

# **The Damn Trilogy**

**Damn Louisiana**

**Damn Santa Fe**

**Damn Miami**

Mysteries in Work Clothes

By

Warner Strang

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# **Damn Louisiana**

## ***Chapter 1***

The rain fell in sheets on the half done building. It ran down the open sides, gushed into the floors, dribbled down the walls. Every open joint was filled, and every thing on the floors was sopping.

“Damn Louisiana!” Randy thought.

He had been here a year, and a long year it had been. His job was to build a new hotel next to the casino, build it as fast and as well as he could. He had done it before, and done well, but this was different.

For one thing, Janet hadn't come with him. She had gotten a new job in Vegas while they were home, and didn't want to leave to spend a year in Shreveport. Randy thought that would be OK with him, but there weren't enough other things here to do. At least, not enough other things he should do.

Randy MacDonald was an average guy, at least in his own view. He had grown up in Southern California, gone to Cal Poly, gotten a degree in building construction, and gone to work, just like everyone else. He didn't have strong opinions on the things he didn't know much about, but he worked hard on those things that were his to do. Almost all of the satisfaction in his life came from his work.

## ***Chapter 2***

The next morning the sun came up on a clear day. Randy sat in his office in the mobile office compound, and watched the clean up out his window.

This had happened so often that everyone knew what to do. The laborers squeegeed the water off the floor, and the carpenters cut out the sheetrock that was beyond hope. Then the laborers sprayed the whole thing with Clorox, and the world went on.

He turned to find Meg Long at his door.

“Randy, you’ve just gotta clean this place up! Look at my shoes!”. Meg wasn’t hard to look at – she was a small, cute blonde woman – but she was a complete airhead.

“Meg, this is a jobsite, not Neiman Marcus....if you insist on walking across it in your heels and a dress, they’re bound to be ruined, and if I’m lucky the safety guys will throw you off.”

She gave him one of her “I’m the owner” looks, and went on as if he hadn’t spoken.

“You know, the people on the New Orleans jobsite built us some special walkways, and they seem to appreciate having their clients office with them. Anyway, I can’t seem to get this black gunk off the dress, so I’m going back to change,”. And with that, she flounced out. He hadn’t seen anyone “flounce” in quite a while.

The regular morning staff meeting was next. Most of the talk was how to pick up time against the schedule, and overcome the effects of the rain. The casino people were demanding, and seemed to think that anything that wasn’t done instantly was his fault, even though they just dreamed it up yesterday. Randy had done a number of casinos though, so he was pretty much immune to that pressure.

The business of gambling was fascinating. Not all casinos were successful, but those that were brought in a high and very constant return. If you could get people to the slot machines, they left \$140 per day in each one, as regular as clockwork. You could pay off the large investments needed to build the casino in a very few years, and have a giant cash cow. But you needed to fill the casino, and in this town that meant you needed to have an adjacent hotel, and his was late.

Cole Johnson was the construction superintendent. They had picked him up here, not one of their regulars, but he was doing his best to keep up with this kind of job.

“Randy, we are getting way out of sequence. The interior finishes are two floors above the windows going in, and the rain is messing up some finished work. We gotta slow down on the inside till we finish the outside.”

“Can’t do it, and you know it, Cole. You’ve heard what the damages are if they don’t open on time as often as I have. We need to keep going and hope for the best.”

Cole looked grim, but he shut up, and the other casino pros went back to either pressing for an early completion, or adding complication to the job.

Randy went out to walk the job to calm down after the meeting. The building was 21 stories, the tallest in town, and from the roof it looked like you could see clear across the state. It satisfied something in him to know he had created it, that it would be there no matter how many chickenshit owners and accountants told

him what to do. That was the attraction of the job, and some days it was enough.

The process of building a high rise building in a hurry seemed to require breaking some rules. Every set of specifications for building construction ever written gave instructions not to begin on interior work until the roof and exterior walls were complete, but that was impractical on very tall buildings. While you were inching up with the exterior wall and putting on the roof, the money invested in the building was sitting there doing nothing, and there was no one working on the floors. It didn't take long for people to see that they could save several months, and therefore several million dollars in interest, by putting up some temporary protection and beginning on the floors. Or maybe not putting it up and beginning anyway.

So...it was important to finish quickly, and that meant he was doing work exposed to the weather. If it got wet, too bad.

## ***Chapter 3***

Another feature of this job was the layout of the site. In Louisiana the casinos were nominally river boats. It had something to do with laws against land based casinos. So the casino itself was on a large barge, docked next to an elaborate building with restaurants and entertainment. Once a year the boat had to be undocked and go for a drive on the Red River. It seemed strange to Randy, but it wasn't his problem.

His problem was that the hotel needed to be next to the landside building, and the site was very narrow. So the parking was on the far side of the hotel site from the casino. Century Casinos had demanded that foot traffic pass through the hotel construction site. The first time he had heard that it seemed so stupid it took his breath away.

But you can deal with anything with enough money. They had constructed a covered, Class A path through the site at grade level, and even gotten carried away in providing viewing spots and resting places in it. By the time they were through it seemed like a pretty good idea.

But time went on, and parts of it needed to be relocated to build things. The walkway got dirty,

which lead to Meg's problems. As it began to carry construction traffic, the walls developed some places that could be opened by anyone, and people could, if they wanted, get into the building proper. It wasn't a problem in the daytime, but at night the security guards that made sure people passed through it safely sometimes caught someone slipping under a railing and going to visit a room under construction. Sometimes they were drunk, and sometimes they were curious. He really needed to tighten up on that.

## ***Chapter 4***

The rootlessness of his everyday life was a constant mystery to Randy. Since growing up in California and going to college there, he had worked in six states for three companies, and had gotten used to the idea that he might be anywhere in the country in the years ahead.

On one level it didn't seem natural to him that people should have so few ties. Most people on earth were bound together by family and tribe, and got much of their self-image from that. They took their place in the world from a long history of relationships with people and places, traditions that shaped their lives.

On another level he thought of himself as a sophisticated person, comfortable anywhere. After all, many of the everyday things that we all use come from the other side of the world. It's a global economy, and no one in the modern world could afford to have roots too deep. They might be torn out tomorrow just to make a living.

Sometimes he wondered what it would be like when he came to the end of his life. He guessed that he would get to be some big executive sometime, and live someplace for awhile, and all that, but it didn't have

much reality in his current situation. There wasn't anyplace that really felt like home anymore. His parents had both died pretty young, and his sister lived in Boston, which to Randy was on another planet. So it was just him and Janet.

Janet was more of a homebody. She had traveled with him up until this last year, but you could tell she was ready to settle and have kids. Randy wouldn't mind that, he thought, but it seemed to mean he couldn't do the work he liked, and he wasn't ready to give it up.

## **Chapter 5**

Things settled down for the next few days, with good progress and no new upsets. Randy was just beginning to see how he might get back on schedule. He might even go home this weekend.

All that ended with a visit from his boss, Jim Marconi. Jim was on the Board of Directors of the casino company, which was how they got the job. Jim's company was Marconi Champion, and he had built it into a powerhouse in the design and construction of gambling establishments in a few short years. He then bought an old casino in Reno, redid it, and sold it to the firm they were doing this job for. That got him some cash, and some stock, and more work.

Jim's message was simple. "Randy, we gotta pick up the pace. Century think we aren't committed to helping them get open on time, and you know how important that is to them."

"Damn, Jim, we're working six ten's now, and wearing people out. Then those dingbats like Meg come up with changes every day that set us back. If you can rein them in, we could go to a second shift...for a price."

“Well, work out the details of what we could do, and I’ll see if we can get paid. Try not to get everyone excited about it, though. You know they’re gonna wake up in a new world tomorrow.” It was a constant theme in the construction world that owners were unable to make decisions as questions came up, and were apt to change their minds quickly and then not want to pay the cost of the abandoned plan. It paid not to move too quickly.

The dingbat in question, Meg, appeared at the door before Jim left. “I just heard from Charley about a wonderful new idea we’re trying out in Atlantic City, and I’d like to have a meeting at 2 to talk it over. I hope you both can make it!” Both men grinned at the predictability of things, and nodded. As she flounced off again in her new, clean, tight skirt both men thought that they would rather do more with her than have a meeting.

The idea, when it came, wasn’t bad. The Atlantic City people had found a way to integrate off track horse race betting into a casino game. It brought in the horse players, whose wives and friends didn’t want to spend the day at a track, and it added significantly to the “handle” – the total amount the casino took in during the day. High handles usually meant more consistent

profits, since the laws of large numbers came to the advantage of the house.

The trouble was, it meant a lot of changes in the design, at just the time when the downstairs rooms were ready to be finished out. Randy could move crews upstairs while the design changes were being done, but that meant doing more work out of sequence, and taking more chances on the weather.

He tried to explain, “Folks, a building project is a factory where the people move past the product. When we get our little production line going, we do good quality work in good time. But when you move the people around, or change what they are doing, it takes a while to get things smoothed out, and that lost time and those mistakes cost someone. Can’t you wait to do all this once you’re open?”

No one bought it. “Randy, you know how important to us it is to have the latest games, and the largest draws. There are two other casinos in Shreveport, and one of them will get this first if we don’t. We’ve already started on the advertising campaign. Now I suggest that you find a way to do it on schedule, or find another line of work.” Jim agreed, Randy clamped his mouth shut, and the meeting was over.

They walked around the site for awhile in silence. Finally Jim said, “Well, we can either go along, or lose our position with them. The guys on their New Orleans job are telling them what they want to hear every day, and not counting the cost. I think they’ve gotten to like it. So I think I’ll tell them we’ll go to two shifts, and plow on.”

Randy wasn’t feeling like a good soldier. Most of the people affected were subcontractors who weren’t feeling charitable right now, and he dreaded the constant arguments that were just beginning to happen over rain damage and lost productivity. It was a constant puzzle to him that his job could have such great satisfactions at one time, and such frustrations at other times. Finally he sighed, said OK, and walked back to his office to talk it over with the subs.

The windows were in up to the seventh floor, and the interior walls were going in on ten

## **Chapter 6**

Tony Johnson was Cole's brother, but now he was living in a different world. Cole had graduated from high school, gone to work as a carpenter like their father, and worked his way up to superintendent. Tony had worked his way down.

He had trouble with high school, and finally decided to drop out and go to work. For some reason he didn't do very well at work, and six years later he was just working in the crew. He had gotten a girl pregnant, a girl his family thought was a total slut, and his parents had stopped speaking to him. He was often out of work, but had gotten on with the out of town drywallers on the hotel, in part because they thought it would help with Cole. When they found it didn't, they were afraid to let him go, but they didn't let him run much.

Shreveport was mostly a non union town, at least in the carpentry trades. The bulk of the labor in his trade was done by illegal immigrants who got just over minimum wage, and melted away when La Migra was coming. Tony couldn't speak Spanish, and most of the men couldn't speak English. He had to depend on a few men he used as interpreters, and he thought a lot of them were laughing at him behind his back.

His bag of complaints was pretty full right now. In addition to the pay, and the spics, and his parents, there

was all the drywall he was having to replace, and now having to help figure out how to work two shifts. The spics didn't mind – they didn't have anything else to do – but he had to stick around all hours to watch them and work with them.

He supposed they would get paid for the replaced drywall, but his bosses wanted him to get his brother to promise, and he couldn't get Cole to do that. People were getting testy, and he felt like he had a target painted on him. He had a plan to get even, though.

The greatest small business in this area was crystal meth. You could cook it up in your kitchen, sell it to the exhausted people on the jobsite, and make five times your normal pay. You had to be careful – one of these meth labs blew up every week – but he was careful. He was saving up for the possibility of getting fired, or the job stopping, and he just thought of it as thinking ahead.

## ***Chapter 7***

The weather matched Randy's mood. Rain began in the afternoon with a thunderstorm, but then settled into a steady soaking rain. He had the laborers check all of the temporary waterproofing conditions, then let them go home. No sense paying people to watch it rain. After a while he followed them back to the apartment.

The next morning things were a muddy mess. More of the sheetrock had gotten wet when some of the plastic wrapping had blown off during the night, and the process of drying it out began again.

There had been as many ways to dry out wet wall board as there were people talking about it. Some believed in Clorox, some in Comet, some in Coca Cola. It didn't seem to Randy to make much difference. He let people use what they wanted.

His morning walk revealed a strange sight – there was a man in a white plastic moon suit poking around in the wet Sheetrock being removed. He was moving silently among the laborers, not saying a word. They stared at him, didn't feel like asking what a man in a moon suit was doing there, and went on with their work. Randy watched for a minute, then went over to him.

“Partner, I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but everyone on this job needs to check in at the office, and visitors get escorts. What’s the deal?”

The fellow took off a hood, to reveal a chubby face, and thick glasses that made his eyes look even larger than they were.

”Hi, I’m Norman Strella with EFT Environmental. Meg asked us to come by to look at the water damage. Sorry about not checking in – I didn’t know I had to.”

“What about the water damage – we’re repairing it as we go!”

“Well, it looks like you’re cleaning off the Sheetrock and taking some out, but she was worried about the chance that mold and bacteria were forming behind the walls, so she asked us to do a survey. Here’s a piece of wall board I just cut out of the stairwell. See the black powder on the back of it? I’ll take it back and test it, but I’ll bet it’s my old friend *Stachybotrus Chartarum*. It’s a variety of mold that is toxic to a lot of people.”

Randy stared at him for a long moment. “What if it is?” he said.

“Then you’ll have to take it all out,” Norman said, and grinned.



## **Chapter 8**

Randy was so angry he was afraid he would hurt the strange little guy. He turned on his heel, and charged back to Meg's office.

“God damn it, Meg, what do you think you're doing! That little twerp is going to screw my job up royally, for no damn reason at all! You just can't leave well enough alone.”

She gave him her little lost girl look. “Randy, that black stuff on my dress the other day looked strange, so I asked our safety people about it. They told me I needed to have it tested, and to have someone look the job over. I didn't know what would happen. Maybe he won't find anything serious.”

“He already has found something he seems to think is serious, and if I know the type he'll work at it until it's a major problem. You can kiss this schedule goodbye, even if there turns out to be nothing wrong.”

Meg continued to look hurt. “Randy, Century has two watchers for every doer these days. If I don't spot a problem early and get people involved, I'll lose my job! Maybe you don't need yours, but I need mine.”

To understand, you'd need to have been in building construction for awhile. The great legal system in this country had made it almost impossible to build a building without a host of claims that it was somehow dangerous to the health of the future occupants. The claims didn't have to be true – they just had to be something that a trial lawyer could get a jury to believe, and make a buck from.

The stal of it had been the asbestos claims of the 1970's. Lots of building products had asbestos in them before 1975, and they hadn't been proven to hurt anyone. But lots of people who worked in shipyards and factories where the air was gray with asbestos had been hurt by asbestos, and died painful and lingering deaths from asbestosis and meliotosis.

Those claims were extended to all the people who fell ill with lung diseases but hadn't worked in an industrial situation. Their lawyers chose to sue the owners of the buildings they worked in. There wasn't any good science to show that the concentrations in buildings were too high, or that the diseases were caused by being in the buildings, but juries felt the human need to help the sufferers, so they found against the building owners. All this was despite the fact that the concentration of asbestos fibers in the air inside a

public building was rarely above the concentration in the air on the street outside – asbestos continued to be used in brake linings, and was worn off those linings at every stop sign in the nation.

So...in reaction all the asbestos was taken out of products used in buildings, and by 1980 virtually nothing in a public building contained asbestos. The asbestos was removed from floor tiles, which made them wear out much faster, and not hold wax as well, so that their cost of maintenance skyrocketed. Laws were passed to require surveys of these products in schools, so the children would not be exposed, and scores of consultants made a living doing the surveys and updating them. Gradually the owners of these buildings built defenses against the lawyers.

By the late 1990's most of this danger seemed to have run its course. The hazardous materials industry began to look elsewhere for an environmental harm to redress.

The first candidate was fiberglass. If asbestos was hazardous, then surely other types of insulation were also. But the fibers were too big, and there weren't real victims to point to as there were with asbestos. So juries didn't buy it.

The next candidate was mold and bacteria, and here there was some real harm to point to. For some time there had been outbreaks of disease from airborne organisms, like the Legionnaires disease first found in a Pennsylvania hotel. For some people the presence of certain organisms had been demonstrated to cause headaches and breathing problems, and hospitals had increased their protections against infection control some time ago. So the field of mold litigation was the new asbestos.

Randy knew all this, and it made his stomach hurt.

## **Chapter 9**

The next few days on the jobsite went better. The little man in the white suit didn't come back, and it didn't rain.

That left Randy to get on with his real job – getting a building built. That was hard enough. One reason was that his initial decisions on subcontractors had alienated the locals, and so almost everyone on the jobsite was from somewhere else. They had to go home on the weekends – the managers, anyway – and they had to ask someone hundreds of miles away to make the simplest of decisions.

The weekly sub meeting showed the flaws. Clay was giving out the detailed schedule for the week, when the drywallers complained that they couldn't get enough sheetrock to finish the floors whose painting was to begin at mid week.

“Why not?”

“’Cause the damn supply house won't let us have any right now. There's a shortage, and they supply their locals first!”

“Well, I guess you’ll have to ship it from Tampa, right? That’s your town.”

“Right, and it’ll be here on Friday”

That was pretty much hauling coals to Newcastle, but there wasn’t any help for it. If it rained before then they would damage some more rock, and need that shipment just to stay even.

“And we went to the AGC dinner last night, and got laughed at because we’ve had so much rain damage. I’d like to deck one of them!”

At the start , Randy had set a schedule, and tried to buy his trade work from local firms for the right price. That was the best way to do it, and it steered around most of these problems. But the schedule had been aggressive, and it had included working on the inside before the building was watertight. People had told him it wouldn’t work. It might not rain in Las Vegas, but it damn sure rained here!

Randy had argued, tried to get people to price the shorter schedule, but finally written them off as a bunch of redneck crackers, and went to people who he

had worked with before in Las Vegas. They believed him, and the deals were done.

That got the initial price right, and Jim Marconi and others had congratulated him on his buyout. But when the rain started and the job fell behind schedule, the out of town subs began to get crabby. Now all these stupid design changes were priced sky high, and there wasn't much he or the owner could do about it. At least not without eating some crow, and he wasn't ready to do that yet.

That was the business side. On the personal side, it put a lot of young aggressive men on the streets at night, a long way from their families. Shreveport was a quiet town, but Bossier City across the river wasn't, and most of the subs had a system set up to bail their guys out of the Bossier City jail on payday. Randy wasn't a drinker, but he was a little lonely too, and wanted to go home more often than one week in three. Pretty soon Janet wouldn't recognize him, or find someone else. "Damn Louisiana" was a constant background in his mind.

He was thinking this way when he stopped to get a beer on the way home, and maybe have a hamburger rather than another microwave meal. He felt

disconnected from the town around him, and thought that if he dropped off the face of the earth no one would know for awhile. “Or maybe no one would care!”

One thing Shreveport did have was honky tonks. They had redneck names, like Dew Drop Inn, or Ragin’ Cajun, but the beer was cold and the music was what he liked. So he stopped at Prideaux’s.

The place was dark, and cold after the hot day, and it took him awhile to get his eyes adjusted. A group in the corner yelled at him to join them. It turned out to be the Century people – he didn’t feel like it, but he couldn’t refuse.

Meg, the cute little Meg, patted the seat beside her. “Tell us what’s new and exciting!”

“We’ll be done on time, and your building will be gorgeous... and you won’t make any more changes.” He grinned.

“Well, two out of three isn’t bad” Meg said. For some reason she looked a little apologetic, but maybe he was imagining things.

The talk moved around gaming, and the entertainment around town, and who was doing what to whom, for half an hour. Randy was quiet – it wasn't his thing, but he didn't want to mess up their pal y. Finally most of the group decided to go get dinner at a popular restaurant. Randy begged off, and then so did Meg.

He sat there with her for awhile, trying not to be his usual antisocial self. All of their conversation so far had been business, and pretty routine positions at that. She had wanted more from them, and he had wanted more from them. Now she seemed to want to talk more personally. She told him about her ex – they had broken up 5 years ago, he worked for Century in Vegas, and despite what she said, she didn't seem to be over it. In her eyes he sounded like a snake, but he was sure that was only one side of the story.

All that seemed to bring out his concerns about Janet, and how his life was at the moment. It wasn't really an intimate conversation; it seemed to him, more like talking to his sister. When Meg asked if he would like to come over to her place for a home-cooked meal, it sounded like a good relaxing idea to him.

They took separate cars to her apartment, which was a Century corporate deal over in Shreveport in a nice

complex by the river. She put on some pasta, gave him a glass of wine, and began on a salad. He talked about projects he had built, and she talked about her family back home in Salt Lake. They had a nice meal.

“Meg, I need to be going...it’s a long day tomorrow, and I need to get ready.....thanks for dinner.” She smiled, a little strangely, he thought, and showed him out. He had a little thought that perhaps she had more in mind, but thought he was dreaming. He was home, asleep, and dreaming about tomorrow’s work in fifteen minutes.

## Chapter 10

Meanwhile, Jim Marconi was back in Las Vegas, listening to some hotshot tell him about the black stuff.

Much of it was *stachybotrys chal orum*. “Nice name,” he thought, for a submicroscopic organism that occurred naturally in dark, warm, humid places. Trouble was, it was all over their building.

Norman, the man in the moon suit, was telling the President of Century that it couldn’t be left in place. “The stuff is proven to cause respiratory problems in anyone who doesn’t have a strong immune system, and that’s a lot of people in a casino.. If you don’t get it out, they’ll sue your ass from here to Christmas.”

The President looked at Jim. “OK, why did it happen, Jim?”

Jim clamped his teeth down, took a deep breath, and replied, “It happened because we are trying to finish on time despite a lot of changes, and we have been taking chances on the weather, and losing. Do you want me to slow down?”

“No, but I don’t want a hotel full of sick people either. Norman, can you tell them what needs to come out,

and stay with it until it's done? Norman saw high fees, and nodded. "I'll have group there Monday to stal ."

Jim was on the Board, and most of the Board supported him, including the President. But apparently that didn't extend to sympathy in a tight situation, where Jim had taken a chance to keep their business.

Jim walked out seething. This was going to cost a ton of money, and a lot of Century people would think it was his money. There wasn't a lot of profit in these jobs, and there were an endless string of ways that extra costs could be excluded from the billable costs of the building by the army of lawyers every owner employed. If he was a jerk about it, and didn't stal until the Century Board approved the extra expense, they would feel he wasn't on their side, and take their business elsewhere. His stomach began to hurt.

On the way home an idea struck him. Every builder carried insurance for damages to buildings from Acts of God – freak storms, tornados, hurricanes and the like, as well as theft and vandalism. The insurance was called Builder's Risk Insurance. Because these events were rare, it cost pennies per hundred dollars of insured value. Usually Jim would have gotten it from his agent for each job.

This job was different, though. Century was a large and sophisticated organization, and they knew how much of their insurance premiums went to middle men, administrative expenses, and somebody else's corporate jet. So for most claims they were self insured. They had offered to include the normal construction hazards under their property insurance in exchange for not paying Jim the premium. It was an irritation, and he hadn't wanted to do it, but finally he did.

The language of the things that were covered in their property insurance was a lot broader than the usual things that were covered in his Builder's Risk. Maybe all this was really an act of God.



## ***Chapter 11***

On Monday Norman had his environmental engineer crew on the jobsite, testing drywall for mold. They all had the silly white suits on, and they were spooking the people on the job.

Cole came in to talk to Randy. “They walk around like there is some radioactive thing going on, and it makes people nervous. I tell them it’s just a precaution, but the laborers want to know if they can have white suits too! Even the ironheads are upset.” The ironworkers were normally oblivious to anything but welding and beer.

To make matters worse, they were testing way down in the building. Some were taking samples and cutting up walls on the ground floor, where work had been finished several weeks ago. If that had to be redone then he was cooked.

Jim was in town, and in the office. He was working with the admin people to set up new cost codes to capture the cost of the cleanup, hoping to find someone to pay them back for it. It was easy enough for their people – a few new cost codes, new timesheets for all the crews, and a lecture. For the subs it was a different matter.

Most of the work of building construction was subcontracted. For 50 years the components of modern buildings had been complicated enough to require specialists to assemble. No one general contractor had enough work to employ all the specialists full time, so they had become middle men in the assembly of teams of specialist firms. In most cases the subcontractors were chosen by low bid, even in negotiated situations like this one. So all these firms had a price to protect, and anything that looked remotely like a change in scope got an instant request for extra money.

This looked like a fat hog to them. By Monday noon Jim and Randy had received six requests for change orders, and reservations of rights letters. Jim spent the afternoon talking on the phone to the distant subcontractors, and working on how they could segregate the cost of the changes. By quitting time his stomach hurt even worse, and he went back to Las Vegas with a lot on his mind.

There was a ray of hope. A tornado had passed through Shreveport at Easter. It hadn't hit their building, but it had hit another hotel job down the street. So there were some insurance claims, and maybe a lot of the so called damage could be blamed

on that. It was two months past Easter now, but there was such a thing as hidden damage. At least he hoped there was.



## ***Chapter 12***

Randy went home that weekend. He was homesick, if you could be homesick for Las Vegas, and he wanted some tender loving.

What he got was attitude. When he told this story to Janet, her reaction wasn't "You poor baby...." It was "What do we do if you lose your job!" She seemed more interested in her lifestyle than in his life.

"It won't come to that, hon. I've done several very good jobs, and one that has bugs in it won't change that." It sounded a little weak to him, but he hoped it made her feel better. "Let's go stal on that family."

And even that made him worried. She seemed both needy and distant at the same time. She wanted to be held, but was locked up in her own little world when they were intertwined.... It worried him more.

Maybe it was just spending so much time apart. Maybe he ought to move back to be with her. Maybe she should come with him... but that meant she didn't

have any satisfactions of her own. There didn't seem to be an easy way out of this rootless life.

Back in Louisiana on Monday morning, the sun was shining, and the fears of the weekend seemed to be illusions. He would finish this job, get promoted so he could stay home more, and life would go on.

The guys in white suits were marking drywall to be removed, and the laborers were taking it out and putting it in special Dumpsters as quick as they did. New, clean Sheetrock was going back in its place, being finished, and looking good. Score was being kept, a cost would be calculated, and someone would pay it. Life went on.

The morning meeting centered on whether to be defensive or not. Cole started off, "We've gotta stop putting in insulation and drywall above the floors we can keep water out of. That means Level 8 right now. We've got the windows in to 10, but we don't have any way for water not to run down to 9". After a long debate Cole had convinced Randy to put in water stops at Level 9. "We could waterstop again at 10, for about ten grand, but we need to do it this week if we mean to keep going with the drywall". Randy finally agreed, but it galled him to remember that that was what the

candy assed local subs had wanted him to do in the first place.

After the meeting he went to walk around. Meg fell in beside him.

“Randy, I’m sorry I started this. I didn’t have any idea it would be such a big deal!” Pal of him wanted to hit her, but she was cute and vulnerable, and so he wimped out... “That’s OK, if it wasn’t you it would have been someone else. For all I know it really is a serious thing, and anyway we’ll take care of it.” Write it down to client relations.

She looked relieved, and hung on his arm for awhile. It was more fun than being with Janet, and he felt disloyal for a moment.

The moment ended soon enough. On the ground floor they walked up on some of the moon suits giving orders to the labor foreman. “You really need to take this container to a Class 4 landfill! This stuff could be dangerous!” The labor foreman, who didn’t have a high opinion of any white man to begin with, just looked at him and shook his head. “If wet sheetrock hurt someone, we all be dead, suh. Get out the way.” Randy reminded Moon Suit about giving orders to

anyone but Cole, and huffed off, but he had a feeling that they were going to pay someone a lot of money to bury this stuff.

The bills in general were getting out of hand. The subs that were tight on price looked at this as a recovery method, so every day brought change order requests accompanied by reams of official looking time tickets and tallies. Add to that the cost of their own people, and the cost of the landfill they were hauling this stuff to, and the total cost looked like half a million dollars. If they didn't find a way to make it an insurance claim, it was half a million out of his employer's pocket. It wouldn't make him popular, even if it wasn't his fault.

Meg followed him back to the office. "You know, all this might be covered by insurance. Those storms were terrible, and the insurance people I've met seem very anxious to keep our business."

"I thought you were self-insured?"

"We are, but losses above a certain level are re-insured, so we don't have to worry about a catastrophe. Anything above \$500,000 will go to Lloyd's of London."

That cheered him up. “ I tell you what, I’ll return the meal favor from the other night – I’ll cook at my place tonight, and you can join me!” She smiled, shook her head yes, and went back to her office. Randy smiled back to his too, until he thought a few minutes later that he might have put his foot on the slope. “Oh, lighten up. She’s just being nice, and you need to be nice to your clients.”

For the rest of the day he caught himself thinking about what he could cook, and how he could clean the place up to look all right to a woman. He had never been the slob that a lot of his friends were – the bed was made and the dishes were done – but his place was a far cry from home. He was working to avoid thinking of this as a date.

He stopped by the grocery store on the way home, and picked up steaks, potatoes, and salad fixings. He wasn’t exactly Cordon Bleu, but he guessed he would get credit if it was edible.

When she came to the door he knew he was in trouble. She had on a tank top and a short skirt, and she looked good enough to eat. It was all he could do to keep from hugging her on the doorstep. “Make yourself at home. I’ve got some cheese and crackers here I’ll

bring in” When he came back she was sitting demurely on the sofa, but when he sat down next to her she was right there, and it seemed natural to take her in his arms and kiss her – it seemed rude not to – and she responded. It all went on from there and it was an hour later before his brain re-engaged. Even then, the little man in his head just grinned at him.

He did get out of bed and cook dinner though, and it wasn't half bad, even if he did say so himself. Meg didn't say a word about relationships, or commitment, or emotions, and they had a pleasant talk about work and other people. Two hours later she helped clean up and left with a little kiss. He thought he had found Heaven.

## **Chapter 13**

Tony Johnson had about had it. The two shift arrangement kept him at work so long that his sideline – meth production – had gone way down, and with it his income. He got a lot of orders he couldn't fill, and of course there were a lot of places for people to go if he couldn't.

They were in the pal of the job that was usually the best for him – framing and covering interior walls and ceilings. He got to create some order out of a vast empty space, and make it look like it was ultimately intended to be. But here it seemed like long work with people he couldn't talk to, and part of it seemed to have to be torn out each week. No matter how much you said that you were just here for the money, no one liked having his work torn up time and again.

He also resented all these damn Mexicans. They worked for peanuts, worked hard, and at least tried to do good work. He honestly didn't see how anyone in the United States who hadn't gone to college and done well would be able to live a normal life! It didn't seem fair – he figured that he had the right to that life, and all these scabs were taking it away.

Cole had told him that the job was in trouble with the Century people and the cost of repairs. Sometimes he wished the whole place just burned down



## ***Chapter 14***

Back in Las Vegas, Jim was at work on the insurance claim idea. He had attended a Board meeting, and complained about the dangerous weather in Louisiana to the other Board members. He had asked the VP for Administration about the procedures for making a claim as an additional insured under their property insurance, putting it as “a little damage to some of our equipment”.

Now he was preparing a claim for water damage as a result of the Easter tornado. He figured if he got this one paid, it would be easier to pile on some more for a similar sort of reason.

The groups on the Board divided into the gambling people, and the business people. Jim was the darling of the gambling people, lead by the President. He figured that being in building construction was so close to casino gambling that they shared a common interest in taking chances. The business people were typified by the VP of Administration. They wanted to just be quiet and let the laws of large numbers make them rich. Taking chances to gain a competitive edge seemed to them to be unnecessary.

The name of the VP for Administration was Stuart Long. He had survived in a rough and tumble business by being the detail guy in a pack of big picture guys, but right now he was in trouble too. He was being blamed for some cost overruns on contracts, and for some paperwork problems at some of the casinos they ran for Indian tribes, so he was as nervous as a whore in church.

“I’ll tell you, Jim, if we have one more big cost overrun, no matter whose fault it is, it’s going to be my ass.” Jim assured him this was going to be only a small amount of the insurance company’s money.

Stuart was cautious, however. Jim guessed that was a requirement for the position. “Since we are self insured, the re-insurers are really the ones who shoulder losses above a certain amount, and they make us do some things to get a neutral party to adjust the claim. We’ll need to hire an executive adjuster for this one”. An executive adjuster sounded like an executive chef to Jim, and he never had known what that meant, but if it moved things along it was all right with him. He was to meet the man in Shreveport next Monday.

The rest of the week at the jobsite went fine. The sun shone, and the wet sheetrock was almost gone. The

windows were going in on Level 10, and the interior walls were going up on Level 13.

The adjuster was named Bud Shuster. He was a wiry old man, who looked like he had seen all of the scams known to man, and wasn't going to pay off on any of them. "We'll have to get a report on the weather, and the tornados in town, and what that did to this building. It will be hard to separate the damage of that from the rest of the damage here, do you see?"

"But I think it's all the same thing, Bud. The storm tore the building up, and the water damage since then is the result of that damage!", Jim protested. "I don't think you can be paid for two months of additional damage since then", Bud responded. "There was plenty of time to waterproof and stop putting up new construction until the building was sealed. We'll just have to get an estimate of the initial damage, and talk to the carriers."

The good weather had just about allowed them to get all of the walls that were marked out and replaced, and the cost of the damage to date toted up. Adding all of the special disposal cost, and the subs extravagant claims, the current total damage was up to about three

qual ers of a million, but if things stayed dry that would be the size of it.

Meanwhile the better weather had cheered the owner group up also, which just meant that they got busier thinking up things to change. In a way it was a blessing, because it gave Jim a reason to ask for extra money and time, and he could put a little extra into each change to get back some of the money he might lose. It was dangerous, though, since Century also employed a group of cost estimators who were dedicated to not paying too much for anything. So the money had to be limited, and pretty much secret. Still, the off track betting idea had helped him recoup about \$100 grand of his possible losses, and there was still the chance that insurance would cover it all.

On the jobsite all this felt like the reason for a party. To 200 men, mostly a long way from home, almost anything looked like a reason for a party. Cole was put in charge of doing a crawfish boil on Friday afternoon.

Now Shreveport wasn't exactly the right place for a crawfish boil. That was the national sport of Acadian Louisiana, the French parishes in the southern part of the state. But it was a good time there, and as far as people from outside the state were concerned, it would

be a good time here. So Cole called up his buddies in Lafayette, and they were on their way with two tons of odd little crustacean, and an 18 wheel truck that boiled them in huge vats, picked the vat up with a crane, and dumped it out on a table by the truck. That, 40 kegs of beer, and some bread was all you needed.

When all this got going Randy and Jim went over to the pal y to see how it was going. Apparently it was going very well, since almost everyone had a cute little girl from town with them. Some looked like high school girls being daring. Most of them had tee shirts on that Cole had had printed up. On the back they said “Laissez les bon temps roulez”. On the front at chest level they said, “Pinch me, Peel me, Suck me, Eat me!” It had a crawfish underneath it.

The two men looked at each other. “You know,” Randy said, “I must be getting old. All I can think of is how glad I am that I don’t have a daughter!”. Jim nodded. “And all I can think of is host liquor liability and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I think I’ll go on home.” Jim walked off to his car and headed for the airport.

Randy stood for a minute more, and watched some of the girls give lessons in Cajun dancing. It looked like fun, for as long as they could stand up.

When he turned to go, though, Meg was there. “You need to rescue me! I’m 37, and I’m the oldest and pudgiest woman here!” The last wasn’t true, but the first was, and Randy knew how she felt. “OK,” he said, “but it’s your turn to cook”.

And off they went, as if he had a brain in his head.

## ***Chapter 15***

It didn't last. First there were more of the late afternoon thunderstorms that are common in the lower center of the country. Water got sucked into the air from the warm Gulf, traveled inland on the trade winds, rose in the late afternoon to thunderclouds, and fell for 30 minutes or so. That wasn't so bad, since the weak temporary weatherproofing, usually an unreinforced sheet of plastic wrap, stayed in place for most of those.

But time had gone on – Easter had passed into May and June, and it had gotten to be July – hurricane season.

Now Shreveport was 200 miles from the Gulf of Mexico. It wasn't going to be hit by a big hurricane, so Randy didn't think too much about Hurricane Katrina on the evening news. It was a weak hurricane, and even if it hit Lake Charles it would not be much by the time it reached them.

And it wasn't. It had been downgraded back to a tropical storm, with winds down to 40 miles per hour. But it stalled over Shreveport, and just kept pumping water from the Gulf onto the town. In the space of 24 hours Shreveport got 15 inches of rain, and steady

winds of 35-50 miles per hour. The streets flooded, people got stranded, the Red River overflowed, and for a time flowed backwards.

The job got trashed. The temporary protection got blown away, the waterstops at Level 10 were overwhelmed, and much of the newly placed sheetrock was damaged again.

When the rain finally ended they surveyed the damage, took photos and video tape, and started again. White suit Norman was back with his marking crew. Jim came back from sunny Las Vegas, and thought to himself, “Now that’s got to be an act of God, and it’s bound to be covered by insurance.”

Bud Shuster was there again too, and he wasn’t so sure. “It certainly was a bad rainstorm, but the winds weren’t too high, and usually we don’t pay for wind driven rain until the wind is high enough to damage windows. You didn’t lose any windows, you were just building ahead of them. I need to meet with my clients and Mr. Long.”

Jim’s stomach hurt. The price tag for this one would be much higher, and he wasn’t getting much sympathy from the Board for the results of building out of

sequence to help them get open. One of the Board members gave him an old jobsite line – “You know where you find sympathy – between shit and syphilis in the dictionary!” So he needed the re-insurers to cover the claim.

They gathered in Shreveport three days later. One was from London, Lloyd’s. One was from General Reinsurance, the Berkshire Hathaway company, and one was from an outfit Jim had never heard of. They met with Bud at breakfast, and then came to the jobsite for a tour. Cole and Randy showed them around, and brought them back to the office to talk to Jim. Jim put them in the conference room, put a sign on the door, and sat down.

They were all grey, elderly, fastidious looking men, and Jim had no idea what they were thinking.

“Mr Marconi, it is unusual for us to be participating in adjusting a claim. But in this case there isn’t a primary carrier to speak of, and all of us want to maintain our relationship to Century, so we are here to see if we can come to an agreement. Now it appears that the project was near, but not in a tornado, and was rained on by the remnants of a tropical storm. It also appears that most of the damage was due to your continuing to do

work out of the normal sequence, and not waiting for the building to be dry to work inside.”

“I think that’s a little unfair, “ Jim responded. “We are doing what your client wants us to do to complete as soon as possible, and what is normal to their business. What will you cover?”

“Right now, we’ll cover the damage done on Easter weekend, and the costs that occurred in the next three weeks. Then we’ll cover the damage done by Katrina to Levels 10 and below, but not to those above that level, since you chose to build out of sequence. If you’ll submit a claim for those, and Bud will approve it, we will authorize payment.”

“Gentlemen, I don’t think it’s enough. I’ll do the claims and see. If it’s not, you know I’ll need to sue for performance.’ Jim wasn’t even sure how to do that, but he was not going to let these wimps bully him. “You can certainly do that, but I think you’ll find it’s harder than you imagine, “ the grey man said. Then he got up, shook hands, and they filed out of the room.

Jim sat there staring at the wall. This could cost him his company, wind him up in court for years, and all he had done was to try to satisfy a customer.



## **Chapter 16**

Meg had become a regular fixture at Randy's place. She stayed there a few nights a week, and brought some clothes so she could leave for work from there. They ignored each other at work, and thought they were being cool.

All of this bothered Randy, who had never seen himself as cheating on his wife. He excused himself by saying he was under a lot of pressure, and Janet didn't seem to want to share it, but in quiet moments it seemed wrong to him. At other moments, though, it seemed very right, and he couldn't bring himself to break it off.

Meg wasn't demanding. She didn't seem to need to have some long term commitment, or a pledge of undying love. She just wanted to have a normal life, and that included a man to sleep with, and if he was presentable and good company that was enough for now. She had been lonely for a long time, and now she wasn't, and she wasn't going to look beyond that for awhile.

Then Janet figured it out. Maybe it was something Randy said, or maybe it was his cheerfulness when he shouldn't be cheerful, but on one Friday night when

Randy and Meg were getting ready to go out to dinner, there was a knock on the door. Randy opened it to find Janet there with her suitcase.

“Hi, hon, I thought I’d surprise you and come for the weekend! You sounded lonely.....”, and at that point she saw Meg.

There was a long silence. Randy had never been a good liar. Meg didn’t even know who she was. Janet had an idea, but hadn’t thought out what she would do if it was true. So everyone stared at each other.

Finally Janet said “I see....”, turned and left. Randy followed her. “I’m sorry honey. It’s just a little thing...” There didn’t seem to be a good way to explain. She got into her rented car, rolled the window up, and drove away. There really weren’t words for this.

Meg was sympathetic. “Randy, I’ll go if you want me to.” Somehow that seemed to Randy to leave him in the cold, so he asked her to stay. He fixed them both a drink, and stared out the window for awhile. One of Meg’s great virtues was that she could stay quiet for a long time, and now she was.

Finally he heaved a sigh. He would have to apologize, he guessed, and patch it up. But he didn't even know where she was, and he didn't feel like spending the night alone. "Let's go on to dinner."



## ***Chapter 17***

The fire began low in the building, and worked it's way up. The most combustible things were empty boxes and furnishings and trim being installed on the lowest levels, but as the fire got hotter and the chimney effect of the hot gases went upward, lots of other materials began to burn. Steel will become combustible at about 1400 degrees Fahrenheit. There were fire standpipes, but the fire began in the middle of the night, and there wasn't anyone to use the hoses or standpipes.

The security people who were supposed to be protecting the patrons who had to walk through the showy walkway seemed to be somewhere else. A few people must have tried to come out and go toward the fire, but for some reason they didn't sound an alarm.

After awhile someone saw the flames out the window of one of the adjacent hotels, and called the fire department. By the time they got there several floors were involved. The Lieutenant made the night watchman swear there wasn't anyone in the building on his last round. Then he sealed it off and watched it burn. Having one of his men die 200 feet above the ground for the sake of some steel and sheetrock was pretty low on his list.

The building didn't collapse. Gradually the fire ate all the things it could, and began to die. Some beams were warped, and some floors buckled, but the structure stayed up.

## **Chapter 18**

No one called Randy. He had spent a restless night – alone – but all the call lists and posted instructions didn't work. He drove up to the building in the morning wondering what all the flashing lights were about.

The police had cordoned off the site, and all Randy's people were milling around outside. They knew there had been a fire, they could see the signs on the low walls, but they didn't know exactly where or when or how much. Finally he sent them home. That got them show up pay, and only a few of them figured out that they needed to begin looking for another job.

Finally he got to talk to the Lieutenant. "The building has had some severe structural damage, and we can't let anyone into it until we know how much. Where's your structural engineer?"

"He's in Naples – Italy – so we need another plan. I can have someone here from Las Vegas tomorrow." The fireman looked at him like he was crazy, but finally agreed. There wasn't anything to do but send out messages, and wait for an expert. It was a long day.

The “consulting forensic structural engineer” was indeed there in the morning. He lead the fire crews into the building, complete with Scott Air Paks and emergency radios. Randy stood outside, and waited.

Finally the radio crackled, “EMT crew to the mezzanine level north side! Victim down!”.

Half a dozen emergency people in yellow bunker coats grabbed their gear and lined up at the entrance. Randy was right behind them, but he wasn’t quick enough. “I’m sorry sir, but we can’t let people without the proper training and equipment into a situation like this!”. The fresh faced kid was right. Randy shrugged, and walked away.

It didn’t take them long. In ten minutes they came back with a draped stretcher. They weren’t in any hurry, though, and it was clear to everyone that the person on the stretcher was beyond caring.

Randy walked up to the procession, and without asking took the drape down. It was Meg.

## **Chapter 19**

From there it turned into a police procedural. They cordoned off the building. When the structural engineer was through, he gave them a list of places that needed to be shored up, and the carpenters were allowed into the building to do that, keeping well away from areas the police outlined. Then a bunch of crime scene people showed up. In their white suits they looked just like Norman, only they represented even more trouble.

By the end of the day Jim Marconi and Stuart Long were both there. Jim took Randy aside, “Randy, I know you and Meg were close, but you need to be quiet about that to the police. If they think you were screwing her, there’s no telling what they’ll think!”

“That dog won’t hunt, Jim. We were discreet, but people always really know, and last week Janet showed up at the wrong time. So I’ll need to tell the truth, even if I’m embarrassed.”

The police captain heading the investigation started on Randy. “Mr. MacDonald do you have any idea of how the fire started?”

“None at all Captain. There aren’t many things in a building at this stage that will burn, and I’m as surprised as you are. We had energized some new

electrical panels yesterday, but I don't know if that has anything to do with it."

"The talk around town is that the job is in trouble. Does this have anything to do with that?"

Now Randy was pissed. "The job isn't in trouble. There is always a certain amount of problems in building a building, but this one has had less than most, and we are intent on finishing on time." Or at least we were, he thought.

"Did you know the dead woman?" the Captain asked. "Of course I did. She was one of our clients, and we saw her everyday." Randy couldn't bring himself to give him the whole story yet.

## **Chapter 20**

And here is where I come in. My name is William Sage - Willie to my friends – and I am a sort of troubleshooter in the building construction business. Usually that amounts to telling people what they ought to do to get a job out of trouble, but occasionally it means being a sort of special investigator.

I don't do claims work. There is a large industry in settling legal proceedings in the business, but its dry work, and largely dishonest, so I don't do it. That leaves me free for more productive things.

Stuart Long called the morning after the fire. He sounded panicked.

“Willie, I need you there right now! I don't know if Marconi set the fire, or it was vandalism, or what. The Shreveport cops don't seem too sharp. And I really don't know what Meg was doing there. Can you go?”

“Yeah, if we get a few things straight. You can't keep Meg a secret, and you can't keep the work on mold a secret. OK?”

There was a long silence at the other end. “Shit, OK.”

“I’ll send you an agreement in a few minutes. Sign it and email back, and I’ll get a plane this afternoon.”  
There was grunt at the end of the line, and it hung up.

Stuart ’s problem was pretty simple. Meg used to be his wife.

## **Chapter 21**

There was a time when Stuart and Meg, and Elizabeth and I were the best of friends. I was building a project for Century in Mississippi, and Stuart was the onsite financial rep, and so we all hung out together. We were older than they were, but there isn't a lot to do in Tunica, Mississippi.

Well, time went on. Elizabeth and I returned to our home base in California, and went on to other assignments. Stuart got promoted to the home office, and in his own words, "outgrew Meg". They never had kids, so a few years ago they broke up. She went on working for Century, but the company kept them away from each other.

Elizabeth and I raised two boys, and had a good life. I have always gotten a lot from my work, and she was a great wife and mother. Then she got sick.

We had first met on a blind date on Valentine's Day. Twenty years later, on Valentine's Day, she was told she had cervical cancer. Two years later, on Valentine's Day, she died. I feel like a pal of me is gone, but I try to be realistic. Everyone dies, and we've been luckier than most. Sometimes I try to believe we will be together again.



## **Chapter 22**

So there I was, next day, in Shreveport, Louisiana. It was raining.

Truth is, I didn't know much about what I was doing. Most of my work has been running construction projects. As I got older, I got asked to review jobs that were not going well, and sometimes to take them over and complete them. There have been some criminals involved, but it has mostly been ego and temper that have to be harnessed, so I really didn't know what I needed to do if this was real violent crime.

The first stop, it seemed, was to the police. Captain Franklin was a large black man, and he didn't much like me. "Mr Sage, what do you think you're doing? I don't know about California or Las Vegas, but here we let the police investigate crimes."

"I'm sure you're right. But the building owners asked me to look into it, as well as to advise them on completing the project. They really don't know what to do, and it seems like it depends on whether this was a crime, and if so, who is responsible. Until we know that, there isn't much we can do. So...what can you tell me?"

“Not much. The arson people aren’t through, and the pathologist isn’t through, and I don’t know if I’d tell you anything if I knew it”. He got up and moved to the door. “Leave your phone number with the sergeant, and if we want to release any information we’ll call.” Fat chance.

So I was on my own. I called Stuart , and met him at the jobsite. We walked into the office and into a meeting with Randy MacDonald and Jim Marconi.

“Willie is here as our representative onsite, Jim. He’ll organize the plan for repair of the damage, and let you know what pal you play in it. He’ll work with the insurance people on our claim. And he’ll assist the police and fire people in their investigation of who is responsible.” I could see disappointment, and fear, in the eyes of both men.

“Well, Stuart , you know how we feel! We’ve had an accident, and someone got hurt in it. We want to do the repairs, have the insurance pay for the accident, and complete the work. You don’t think we set the fire, do you?”

“Guys, I don’t know, but I don’t think we can let you treat it as business as usual. Willie is in charge until the facts are known!”

And with that he walked out. I had expected a heal to heal talk about Meg, and who I was, and where we were going, but it seemed like he was lost, and hoped somehow it would work out without his participation. I tried out a lot of platitudes and clichés in my mind, but none of them were likely to be successful, so I decided I’d follow my nose for awhile too.

“Jim, I’d like to interview all your team members, one by one, to see if I can get up to speed on the project. Is there an office I can use here, and will you be first?”  
When in doubt, be expression-less.

“I don’t know what you’re going to get out of it, but sure. You can use this room, and we’ll use another conference room for a while. We’ve set up a meeting with the structural guy later in the day, and I guess you should sit in on that too.”

So we got down to work.



## **Chapter 23**

Jim went through the history of the project, emphasizing the time constraints that forced them to work out of sequence, and the natural disasters that had soaked the building. I picked at that some, since I was familiar with the problem, but he was sure that they hadn't been ignorant about the weather. He wanted me to understand that Bud Shuster was just being "an insurance guy" who wanted to avoid presenting a claim, and that Jim would sue his ass back to New Jersey if he denied coverage for the remedial work on wet drywall.

I asked about Meg. Jim said she was a cute airhead, that he didn't know her well and couldn't imagine how she came to be in the building. Maybe I should ask Randy, since they were good friends.

I tried to get an idea of what the remedial work had been doing to Marconi Champion, but got nowhere. It seemed that everything was lovely. After awhile I gave up and thanked him.

Randy was next. "Willie, I'm sorry if I look pole-axed, but I really don't know how to act. I've never had a fire, or a fatality on my jobs." I got into my Father Willie mode, and dispensed a lot of comforting words, until it looked like we could go back to the history of work on the job. He was a lot more realistic about the chances they were taking than Jim had been,

and about the feelings of the local subs, but he still thought it was just a run of bad luck and bad weather.

“I need to tell you something, though. Meg and I had a relationship for the last few months, and you’re going to hear about it. It was a casual thing, but it looks like it’s going to break up my marriage.”

“Tell me about it”

“Well, you know how it is. You’re a long way from home, and under a lot of pressure, and it doesn’t seem like any harm. I didn’t want a new wife, I just wanted someone around!” I had been in the same situation, and made different choices, but I had seen a lot of people do what Randy had done.

We talked a little about how to fix the damage the fire had done, and what a plan would look like, and I let him go. The rest of the day was spent on talks with Cole Johnson, the superintendent, the office administrators, and the subs. Everyone wanted to tell me the secret about Randy and Meg, and about the havoc caused by the out of sequence work and the rain. By the end of the day I thought I understood the situation. I went back to the hotel, went for a long run,

a nice dinner, and a mystery book. All it told me was that the real world was a lot harder than fiction.



## **Chapter 24**

The structural engineer was first in the morning. He was from Las Vegas, acting as an agent for the structural designer of record, Studio Nervi of Naples. He wanted the fee, but he didn't want the risk of actually saying anything. It was a long version of a testing program, then some limitations of their liability for a repair program, then maybe a design – but maybe not – then some work. At the most optimistic it looked like a few months of dead time. Bad choice of words.

On top of that, we didn't know who ought to do the repair work. If Jim or Randy had started the fire, they shouldn't be the ones to repair it. If not, they were the logical people if the price was fair. We needed to figure that out before we started work, but we could clean up and get ready while that was being decided. So...the structural engineer was convinced to provide a shoring plan, and Randy and I worked out a schedule for cleaning out debris and exposing the structure for testing. It seemed like our normal work, and settled people down some. I went off to lunch with an old friend, and the Marconi people started getting the laborers back.

Lunch was a study in regional culture. Bob Wilson is an old friend, the head of a mechanical contractor in Shreveport, and the strength of most of my projects in the South. He is a noted Episcopalian, and as upright

as anyone I know. He didn't have anything good to say about Marconi Champion or Randy.

“Those people are double dog dumb, and arrogant to boot. We all told them that schedule was too risky, and they did it anyway, and called us hicks. I could've spit!”

Once he got that off his chest, we had a good time catching up on all the people we had worked with all over the country. One of the drawbacks of building construction is that new teams are formed on each project, so all the interpersonal kinks are never worked out. On the other hand, you meet a lot of interesting people, who go on to do a lot of things you never thought of. Two of our friends had decided to take their retirement in the middle of their working life – rather than at the end – and gone off to sail around the world. They figured that when they got back there would always be work here. Bob and I were both too homebound, but we both had a quiet respect for someone who could do that.

When I got back there was a woman in my temporary office. Nice looking, but determined looking.

“I’m Janet MacDonald. I want to tell you about Randy...”

“I think I know, Janet. He and Meg were shacking up. What else do you want to tell me.”

Her face crumbled. “ I just don’t know.... I’m afraid he killed her, and I don’t know what to tell the police. If everyone but me knew, maybe I don’t have any choice....” I went back to Father Willie – there are some advantages to being older – and tried to tell her that I didn’t see that Jim had any strong motive, and that they could patch it up. It seemed odd to me to tell her that she wasn’t worth the effort she suspected, but it seemed to work. I sent her off to tell the truth to the cops.

I sat there thinking about how I could avoid getting involved in that pal of this affair. What I know how to do is to build, not to really investigate crimes. So it would be better if the Shreveport police wrapped it up soon, and I knew who was left to work on the remaining problem. That made me call the captain.

“Mr Sage, we are investigating several avenues, but I have no intention of sharing them with you. I’m sure you have good intentions, but I’d like you to butt out!”

“Captain, as far as I can see, you fellows aren’t doing anything. The people here onsite aren’t getting intense interrogation, you have a few people standing around looking at yellow tape, and that’s it. I just sent Randy’s wife down to talk to you about her husband and Meg, but so far as I can see you wouldn’t have asked her on your own. I’d like you to figure this out, but I don’t see much happening!”

There was a silence on the other end of the line. Finally, “Well, the problem is that we have a rash of incidents right now, and we just don’t have anybody to put on it. That doesn’t happen to us very often, but it has now. We’ll have to wait until at least next week to get started. So...in the meantime, keep your ears open, and let me know if anything else comes up.”

Well, now I knew where we stood – nowhere. While I was trying to come up with a plan that didn’t involve knowing what had happened, there was a knock on the door. The insurance adjuster walked in and introduced himself. Bud Shuster.

He wanted to tell me that Century was covered under their property insurance for arson, but the arsonist could not be an “additional insured”. Meaning that Century might get paid back for the damage, but if

Marconi Champion started the fire then they couldn't be a valid cost. Bud clearly believed that Randy or Jim had started the fire to head off the environmental costs, and he wanted me to know that it wouldn't work.

“Willie, you need to move away from Marconi, and get someone else to finish this. If it turns out that they aren't the culprits, you can terminate the contract for convenience, but we can't be a pal of keeping them on!”

“Bud, maybe you haven't had to live through it, but terminating a construction contract can be a giant lawyer feast. If we don't have real proof, like say a conviction, then we'll get sued for years. If you have some proof, there's a police captain who wants to hear from you. If not, then we'll go ahead presuming they're innocent!”

He didn't want to hear that, and I privately thought I might be making the wrong choice, but all my previous experience pointed that way. Bud left in a grumpy mood to confer with his reinsurers about paying claims to firms under suspicion. All this wasn't exactly what I was good at, and I spent a minute wondering why Stuart had called me.

Probably couldn't think of anyone else, and didn't want to get tied up here himself.

## **Chapter 25**

The next day was Sunday, and the jobsite was quiet except for the arson investigators, so I decided to take the day off and go fishing. Lake of the Ozarks wasn't far away. I'd been reading about fishing for bass with my fly rod, so I spent a pleasant day trying it out. Turns out to be harder to attract them to the surface, or put a nymph in front of them, than I thought, but catching a lot of fish wasn't the real objective anyway.

The real objective was to figure out what to do. It looked to me like the sort of intense investigation we all think of in a suspicious death just wasn't going to happen, and that it would take a long time, if ever, for the fire and Meg's death to be resolved. So much for mystery novels and CSI on TV.

That left Marconi Champion with a cloud over their head – but “cloud over their head” didn't figure into the construction contract. We could do a certain amount of the clean up and repair work under a separate contract, but when the contracted work resumed we would have to return to using them, or buy our way out of the contract on some grounds, and I didn't know what that might be. On the other hand, if we continued, I was going to have to convince Bud to pay the bills. I spent some time imagining each of the possible situations. The best option, it seemed to me, was to continue with them at least until someone had some sort of proof, and to shame the insurers into

paying the bills in the meantime, on the high sounding premise that everyone was innocent until proved guilty. On that note I took my two small bass to a local restaurant to be cooked, had a good meal, and went back to Shreveport.

## **Chapter 26**

The arson people were through. I talked to them at the site, and got an unofficial answer that they had not been able to find proof of intentional arson. It looked to them like someone had not stored the acetylene and oxygen cylinders properly, they leaked from a cal , and something set them off. I called my new friend Captain Crunch, and got another round of no comment. He had talked to Janet MacDonald, but as far as I could tell they hadn't done anything else. He wouldn't give me any autopsy results, and I wondered if they had any. The papers had been full of some gang killings in Shreveport, and it sounded like that had a higher priority.

There was, however, a little man in white moon suit poking around. When I asked who that was, Cole answered that that was "just Norman." "He's just the family ghost around here," he said with a grin. It took a few minutes to get past everyone giggling to an explanation about the industrial hygienist and the mold. I knew there had been a problem, but I hadn't met Norman.

He was a pleasant little fellow, and for once didn't have any bad news. "Most of the moldy drywall was out when the fire started, and the fire got the rest. You're good until it rains again." Thankfully a period of sunshine was forecast.

So, going on my bass fishing decision, I got with Randy and Cole, and we worked out what to do. The engineer had given us a temporary shoring plan, and we sent crews with heavy shores in to reinforce the building at points that may have been weakened. When they were through, we would begin taking out debris so that structural members and connections could be examined and x-rayed. With that information the engineers would give us repairs to assure that the structure was sound, and we could begin reconstruction. Sounds easy when you say it fast.

Norman had a role in this too. News of health problems for responders to the Twin Towers collapse were big in the news, and we wanted to make sure that no one got sick on the dust and pal iculates. So the moon suits stayed around, and the shoring and demolition crews got their own moonsuits and respirators. The whole place would look more like an operating room than a jobsite.

We worked on that, calling various subs and getting prices all afternoon and into the evening. Finally we gave it up for the day. For all of us, it was more like our normal work, and seemed like a return to a satisfying life. If Randy felt some sort of guilt, I couldn't see it.

We picked it up again in the morning, trying to pin down the liability scared engineers about what to do, and the greedy subs on how to do it. Sometimes it seems like a silly game, but in the modern construction world it is the normal course of events. The news is full of tunnel failures, and bridge failures, and building collapses, and in every one of them there is the end of a person's career, or a firm's existence. It's hard to make them brave.

Finally the repair plan was done, and I emailed it off to Stuart to get his agreement before we spent his money. I thought he would run it by Bud, who would send it to London, so I didn't expect an answer until tomorrow. The phone, however, rang almost right away.

“Willie, are you nuts! You're rewarding the people who burnt our building down!” He didn't say “...and killed my ex!” Stuart was as mad as I have ever seen him.

“Stuart, you don't know that, and the cops here aren't close to an answer. Doesn't look to me like they ever will be. So you can pay Jim the rest of the contract, and face your Board for that, or you can work with them for awhile to get the insurance money, and then

take action when there is a finding to base it on.  
What's your poison?"

"Willie, I think you are making a terrible mistake. Those guys killed her, I just know it!" "Well, produce the evidence and we'll go from there. Meantime, sign that thing, or I'm on the plane tomorrow." I'm not known for my client management skills. After a few more minutes, though, I thought I had convinced him, and the signed document appeared in my email. I had a feeling it was a Pyrrhic victory.

## ***Chapter 27***

The next few days were productive. Beams were shored, debris was removed, tests were begun, and we all began to feel like we were putting a bad time behind us. I am often amazed at the calming influence of everyday work – most people would rather work hard at something they think is honest labor, than argue with one another. It doesn't look that way on the evening news, but it looks that way at work all day.

Steel connections were x-ray tested at night, since there needs to be a clear area around them. The results were compiled, and seem to indicate that the steel structure was not weakened except at the hottest part of the fire. We all conferred about how to strengthen the structure, and started price negotiations. It was comfortingly normal.

It took two weeks to get the main tests, and a plan. The engineers' plan was heavily larded with weasel words so if the building fell down it wasn't his fault, but none the less it was a plan.

The Shreveport police had finally gotten down to us on their list. Two detectives came to interview all the people in the jobsite office, and they spent a long time with Randy. Jim was in town for a day, and he got a short grilling. So far as I could tell, the connection between Meg and Stuart had not come to their

attention. Since I wasn't around at the time of the fire, I didn't get interviewed.

One of the drywall foremen was walking around with a bandage on his arm. I finally asked someone about it, and was told that it was Cole's brother, and he had been burned at home last week, and just reported back to work this week. I hoped that the cops were talking to him.

Two days later Captain Crunch called. His name is really Captain Joe Franklin, and I decided I needed to correct my attitude, so I was on my best behavior.

“So, Captain Franklin, can you tell me anything so far? How about the autopsy results?”

“I guess I can tell you that she died of smoke inhalation. There was a blow to the back of the head, but it could have been when she fell and struck one of the carpenter's tables in the ballroom area. So right now we don't have any evidence that this was anything but an accidental fire and an accidental fatality. The arson investigators found that the fire started from a cutting rig that hadn't been shut down properly, and we didn't find any hard evidence of interference in her

death. So... unless something else turns up, we're closing the case."

I should have been relieved. We had all the support we needed to get on with the repairs and completion of the work, and I didn't have to worry about dealing with a murderer. I should have been relieved.

Stuart , on the other hand, wasn't. He seemed to feel certain that Meg had been murdered, and that one of the Marconi Champion people had set the fire, and the lack of evidence was just the result of the "stupid Shreveport police". The harder I pressed for facts or evidence, the madder he got. Finally I decided to let him cool off, and promised to call tomorrow to talk it over some more.

I didn't have any evidence either. I should have been relieved.



## **Chapter 28**

I was feeling unqualified. Most of the things I get to do – planning and directing building construction, finding the right people for building jobs, and consulting on organizational change – are the result of a lot of years of doing that, together with some luck in knowing a lot of people who might have that need. A few years ago, when Morrison Knudsen got taken over by a financial wonder, I stopped working for large companies, and went out on my own. Elizabeth and I had our heal s in our mouths for a few months, but it turns out that there is a remarkable demand for competent, flexible people outside of large organizations. More and more these days that's where they are.

I had thought about advertising, and getting organized, and maybe someday I'll have to. It sometimes seems that no one has a real personal relationship these days, and gets whatever they need, even wives and colleagues, off the Internet. But every time I get to feeling that way, the phone rings with an assignment, and I delay entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Anyway, I'm not an investigator. If the cops thought it was all an accident, maybe it was. That lets me do what I think I can do well, and not what I don't know how to do. I resolved to put away my misgivings, and accept their verdict.



## **Chapter 29**

That lasted through Tuesday. I worked with Randy and Cole to get our recovery plan together, and beat down all the predatory pricing the subs dreamed up about repairing and restaling construction. All this stuff may seem venal to a lot of people, who complain about contractors having inflated ideas about what something will cost, but it seems normal to me. The same people routinely exaggerate the estimates they give their supervisors about how long it will take to get that contract done, or send out those prospectuses. It's more a matter of class than behavior.

But it didn't last. The first sign was a call from Bud Shuster, the insurance adjuster. He wanted me to know that the reinsurers weren't sure they would honor the claim for the fire, even if the police didn't find any wrong doing. There was a lot of mumbo jumbo about "proximate causes" and "management oversight". He had apparently told Stuart all this, but Stuart was in shock – his opinion – and he wanted me to be careful in spending what could be Century money.

I revised my ideas of the fall to be fishing the McCloud River rather than Lake of the Ozarks. Then I asked what would be required to convince his people that it wasn't their clients fault, and the claim should be paid. Or, what's the same in his world, what would convince them that they would lose the lawsuit.

He thought for awhile. “I suppose if it was clear why the fire and the death occurred, and it wasn’t Century fault in any way, then the policy would be in force”. It was the not knowing, and not feeling there was a real investigation that had lead to their decision.

The next logical question was “Well, why don’t you mount what you feel is a real investigation. All these companies have some very competent investigators – bound to – so why don’t you send them over?” The answer was a typical insurance answer. “We don’t have to, it’s the duty of the primary insurer, Century Insurance unit, to conduct an investigation that is satisfactory to the reinsurers. These people aren’t in the retail business, and if they think the primary insurer has a conflict, they won’t touch it!”

After several tries I got Stuart . He was oddly detached. “Willie, I don’t know what to do, but you know I think they did it, and I can’t really disagree with Bud. Can’t you pin it on them?”

“Stuart , you’re not thinking straight. Even my friends know I sometimes can’t find my ass with both hands, so I’m not likely to solve a crime – if that’s what it is – when the cops can’t. Call me back when you have a good plan. I’ll continue here for a week!” All these

people were running for cover, and hoping I would save them. I had occasionally turned up some non-violent frauds in the past, but nothing like this.



## **Chapter 30**

Not knowing what else to do, I went back to work. Randy and Cole were still going over schedules and budgets for the repair and construction work. I told them that we might have to put it all on hold since the re-insurers didn't think it was a valid property insurance claim. They both said "Uh huh" and kept on going for a minute until it sunk in.

Randy was trying to be reasonable. "Well, we've got a contract to design and construct a building. In doing that, we've had some bad weather and a fire that we think are covered by the insurance policies that the owner provided. Now you are telling me that the policies are no good. How is that my problem?"

"Well, it's your problem because the owner could terminate the contract for convenience, and pay you the value of the work in place. You'd have to sue someone to get the insurance claim paid, and you know those guys keep lawyers for pets. Meantime the subs would be after you, and your surety would pay them and come after you for the money, and those guys keep other lawyers for pets....you get the picture." The picture was one of a bear pursued by hounds, and getting cornered.

They shrugged, and went back to their offices, but 30 minutes later Jim Marconi called. "What the hell is this about the insurance! I'll sue your ass back to

California if they dump us! I thought you were our friend!” And on and on.

I put the phone on speakerphone and listened until he ran down. “Jim, you’re on the Board. You go talk to Stuart , and the CEO, and the re-insurers, and get it straightened out. Meantime, I’m going fishing. Leave me a message at the hotel when you think it will get going again.”

“Willie, you know they think we torched the job. I’ll try, but I don’t think I’m the one to do it.” He had a point, but I didn’t have a better idea.

## **Chapter 31**

So I went fishing. Years ago we had built a hospital at Batesville, Arkansas, on the White River. At that point it's a big slow moving river. But further up, at Mountain Home, it's a clear stream, with a bunch of even better streams feeding it. So that's where I went.

Fishing is a great aid to thinking. It looked like I wasn't going to have anything immediate to do if I didn't untangle the fire and death, so even if I wasn't the right person, I needed to try. If it didn't work out, I'd go home and find the next job.

It still might have been a complicated accident. But that didn't get me any further along. So if it wasn't, who was it?

Stuart could be right – it could have been Jim. He was facing losing his company over the mold costs. He knew the jobsite well, and could have easily gotten in and set the torch onto the forms. I didn't have any idea what he had to do with Meg.

Or it could have been Randy. He was looking at losing his job, and maybe his wife, and certainly his good reputation in the business. A fire could save him, and Meg's death might be a convenient thing for saving his marriage. He could easily have staged the fire, and gotten Meg there to get knocked out. I had

been working with him for a few weeks now, and didn't think he could have done that, but I wasn't sure I was a reliable spotter of murderous intent. They say anyone can do it in the right circumstances, and fool people after.

Or it could have been Janet. It was harder to see her using the torch, or luring Meg there to get knocked out, but a woman scorned was a formidable enemy, and she would probably have figured no one would ever suspect.

Or, I guess, it could have been Cole's brother, although I didn't know anything about him. It was hard to see what interest he might have in burning a building down, but stranger things have happened, and I had to put him on my list.

So, five options – accident, Jim, Randy, Janet and Tony Johnson. Had to be one of them. I'd stall with where they were that night. Captain Crunch had to have gotten that far.

I fished for three days, caught enough bass and perch to last me the rest of my life, and went back to Shreveport. When I listened to my messages, there was one from Stuart's boss, the President of Century,

to the effect that while they worked out their insurance situation he wanted “the project team” to go on planning the repair and completion of the project. So don’t spend any more than we had to, but be ready to work again when it was all worked out. So I had a job, and time to figure out who done it.



## **Chapter 32**

Next day I went to see Captain Franklin. I explained that some additional investigation was apparently necessary before the insurance paid off, and could I see their reports to save myself some time.

That got me a hoot. “Mr Sage, I know you don’t know what you’re doing, but police investigations are never open to the public. They are full of speculation that doesn’t work out, and all sorts of false leads and exaggerated reports that are later discarded. Giving that out to the public would be suicide for us!”

“Well, OK. Can you confirm the whereabouts of some people for me, then, so I don’t have to work that out again?”

“No luck there either. Sorry, but all we can say is that we closed the case without a finding that there had been a crime committed.”

So I cussed the cops, and got on the phone. In my best Undercover Elephant style I found out where everyone was that night. Trouble was, they were all in Shreveport for one reason or another. Randy was here because that’s where his job was, Jim was here because he had a meeting with some of the Century people about his last billing, and even Janet was here because she had planned to call Randy to see if they

could finally talk about their marriage. Even Stuart was here, because he had a meeting with Bud to work on the original mold claim. I asked Cole about his brother, and got a family story, but no idea where he was that night. So, no help there.

I started with Jim. I told him I needed to do some sort of investigation that answered some of the insurers questions, and asked him to go over the history of the project with me, so I could make a convincing case. That would necessarily include some information on where he and others were, and how they could have caused the fire, as one of the possible causes. It sounded a little contrived to me, but Jim needed to get something going and appeared to welcome a talk.

“So, where were you when the fire started?”

“At the hotel, sound asleep. I had been through the casino earlier, to see how one of the new games was working out for them, but I had something to eat in the landside building, walked through the walkway to my car, and went home to bed. The last few weeks have been tense, and I thought I’d get some sleep.”

“Anybody see you?”

“Willie, I don’t know! The cops must have done this, and they have resources and authority you don’t, so I don’t see how you’re going to get anywhere this way.”

He was right, but we also weren’t getting anywhere the other way, so I kept on asking. We went through the history of the construction, Marconi Champion’s financial position, and the possible outcomes of the fire. By the end of it I could see why Stuart liked them for it. Without the fire the mold situation could easily have been the end of their company, and Jim’s finances. Now at least he had a chance.

Janet was next. She was back in Las Vegas, and I wanted to go home for a few days, so I stopped in Las Vegas on the way to Los Gatos. She lived in a modest apartment out near Henderson. I called from the airport, and she invited me to visit her apartment.

Janet met me at the door. She looked composed, but very tired. I couldn’t help comparing her to Meg, and thinking that Randy had been thinking with his dick when he paired up with Meg. Meg was lively and vivacious, but Janet was hauntingly beautiful. Made me think of Elizabeth.....

I explained that the police conclusion hadn't satisfied the insurers, and that I was trying to do an investigation that allowed them to cover the incident, and get the work going again. As the wife of a builder she could understand that. She didn't seem to see any risk to her in all that, and looked like she welcomed someone to talk to about it.

“Janet, where were you when this fire started?”

“Willie, I was at my motel. I had gone to Shreveport to try to talk to Randy....but when I got there I felt I didn't know what I really wanted, so I thought I'd wait till the morning to call, hoping my mind would clear up. This is all my worst nightmare, and I don't know how to act!”

“Are you going to get back together with Randy? I've been working with him, and he seems to miss you terribly.”

“I really don't know. My parents broke up over my father's cheating, and I promised myself I would never stand for that myself. And lately our lives seem remote and cold. But then I think I really love him – most of the time – and I want to get back together. I'm just a mess!”

“Did you ever talk to Meg? I don’t think she was serious about Randy; I think she must have just wanted company.”

“The police asked me that. I had called her, and I wanted to meet her, to see if I thought that it was serious. But she didn’t call me back, and pal of me was glad.”

I asked a bunch of other questions, and got good, practical answers. I left thinking Randy was a fool in some ways, but then most men were.

Los Gatos was comforting. The Santa Cruz mountains are outside the door, the weather is great, and all my friends were just where I left them. If I didn’t get to build buildings, I’d never leave.



## **Chapter 33**

Back in Shreveport on Monday, I started the conversation with Randy just the way I had with Jim. This was a step we needed to go through so we could all put this behind us, and get back to normal.

“So, Randy, where were you that night?”

“Well, it had been a long day, and I was still upset about Janet, so I went straight back to the apartment, had a frozen dinner, watched TV, and went to bed. No one saw me, or heard me, so I told the cops I didn’t have an alibi in the world. It didn’t seem to bother them.”

“How did you feel about this mold business? It seems pretty serious for you, to me.”

“Despite what’s happened, it’s hard for me to take it seriously. I mean, you’re talking about killing a good company, because the concentration of some unseen bug inside rises to almost the level it is in some places outside. I guess I still don’t believe it would really happen.”

“Have you ever had a fire on one of your jobs?” It seemed to me that the idea had to have come from

somewhere – burning down your project couldn't come naturally.

“No. One of our superintendents had it happen to him one time, but I never have. I really didn't think there was that much fuel for a fire!”

“Any idea how someone could have left a torch like that? What have you been having them do with them at night?”

“Well, most of the job we have been real careful, and of course most of the cutting was done a long time ago. This was the guys doing the big stairs up from the ballroom. They are running two shifts, like everyone else, and I think they are just working the same guys twice as long. We've had some trouble with them getting careless on the second shift.”

“Any idea why the security guys weren't on top of it? It seems like they would spot it right away, and maybe even smell the gas before it got lit.”

“I don't have any idea. They aren't our guys; they work for Century. This isn't Vegas – there isn't much traffic at 2 or 3 in the morning. They could be off having a smoke, and maybe even being the thing that

set it off. They've been telling everyone that they saw someone acting funny in the water beside the barge, but no one believes them."

"Do you know Cole's brother? What's the story on the burns?"

"Well, I don't know an official story, but I know the rumors. Tony has been a black sheep in his family, and some people think he is in the meth business. Cooking meth is a dangerous business, and most people here think he screwed up and got burned doing it. He lives back in the woods near Ruston, and there is a meth lab explosion over there almost every week. I don't know why he might have tried to start a big fire except out of meanness."

All these answers seemed perfectly practical to me, and I didn't feel like Randy was lying. After awhile I ran down. We agreed to get together after lunch to go over the latest sub proposals, and our plan for whenever they told us to start again.

I sat and mulled that over for awhile. If there really was a diversion to get the security people away, then there was more than one person involved, and that pointed to Jim and Randy. I doubted that Janet had a

pal ner in crime. Tony could have, if he had a motive. The police had asked all of the late shift casino employees if they had seen any of the main people in the incident that night, and gotten universal no's. I needed a new idea.

I imagined how each of the possibles would have done it, and what would have been needed to carry it out. Of course, it all could have been a set of chance circumstances that pushed one of them to do it because it was all possible, but there again that didn't get me any further along.

So I went to see the ironworkers whose torch was the thing that set the fire off. They were taken off the job, but they still worked for the same outfit, and it didn't take much to get their names and current jobsites. I went over there and found them working on another monumental stair for another hotel.

I introduced myself as an insurance guy, just needing some information to settle the claim. Neither of them wanted to talk, but they were polite Southern people, so they didn't walk away.

“ How do y'all remember leaving things? Did you normally separate the bottles at the end of the day?

“Well, we used to, but lately we’ve been working two shifts, and it seems silly to spend 30 minutes taking things down that you’re going to put together again 8 hours later. So, we’d been leaving it all on the cal , and the cal near the stair. But we didn’t leave the hoses on, and they were all rolled up. So if it really was our stuff, someone had to set it up again.”

“Were the tanks full? Seems like they kept feeding the fire.”

“Yeah, we’d just gotten new bottles. Bad luck.”

“Does anybody else on the jobsite use your cutting torch? It looks like the only one left on the job.”

“Well, we lent it to Sparky to cut off some ground rods. And Cole and Randy borrowed it the other day to do some weird signs for their crawfish boil. Not besides those.” Sparky was the name of any electrician whose name you didn’t remember.

They had quit work about 11 pm that night, and come back the next morning to find the hotel burning. They didn’t have any idea that their cutting torch was the original site of the fire until the cops told them two weeks later.

I spent the rest of the day in the office working with Randy and Cole on the repair plans and costs, and wondered about them knowing how to use that torch.

## **Chapter 34**

We were getting closer to a final plan and a cost. I called Stuart to give him a preview. It would cost about \$4 million to complete the demolition, some \$6 million to do the repairs, and about \$18 million to complete the project from there. The original \$25 million project would cost about \$45 million. We all hoped that the extra \$20 million would largely be covered by re-insurance, but Century Insurance unit would have to take their deductible, and the re-insurers might not take anything but a little of the mold costs, maybe not even that.

Those sorts of numbers always seem huge to me, but they aren't serious to the insurance people. They might heave a sigh of relief, and pay the claim. If they felt they weren't paying the one who caused it.

Stuart wasn't as happy with the plan as I was. "Willie, if the re-insurers deny coverage because of the continued presence of Marconi, it will mean my job! Can't you run them off?"

"Stuart, if you want to spend your declining years in court we can terminate for convenience, but if you do you need to get someone else to finish this job, because I don't want to spend mine there. If they

committed a crime it would be easy, but no one but you, and maybe Bud, says so right now.”

“All right, I’ll come over tomorrow to go through it in detail. But you better plan on all of us taking a few days to make up our minds.” I could see him at the Board meeting. This would make some cash cows run dry for awhile.

In the afternoon I went out to see the security guards.

They had gotten fired over it all, and went on to another job, pretty much the same thing. Both were overweight black kids whose main goal in life had been to carry a gun. They couldn’t get into the Police Academy, or even get into the local gangs, so security work on the graveyard shift was it. I supposed I admired them for not being on welfare, but then welfare wasn’t what it used to be.

I introduced myself again as an insurance investigator. That drew some questions about how you got to be one, and I had to make up some answers. If I kept this up I’d have to know more about it.

“So, tell me again what got you away from the new building?”

“From where we stay, you can look around the landside building to see the barge in the river. There wasn’t much going on in the walk that night, there usually isn’t on our shift. We kept seeing a light blinking on the side of the barge, kind of low, making a thing on the water. Nobody came by for a long time, so finally we went over to check it out. It went away for awhile, then it came back. We couldn’t figure out what it was, and we thought it might be someone trying to hurt the boat, so we kept looking around. Finally we got tired of that, and still no one was coming out of the casino, so we went on break.”

“Aren’t you supposed to stagger your breaks? Like, don’t both go at once?”

“Yeah, but there isn’t anything going on that time of night, so we usually go across the street to Mame’s to get a drink.” And I thought all this was going to be hard.

“Are there any kind of security cameras around, to get a look at the people who come and go?”

“Well, there are cameras, but we ran out of tape the other day, and the boss hasn’t gotten us any more, so we haven’t been using them.”

“Are y’all supposed to keep track of the cars in the parking lot? Like, take license numbers or anything?”

“No, we’re just supposed to keep people from hurting themselves getting to and from the landside building, or getting into the jobsite.” He paused, “Guess we didn’t really do that.” Guess not.

## **Chapter 35**

The last thing on my list was Tony. I got his home location from Cole, who looked kind of worried. I expected that he was on the phone to Tony as soon as I left his office, even if they weren't on good terms. No one wants his brother in jail.

Tony lived in a rural area about 20 miles east of town off I20. If you're from the cities, it's pretty surprising how isolated you can be near Shreveport Louisiana, 20 miles from work. The house was in poor shape, but it looked like it could be fixed up if someone spent some time on it. Having it run down was a bad sign, since for most of the people in the building trades, their main hobby was fixing up their home.

I knocked on the door, and Tony came to answer it. He stood in the door. "What do you want?"

"I'm working on getting the job going again, and I need to see what you saw, and do a report to the insurers. Can I come in and talk for awhile?"

"The damn job can burn to the ground for all I care, but sure, come in. Want a beer?"

"Yeh, I do. Dealing with the insurance wienies all day is thirsty work."

We wound up sitting on the porch, and I asked Tony how the job was going from his point of view. He didn't seem to be able to get past his grievances, so he really didn't have much information. I got his opinions on mold, and rain, and Randy's schedule, and Century's changes, and illegal immigrant, till I turned to his burns.

“Tony, how'd you get your hand burned so bad?”

“God damn it, I burned it on a pan in the kitchen! See the fire marks in the window! All you sumbitches think I started that fire, but I don't give a flying fuck about that building. Doesn't help me to have it burn! Now git outa here.”

I had seen a shotgun leaning against the wall when we went inside, and I didn't want to get shot if he thought I was really trying to shut down the drug operation, so I left. I don't know if he did it, but that was my favorite option right now.





## ***Chapter 36***

Tony represented to me the most depressing part of my work – the effect of drugs on building. Building a building is an exercise in bringing all of the social levels of American society together to accomplish something big. Outside of war, it's about the most frequent activity that brings people of all backgrounds together for a time. And all of them have a serious problem with drugs.

At the manual labor level, with immigrants and poorly educated citizens, it was meth, and crack, and marijuana. It seemed to get a lot worse in the '80's, and we began pre employment testing. On some of my projects, we had rejected 30% of the people looking for work until they knew they would be tested. Then they just didn't come looking. The idea that 30% of the people couldn't pass a drug test made me sad.

Once you had the job, of course, you could use whatever you wanted, so we started random testing, and testing of everyone associated with an accident. In union areas, the unions objected that pre employment testing was an invasion of privacy. I didn't see it, and had a lot of frank discussions with my union friends, but usually they prevailed. Even they agreed that testing was necessary if there was an accident. And

the random tests initially picked up an incredibly high number of people who had been clean when they hired on, then went back to drugs.

On the professional level, many of the designers, architects, and engineers turned out to use higher class drugs. Many of the parties and events I went to had some drugs being used, and there were a few of the people I dealt with whose poor appearance and functioning in the morning was the result of more than a few glasses of wine. I knew it was mistaken, but sometimes I wished for some ordinary drunks to deal with.

Part of this I'm sure is the pressure all of these people felt. They had to compete for work, put up with jerks for bosses, try to help their kids get into Harvard, and find some satisfaction from their lives. But it doesn't seem any harder than farming for a living to me. Maybe it's just the choices that does it to people. At any rate, if there was one thing I could do to improve American society, it would be eliminating drugs, and Tony would be a start.

## **Chapter 37**

Next morning, there was Stuart . I gave him an overview of the plan, complete with diagrams and the various consultant's reports. Then I invited Randy and Cole to go into more detail. I thought Stuart would be reluctant to meet with the people who he thought had caused all this, and perhaps he was, but he was polite, paid attention, and asked some good questions. We made some changes to the plan to address his concerns, and let Randy and Cole go.

We went over to the landside building for lunch, though, and he loosened up. "Willie, you've done a good job in figuring out what needs to be done, but if we don't get it covered it will be my ass. Even though the Board hired Marconi, if we can't prove they did it, the insurers will continue to hide, and a \$20 million loss will be blamed on me. On top of everything else, I think they'll fire me. Isn't there anything you can do?"

I had been debating one idea since the White River trip. "We could advertise that we had found a new piece of evidence, and were going to turn it over to the cops, and hope that spurred someone to action. I don't really have anything concrete, but we could make up something vague, and see what happens. If nothing does, then I don't know what else we can do."

Stuart was trying not to look too eager. “What would it be?”

“I dunno – how about if I say that you have found some communications in the project database, and I have some ideas about the light that distracted the guards? The project database is so large and confused that no one knows what’s in there, and there is always a chance that someone really did do something with a blinking light. It’s all a longshot, but if we make a big deal about it and have you come on a big visit to the cops next week, maybe someone will do something, and we can go from there.”

I really didn’t have any idea what “someone would do”, but I could imagine that if Randy or Jim or Tony thought there was some evidence, they might run. That might also go for Janet, if I could figure some way to get the message to her. I tried hard not to think how dumb I would have thought this idea was, if someone else had it.

Stuart was warming up to it. “I’ve got access to the database, but I really don’t use it for much. What am I supposed to do?”

These days most of the information in building construction was in electronic forms. We print plans to use in the field, but they are constantly changing, and the actual field-use documents often turn out to be shop drawings that are trade specific versions of the basic plan. Add to that hundreds of thousands of pages of letters, questions and answers, and administrative things, and there wasn't enough file cabinets in the world for it all. So most projects used electronic communication and storage systems to route and store information. Access was restricted, but on this job a lot of people had access, and a lot of things, like email, were stored away without the writer knowing it. So it wasn't too far fetched.

“You're going to have to spend a day rooting around, and going to unlikely places, because the administrator here can see who has been on the system, and if someone is worried about you they could check. So make a good show.”

He promised he would, we set a time for his return, and he went off to another meeting on how the casino was doing. The bottom line was good, with an expected profit of several million this year, but the hotel fire and repair was still the big news around town.

Apparently the pressure to get moving was felt in Las Vegas also. Stuart had said that the Board was debating doing something to get started, and as soon as I got back to the office the President called.

“Willie, we can’t authorize the whole plan, but is there something you can do that will make some progress while we talk to the re-insurers? It can’t close off our options, but we need to let people know we are moving forward.”

We could start on the structural repairs with two small subcontracts and a lot of inspection, and probably not waste any money. It would seem like a band-aid to the builders, since many other things needed to be done at the same time, but it would give the appearance of action. We settled on the budget - \$1 million – and he rang off.

At least I had something to do.

## **Chapter 38**

Over the next few days we finalized the subcontracts, and got the work started. The Marconi Champion people wanted to know why we were doing so little, and why we hadn't paid them for last month's work. I told them I didn't know, that the owner was still settling with the insurers, and threw in that both Stuart and I thought we had found some new information, and he was coming next week to turn it over to the cops. Stay tuned.

I solved the problem of letting Janet McDonald know by "misdirecting" a copy of an email to Stuart with a copy apparently to another Janet who worked for Century. I told him I had set up a meeting with Captain Crunch, and urged him to bring everything he had, and I would do the same.

I hadn't in fact said anything to Captain Franklin, since I was sure he would laugh at me. This whole thing probably wouldn't come to anything, and I didn't think we needed any police help anyway.

Once the steel connections had gotten far along, we decided to re-establish the walkway through the jobsite. Routing people through barricades put out into the street had been putting some customers off, particularly the older and less mobile ones. No matter how fashionable the gaming business looked, it depends in large part on older gamblers who arrive in

busses, often leaving from Social Security offices, to keep the handle up.

This time we built the walkway across the next level up, so the people who passed through it couldn't get out of it unless they jumped over a railing. That required some sort of escalator at each end, normally a deal killer in a short time. But we had gotten the equipment in for the permanent escalators going to the lowest level, and the sub was willing to put them in to the walkway on a temporary basis, for a handsome price. Still, it seemed worth it to change the appearance of walking into the casino.

Janet called to say she had gotten the email by accident, and that she was planning to come next week also, to talk things over with Randy. We agreed to have dinner. I told myself she just didn't have anyone else to talk to in town.

The week passed quickly in getting the walkway going, and the welders doing the steel fixes. We worked the weekend to reach the point where the Century people could start with a new round of "We're doing fine!" publicity.

I put my story about having an idea on the mystery lights around, by telling the office manager, Dawn Marie, about it while fixing coffee one day. The people in the office had taken to drinking something called French Market, which really wasn't coffee at all, so I had my own coffee maker, and had to operate it myself. She said she had noticed Stuart being in the database lately, and what was that about. I gave her the standard story, and went off satisfied that everyone would know about it all before lunch

I hadn't seen any reaction. Far from running, it seemed like everyone was coming to town next week. So much for Sherlock Holmes.



## **Chapter 39**

Stuart came in on Monday, and we made a show of “going downtown”. We did actually go visit the Captain, and asked if he had any new information, since the owner needed to make some final decisions. As usual he looked at me like I was crazy.

“Mr Sage, I told you we had closed the investigation. As far as we are concerned, it was two accidents together. There just isn’t any other evidence!”

We thanked him politely, and left the building.

“Stuart , that’s it. No one has made any move. When we get through with the work we’re doing now, the Board is going to have to fish or cut bait.” He looked resigned. “OK. I’m afraid I know who the bait is. Guess I’ll go try my luck as a gambler.”

When I got back I got a bunch of looks from the staff, but no one wanted to ask a question. There was a note from Janet on the desk. She had gotten in, was at the hotel, and wanted to buy dinner. I was more than willing. I would meet her at Henderson’s, and show her some Louisiana cuisine.

She was there when I got there in the evening, looking like the most attractive thing in Shreveport, but very nervous. After a glass of wine she felt a little better,

and wanted to tell me more about Randy than I really wanted to know.

“Willie, he’s such a little boy. He wants to play with his toys, have his dinner on the table and his bed warm, and that’s it. I’m just not sure I want to put it back together. Did you have that sort of relationship with your wife?”

I had told her about Elizabeth somewhere along the way, I forget where. “No, Elizabeth was no one’s servant. She was the youngest female auditor in town when we got married, and managed to have a good practice, raise the boys, and run the schools and sports associations along the way. I guess I was gone a lot, and we missed each other, but it was a marriage of two strong people.” That was the way I remembered it, and I think that’s the way Elizabeth saw it too.

It all went on in that vane for awhile, with Janet comparing me to Randy, and quietly buttering me up. It didn’t take much. When we went back to the hotel, I asked her up to the room for a nightcap, and you know the rest. I told myself I was keeping an eye on my suspects.

The lovemaking was spectacular. Neither of us had had any real affection for a while, and getting older seemed to make gentle intimacy easier for me. There was one pretty driven round, some quiet talk, and another long exploration. I felt some tension leaving me that I didn't know I had.

Then the phone rang.

“Mr Sage, please come quickly. Mr Long has been found downstairs injured. It looks like he was attacked, and thrown off the walkway into the basement.”

Well, at least I had eliminated one suspect.



## **Chapter 40**

By the time I got there, the EMT people had taken Stuart off to the hospital. Our new security guard was standing at the middle of the walkway.

“Jerry, was Mr Long hurt badly?”

“Didn’t look that way, Willie. It looked like a knock on the head, and a broken leg. I did what you asked me to, and I believe it worked.” We went back into his office. After a few minutes I came out, with a heavy heart .

In the morning, I went downtown, and then over to St. Vincent’s Hospital. Stuart had had the leg set, and was in a private room, looking a little groggy from medication.

“Willie, did they get them? I didn’t see which it was, and the cops haven’t been here yet, but I’m sure it was one of them!”

I looked at him for awhile, telling myself that he was an old friend, and I was sure I could tell. The fact was, if I didn’t know it, I couldn’t have.

“Stuart , let me show you something.” The boys had gotten me a small handheld music and video player for last Christmas. I didn’t think I would use it much, but

it was important here. I started a video clip I had taken off the security camera we had installed in the walkway when we rebuilt it. I thought it might be important if we forced another incident. For some reason I didn't want anybody to know, though, so I paid for it myself.

The picture showed a man walking along the walkway. The camera showed the time was 1:31 am. The man looked around for the guards, and then straight at the camera, which was hidden in the column cover.

Then he backed up to one of the steel columns, and banged his head against it violently. The first time didn't work, but the second did, and blood appeared on his shoulder. Then quickly, as if not to lose his nerve, he jumped up on the walkway railing, and jumped off. It was 35 feet down to the basement floor. People have been killed in shorter falls. The fall was silent, but a few second later there was a very real scream.

I shut off the video, and switched the player silently to voice record.

“Stuart , why?”

He was quiet for a long time“Willie, I’ll tell you this, but I’ll never tell anyone else. I hope you haven’t given that video to anyone, and that you won’t.

“Things haven’t gone very well for me since Meg left. Some of our operations haven’t been smooth, and I’ve gotten the blame. The gamblers on the Board are saying behind my back that they needed someone who had more feeling for the business, someone they could work with better. Even though this mold business was Jim Marconi’s fault, and they picked him, they think it had to do with the way we were running the project. If I don’t prove it was them, and they’re crooks, I’m cooked.”

“I was working in the landside offices that night, and I saw Meg in the casino. Saw her leave, and I thought if we could talk, maybe we could make it up, and start again. I have been so lonely, and knowing she was seeing Randy made it worse. She left the walkway through a construction door that she must have had a key to, and I followed her.”

“I found her in the entrance to the ballroom – at least I think that’s what it’s going to be. She said she was thinking about some changes, and wanted to visualize them. I tried to talk about us, and she said some things

about me, and things about Randy, and I just snapped. I picked up something and hit her. I didn't intend to hit her hard, but it caught her on the back of the head, and she went down hard. I just stood there, and tried to think. In an instant I had a plan that I thought would work."

"Our risk management people had been saying that often when a job gets in trouble, it mysteriously has a fire. The damage covers up the trouble, and is a reason for the delay, and the builder gets out scot free. So why not start one here? There was a cutting rig there, not even locked up. I had worked construction some going through school, and I could rig it up, and start the fire. If it looked set, so much the better."

"The problem was Meg. If I took her out, she would know who set the fire. So...I set it, and walked away."

"Willie, I just did what I needed to do. Don't give them the movie!"

I stared at him a little more. You just never really know.

Then I walked over to the door, and asked Captain Franklin to come in, and read him his rights.



## **Chapter 41**

It all took a while to clean up. The re-insurers weren't sure if their policy covered a crime by an officer of a company related to the insurer, and Lloyds and their friends dithered over that for awhile. Finally Century started to file suit – a love puppy bite in their world – and the re-insurer's decided that they could make it up on premiums in a year or two, and honored the claim.

By that time we had gotten the structural repairs finished, and polished the rest of our plans, and gone fishing a few times. We finally got the go ahead, and now were well on the way to finished.

Stuart , of course, was all lawyered up, and saying nothing. But the evidence was pretty strong, even if the recording wasn't ruled admissible. It looked like life in prison. I often thought about his last words to me, and how little we know of each other. It's a comfort to me that in my daily life I have something solid to show for my work, because improving humanity seems like a foolish dream.

On the other hand, I was still seeing Janet.

The End



# **Damn Santa Fe**

Mysteries in Work Clothes

By

Warner Strang

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locals is entirely coincidental.

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# **Damn Santa Fe**

## ***Chapter 1***

The fat, stupid Indian woman just stared at Valerie. Finally she said “In the Season when Thunder.....at this time of year, the Council only meets on Sunday”.

Valerie felt her face get red. “But zees people are coming from Washington and Chicago to see zee presentation! Zat will ruin their weekend! Can’t we switch to Tuesday?” The Indian woman just stared at the ground, and everyone else fidgeted.

These people had no idea what they were getting, and no gratitude for it.

“Damn Zanta Fe”, Valerie thought.

Finally Ken came to her rescue. “Mrs. Begay, you remember we had a meeting once during the week when there was some Indian Health Service doctor here to certify the Hospital. It was a little inconvenient, but I’d bet that the Council President would allow it again for this one. After all, we are getting a new building.” Mrs Begay smiled, and the awkwardness seemed to lessen. The meeting went on to who would attend, and what the agenda was, and what would be served for refreshments, and finally wound down.

Valerie and Ken walked back to their joint office in the old hospital. “I’m zorry, but I just don’t see why they don’t understand that they are getting world class design for a new hospital, and they need to help those people who are providing it!”, Valerie said. “Zere are people standing in line for Horst, and here we are.”

“Well, you just got here. It takes a while for people to get to know you, and adjust to the situation. These people don’t do new buildings every day” Ken said. He debated saying more, but decided it could wait until he knew her better too. It was worth waiting for – she was an attractive woman, and it appeared that

they would work together for some time – but she could also make anyone angry. Valerie had just arrived, as the onsite representative of AB Malley, the Chicago architect. She was proud of her firm – that’s OK – but a little stressed that she found herself on a different planet. Or maybe yet another different planet, since she had only recently moved from Paris to Chicago to join Murphy, and they had posted her here. Ken thought he should make allowances.

They got back to their temporary quarters, and each began the process of alerting people to the upcoming meeting. It was the Schematic Design presentation of the design of the new hospital, and it had worked into being a big deal. The space program had been done here in Santa Fe, but then it went to Chicago, and no one on the ground here knew what the design was going to be like. Ken was a little nervous about that.



## ***Chapter 2***

Nothing is as simple as it seems. Most people think an owner chooses an architect from his community, whose work the owner likes. He designs a building, it gets priced, and built.

In the era of large government agencies, and in Indian Country, it was a little different. The architect selection was the result of a national competition. The selection panel was composed of bureaucrats in Washington. The selection had a lot to do with those firms whose projects were published in *Architectural Record* magazine, and perhaps those firms that had done a lot of medical center hospitals. They were, in the terms of arms length procurement, the most qualified people.

The trouble was, they didn't know much about the environment of the Santa Fe Indian Hospital – Pueblo Indians, the Hispanic historical traditions of Santa Fe, or the medical practice of the area. That wasn't much of a concern of the committee until late in the process, when one of the Indian Health Service executives, a

Navajo, pointed out that the front runners really didn't know much about what they were doing. The fix was the inclusion of a local partner with the selected Chicago firm. That was Ken Anderson's firm, whose practice was exclusively in the Historical District of Santa Fe.

Ken was glad to have the work, but he felt a little like a step child. The Murphy people, and Horst Paul in particular, flew in in their little plane, made pronouncements, and flew away. He didn't complain – it didn't look like it would do any good. But it felt funny.

Life as a practicing architect was a little different from what he had expected too. Young architects in school dream of being on design teams that do grand structures right away, and to progress from that to being able to see their design aesthetic take form as a common occurrence. The facts were a lot different.

For one thing, building design in the abstract was only a small part of the job – preparing construction documents and solving the problems they created was a lot more of the time. So he had graduated, gone to work for an Albuquerque firm, and sat for two years doing door schedules. Only slowly was he included in

the design meetings that he had thought would be his whole life. Mostly he argued with builders about what his plans said.

That was the other thing – everybody thought they knew more about how things should be done than he did, because he was a kid without much field construction experience. It would be OK if there was an old hand in the office to handle the complaints and vouch for their details, but the economics of the business worked against old hands in the drawing production positions. There wasn't enough money in the fees to pay experienced people to handle construction administration. So he was on his own with some computer details that were in their library.

The feeling of having taken a wrong turn in life didn't help his personal life either. He had met Shirley in school, lived with her for a year after school, and finally decided to get married. It was a big deal for her and her family, but it seemed to him that he was a spectator at a production, and probably could be replaced with a cardboard cutout without anyone noticing.

Life was OK for awhile after that, though. They both worked, there was enough money with two incomes,

and so what if work was dull. He had some work on projects in Santa Fe, and he enjoyed his days there. Then one of their associated firms there asked him to join them. It seemed like a way to jump forward, and he accepted immediately. Shirley didn't want to leave her job right away, though, so he commuted for several months. His schedule – every architect's schedule – was really tough, though, so he didn't see much of her. It seemed like work in the office just got started when the sun was going down, and some times he just slept in the office.

Finally, two years after their marriage, Shirley announced that she couldn't take it anymore. It didn't seem like a marriage to her, just an elaborate way to shack up. After a fight, they broke up. He moved up to an apartment in Santa Fe. They hadn't really decided on a divorce, but they might as well have.

Sometimes it didn't seem that way, though. She really was a beautiful woman, inside and out, and who could blame her for not wanting an absentee husband. So they talked sometimes, and occasionally went out for dinner when he was in Albuquerque. Once they had made love again, and he stayed over, but in the morning he had to go, and the whole thing started again. Later, when he had mentioned Valerie in

passing, Shirley had gotten a hurt look and seemed to be jealous. He really didn't understand women....



## **Chapter 3**

The appointed day for the presentation arrived. The Council that governed the Indian Health Service Hospital, or rather advised the IHS on how to run it, assembled.

The Council was made up of representatives of the groups that were served by the Hospital. They were largely Pueblo Indians. Of the thirteen Pueblos, seven were in this Hospital's territory, and six were "zoned" to the Acoma Laguna Hospital. In addition there were some Navajos living in the area, and one band of Jemez Apaches. But mostly it was Pueblo Indians.

The anthropologists say that the Pueblo Indians are the descendants of the ancient groups that migrated across the Bering Straits, and moved down into the Southwest. They are the remnants of the Anasazi Indians that lived in Canyon de Chelly a thousand years ago, and then suddenly left, for reasons no one knows. They settled in bands in Northern New Mexico, and became sheep herders, some farmers, all sedentary and settled enclaves.

As individuals, most Americans found them to be quiet, hospitable people, little given to talking or making themselves heard. It was hard for modern day Americans to imagine the uprisings that drove the Spanish out of Santa Fe for awhile, or the people that helped Kit Carson march the Navajo to Bosque Redondo. They were just too passive.

Horst Paul arrived at the little Santa Fe airport on a Gulfstream aircraft, with a retinue of three young architects to handle the presentation boards. Ken was at the airport to meet him, and, he thought, to go over the presentation. The schematic design presentation on what was a major project for this community seemed to him like real architecture, and he was as anxious as everyone else to sit at the feet of the master, and perhaps contribute the local knowledge that had gotten them the job.

It wasn't to be.

The meeting they had finally gotten together was at four in the afternoon, when the locals had gotten off their jobs and could get there. The plane was due at ten, but it kept being put back by other commitments, so that it finally arrived at three o'clock, and they had to hurry to get to the meeting. He talked to Horst in

the car, but there wasn't much they could do, so he told himself it really wasn't his show yet.

They had a large conference room at the building next door to the existing IHS Hospital, the Institute for American Indian Arts. It was a nice room, in a graceful old building, and Horst and his minions happily set up.

AB Malley, and Horst in particular, had gotten a lot of press lately. Their design for the Chicago Arena in suburban Chicago had been featured in Architectural Record two months ago, and the use of the large white metal panels had been acclaimed as the latest in modern design. They were on a roll.

The President of the advisory panel called the meeting to order. Frank Tossie was a Navajo, a pudgy, talkative guy who Ken found easier to work with than most of the panel members. He was as hard to read, but better than most.

Horst started off with a long description of the design process, with adjacencies, and matrices, and aesthetic choices. He had a slight Germanic accent, and a sort of even voice, and before long he had lost most of his

audience. Even Ken, who was interested in the subject, felt his mind wandering.

Then with a flourish he turned the boards with the renderings of the new building. From the street it was an even rectangle, with a few small windows. The walls were all white metal panels. It took a few minutes for the viewers to see that the main entrance was at the side, facing south. Horst explained why that allowed the sort of depal mental closeness that would help the hospital function better.

The Indians were impassive – interrupting was considered very impolite – and waited for the presentation to end. Finally Horst wound down.

There was a long silence in the room. The panel members all looked at the renderings, and at Frank Tossie, and he looked thoughtful. Ken was getting nervous.

Finally he said, “Well, shit, it looks like the world’s biggest Texaco to me.”

The faces of the Chicago architects turned white. Horst stood up, gestured for his helpers to gather their

boards, and walked out. Before Ken knew it, they had gotten into their rental car, and driven away.



## **Chapter 4**

When Ken got back into the room, Valerie had also gone, but the Tribal Council was sitting quietly talking. They looked at him as if they expected some sort of explanation.

“Uh, well, the Chicago people are a little touchy, I guess, and maybe they don’t understand us all very well....” He was hoping for some reaction to tell him what to do next, but not getting any help.

“ So maybe we should do a little design work, and solve a few of the things that I know are on your mind, and meet back here on Sunday. Maybe then we can talk a little more....”

And all those people nodded, and got up and left. What the hell was he going to do now?

The first thing was what Murphy and Valerie were going to do. When he went back to their office she was standing at the window, looking furious.

“Zay are crazy! Ze most famous architect in ze world right now, and they spit on heem! He cannot stay....”

“Valerie, that design insults them just as much. Look around you. Are there any important buildings that aren't adobe? Are there any important buildings that don't face East? What were they thinking!”

“Zen why do zay need an architect! You can finish ze damn thing!”. And with that she stormed out.

And that gave him an idea of how to proceed. He could make a few changes, draw a different wall section and change the rendering, rearrange some departments to change the front door, and perhaps keep the job going. No body else seemed to have a plan.

## **Chapter 5**

In fact, Ken found it was really pretty easy. Since everything was done with computer programs and images, he worked late, came in early – no Valerie – and had a new set of plans and boards by the end of the next day. Maybe he was fooling himself, but he kind of liked the way the building looked and functioned, and he thought the Council would be able to see it also.

That didn't solve the political problem, though. It was mostly Murphy's contract, and he hadn't heard a thing from them. Valerie seemed to have disappeared, and he had had no word from Horst and company.

One option was a sort of "What me worry" approach. He called the IHS project manager and said "well, we've made the changes, and we're ready for the Sunday meeting, so you can confirm it to everyone." He didn't say who we was.

"OK, what all did you change? "

"Oh, just the wall types and a few departments, but I think people will be able to look at it without a

reaction now, and maybe we can get down to the details.”

“Great, see you then.”

## **Chapter 6**

The second review meeting, when it happened, was a sort of relieved sigh. The Council, including Frank, were a little embarrassed about having insulted this world famous guy ... although most agreed with each other that it really had looked like a gas station. So when they saw a rendering of a building that looked like one of theirs, they were not very hard to please.

There were some operational people on the Council, and they asked good questions about adjacencies and efficiencies, but most of the members were just OK that it looked right from the street. So, after about 30 minutes, Frank told Ken that he had the Council's approval to proceed. The next review was in eight week's time, and it was for a more advanced stage of design, called Design Development.

Valerie had attended the meeting, although she hadn't said a word. They went back to their office. Ken took a deep breath.

“Well, OK, but now I need some engineers. We have some local people on the team, but they aren't used to

heavy medical stuff. Will the Chicago people help now?"

Valerie smiled. "Vell, I don't think zo. Horst says that if he sees anyone with the plans he will fire him...they don't have many who want to lose their jobs with him for the sake of some damn Indians!". It was clear that he was on his own, and that was OK with her.

"OK, will they pay me to get someone to do the work here?"

That was a harder question. They called the managing partner in Chicago to talk it over. It was clear that he didn't want the firm to plainly turn down the commission because their feelings were hurt – that sounded childish. But he also didn't want to take responsibility for someone else's work. After back and forth for awhile they reached an agreement to continue with Santa Fe design engineers who had their own professional liability insurance and who acted through Ken's firm. Sounded like a lot of weasel words to him, but Ken agreed.

“Zees is ze stupidity!” And she flounced out.

In the next few days Ken talked to almost all the design engineers in town, and assembled a local team. They didn't have the national credentials, but they did have a good knowledge of the area and local practice, and by the end of the week he was cheerful again.

Valerie didn't come into the office for several days, but Ken did see her at a local restaurant. She was with one of the physicians from the Hospital, Jim Whitecloud. Jim was a Navajo, one of the well qualified people who had chosen to return to Indian country rather than work in the big cities. He was on the Council, had asked some good questions, didn't care much for the squabbling about designers. In Santa Fe, he was a little east of Dinetah, but he must find it better than Window Rock. Certainly looked like he was enjoying himself tonight. Ken didn't interrupt them.

As the design effort got back underway, Ken and Janet became popular with people and firms that might compete to build the building. The government had a new process for choosing the building team, and it involved the contractors being chosen early and helping with the completion of design. Somehow they

all knew that the selection was coming up, and flocked to understand the job and establish their credentials before proposals were requested, and a blackout started with the project designers.

The first ones were the Native American building firms. Flintko from Oklahoma sent two people to look the design over and try to get the Santa Fe folks to have some sort of Indian bias. There was also a firm called Artic Slope that worked all over the country on Indian projects. It seemed funny to Ken that Pueblo Indians were being courted by Cherokees and Inuits, but business makes strange bedfellows.

Then came the healthcare builders. MacMullen had a Denver office, and those guys drove down and came by. They were well experienced in jobs in the West, but clearly thought they knew more about hospital design than Ken did, so it put him off a little. He put it out of his mind and continued on.

The hardest group to ignore was the local trade firms. They were always around, wanting to buy lunch and get on someone's team. They felt like it was their Hospital, and they should get to build it, and it was hard to convince them that it really wasn't Ken's

decision. He didn't really know whose decision it was, and right now didn't care.

In the midst of all that he got a late night call from Shirley. She must have had a bad date, and wanted to come stay with him for the weekend... she was still his wife, after all. He made the stupid mistake of saying that he and Valerie had meetings all weekend, so it wouldn't be much fun for her. She hung up without a word.



## **Chapter 7**

In the thick of the design effort Ken spent long days with the engineers getting down to the details of the way the building systems worked. Valerie had initially been gone a lot – probably with Whitecloud, Ken thought - but began to get interested in the endless design meetings.

“We don’t do this in France”, she said. “The trade planning es done by the builders!”. Ken spent some time explaining that American design was based on the notion that the architects and engineers could completely describe a building, so that bidders could completely price it, and the owner could rely on the price.

“It’s a little of a myth – we really don’t get all the details down until the contractors have submitted their information and coordinated drawings, but we pretend that all this is completely designed and easily priced.” She looked at him with what he thought of as a Gallic expression. “ But we need to detail all of it as if that was the final word”.

Meanwhile the people in Washington had gotten into gear in choosing a builder. This was one of the first projects that the new approach was going to be used on, so the development of the request for proposals, and how the choice would be made, was pretty much kept to them. The visits from interested builders continued until finally Janet got the document she was to advertise the job with, and the things she was to send out to anyone who wanted to propose. Then the rules were that all the questions went through her and were published to everyone, and all the visits stopped.

There was a large prebid meeting, and occasional formal written questions. But since all of that had to be disclosed to everyone, it mostly seemed to be for show, and to try to impress the competition. To the Federal procurement guys it seemed normal; to Ken it looked like Kabuki theater.

The proposal date came, there were 20 large books delivered to Janet, she bundled them up and sent them to Washington, and no one in Santa Fe heard a word for a while.

Meanwhile the detailed design effort continued. Ken could see that a lot of the local engineering was done with local rules of thumb rather than analysis, but there

didn't seem to be anyone watching or asking, so they went on. The mechanical engineers were using systems they had some experience with, rather than the ones that appeared in the building magazines, but there was no objection. Ken would occasionally send progress plans to Washington, but he didn't hear anything back.

Through all this his relationship with Valerie got better. She could see that all this was another country, albeit one with strange attitudes, and she was willing to join him for dinner and talk about how it was in Europe compared to the US.

“I suppose it is because you all hate your government....or any government....so you don't want them to make any hard decisions between people, where they could be corrupt....so you try to make it just low price wins. Right?”

“I guess. I don't want Dominiche choosing his biggest contributor, that's for sure. But this new process is swinging it back toward qualifications, and having people make subjective judgments, so maybe we'll be like France soon. At least we'll probably eat better. Let's order.” It was pretty formal, and Ken didn't

know how to be more personal, but it was better than nothing.

Finally the selection committee in Washington announced a decision. They had chosen the MacMullen Healthcare group in Denver.

That was OK with Ken, but produced outrage from the Native American groups. They came to talk it over with Janet, who told them it had never been in her hands, and got some newspaper articles written questioning the decision. Both Flintko and Artic Slope threatened to protest. But when they finally talked to the Washington people the answer was “Sure, go ahead. We will send you the forms”. It looked like death by delay, and both of them gave it up.

## **Chapter 8**

A few days later the MacMullen team showed up, planning the move onto the jobsite. The project Manager was Al McEntire. There was an estimator charged with buying out the job when the plans were far enough along, Jim Bailey. They planned to bring on one of their superintendents, Paco Jordan, when the work began, and to hire a local administrative person, Lisa Antiya, to make up the full team.

Al looked like a fellow with an unusual problem – he was too good looking. He was well set up, with wide shoulders, narrow hips, good height, regular features. He was polite, articulate, intelligent. It made every man in the room nervous about him.

To make matters worse, he was happily married, a longtime resident of Denver, had two kids. He was a little shy, not too good at putting people at ease. Ken sort of liked him, but also thought Valerie might run off with him to some island. Really an odd thought.

Bailey, on the other hand, was a pudgy, sarcastic fellow who was easy to fit into categories. He quickly became friends with the design team, and took

pleasure in gently pointing out the weaknesses of the design. So people's reactions were exactly the opposite of what they should be.

They moved trailers onsite, set up their office, and began working on bidding out the plans that were ready. It made Ken nervous to have some things locked in early, but that's the way this approach worked, and it did get him some good advice, and occasionally an ally for the cost of good design.

The local subs were still pressing for a good share of the work for Native American firms. Jim Whitecloud had come in to Ken to urge him to support some of them. Ken agreed that it would be better to be dealing with people he knew from other jobs, but he didn't expect MacMullen to agree.

To his surprise they were very open to the ideas, so long as Ken supported them in using the local firm's prices in the final contract cost. There were some out of town firms that had some lower prices. Sometimes they made sense – a national medical casework firm could make medical cabinets in a factory for much less than a small firm in Santa Fe. But other prices seemed unreasonably low given the labor rules in the area. On those MacMullen was willing to use the local

firms. Ken walked out with far more than he expected. Maybe this approach wasn't so bad.

Finally they came up with a maximum cost based on a mix of completed and incomplete plans. The full name of the contract type was Cost of Work plus a Fee to a Guaranteed Maximum Cost. We'll see, Ken thought.



## ***Chapter 9***

Approval of the Guaranteed Maximum Price allowed work to begin on site. A parking lot had to be relocated temporarily to have the old lot area be the site of the new building. Later the old hospital would be torn down to be the site of a new parking garage. It began to look like a jobsite.

It was Spring now, and the schedule on which the GMP was based had the building partly closed in by next winter, so there was some urgency in getting things going.

And it settled into a weekly routine. Almost every jobsite in the nation, at least those for public buildings of any size, had a weekly process that included a meeting between the general and all the subs to monitor daily work progress against the schedule, a meeting with the general and key subs with the owner, and the design team to talk about issues, and special meetings on individual subjects that needed resolution so work could proceed. Most of these took place in the portable office trailers that the general and the subs had put onsite, in what for large jobs began to resemble a small city.

Then at the end of the month there was a updating of the schedule and the logs of change orders, questions, approvals, and issues, and a thick report. Then the process began again. The new Santa Fe Indian Hospital project fell smoothly into this routine.

In between all these meetings Ken and Valerie and the engineers were busy checking and approving submittals. Ken had been frank in saying that the job was not really all designed until the trade contractors had reached agreement with the design team on the actual products that they proposed to use to meet the specifications. Those specs were a 1,000 page document, often including sections and clauses that no one had read for a decade, but they were the rule book on what the price should contain, and the basis for long arguments on meaning, and function, and cost. Valerie grimly did her share of the work, but never missed the chance to mutter “Stupidness!” to Ken.

Al and Jim added to the MacMullen team once work started. Paco Jordan was a superintendent who had worked for MacMullen before in Santa Fe. He was very competent, familiar with the process, and good at bringing about agreement between all the warring parties.

The office secretary – administrative assistant these days – was Lisa Antiya. Lisa was a young community college graduate who lived in Espanola. She had all of the office skills she needed, and Al was initially glad to find her. But after a few days it was becoming clear that she had one more attribute – she was hot. The office usually had more guys in it than had clear business there. She was perfectly pleasant, not out of line at all, but something about her had them flocking.

A part of it was clothing. There wasn't anything fashion conscious about what women wore on jobsites – they needed boots and warm clothes in the winter, and cool clothing in the summer just like everyone else. But Lisa was often just a little more sexy, or revealing, or trendy than others. Not much you could criticize, but enough to have some guys detour by the office each day just to say hi. Al gritted his teeth, and told himself he had bigger problems than that. Besides, she was nice to look at.

For Ken, a lot of the excitement was over. He had gotten the building designed, and engineered, and the information and money flowing. All he had to do now was to keep it flowing until the job was done. It was important, but not so exciting.

Which gave him some more time to think about Valerie, and Shirley. Valerie was still seeing Dr Whitecloud from time to time, and Ken didn't know how that stood. Shirley still called, and when she was in Santa Fe for some other reason often stopped by the office, but the whole thing seemed more like a sister than a separated wife. Ken was frustrated but didn't have a clue about what to do.

## **Chapter 10**

The job went on, the parking lot got done, the new building was laid out, and the foundations started.

Late in the afternoon Paco came into Al's office.  
"Boss, we got a problem."

Al looked at him. He looked pretty serious, so Al didn't say any of the smart-ass things he usually did.

"Look out your window along column line M". That was in line with the view from the trailer window. There were a bunch of people standing around one of the excavations for the footings that trooped in a line across the site.

"What's wrong?"

"We dug it, reinforced it, and cast concrete in it, all exactly one foot out of place, that's what!"

"How the hell could that be? The thing has to be in line with eight others out there, and anyone can see that while they are doing it."

“Beats me. I’m sure we laid it out right, staked it, the whole thing. Someone must have moved the stakes, and we were in a groove and no one noticed. Think we can leave it, and just move the anchor bolts?”

“Sure. I’ll just tell Ken and all these damn engineers that we are a quality outfit, we just want to put a column sort of on the edge of their footing. We would never hear the end of it!”

“That’s what I thought. I’ll get the compressor and jack hammers out, and we can work over this evening taking it out. I don’t know who would want to do this.....”

Paco left, and Al stared out the window. Everyone made mistakes, but this one seemed to have to be deliberate. Maybe someone thought it would just be a joke, the field engineers would catch it, and no real harm would be done. Now it looked like a \$10,000 joke.

There had been a few other things lately that seemed odd, but he had been putting it aside in his mind. A job with dozens, later hundreds, of people doing something un-programmed each day was bound to

have some odd events. Maybe it was more than that. It could be someone just doing pranks for some reason.

Enough of that. He stepped next door and asked Jim if he wanted to go get a drink. It was after working hours, anyway. Jim had never said no.

They walked two blocks down Cerrillos Road to their favorite bar, and found half the job there, including Lisa with the ironworker foreman. She had her usual short skirt on, and looked like she was having a good time. “You know”, Al said, “ I really need to have a talk with her about her clothes – she’s attracting flies like honey.” “sure you do”, Jim said. “Can I sell tickets?”

He was probably right. Al was about as straight-laced a person as you could find. He and his wife Gloria and their two sons went to St Marks Episcopal in Lakewood every Sunday. His chance of communicating with Lisa was zero. But, Jim agreed, it was his job.

That Navajo doctor, Whitecloud, was also there with the French architect, but they looked like they were having a fight. What she was doing in Santa Fe was also a mystery, but she was pleasant and attractive, so

Al wished her well. After two drinks, and a debate about whether the job was cursed, he gave it up, and walked back down Cerrillos to his apartment. It was all so close, his truck was getting no miles at all during the week.

## **Chapter 11**

The foundation work proceeded, column line by column line. The steel frame was being fabricated in a plant, so it wasn't there yet. The MacMullen crews dug, reinforced, placed anchor bolts, and cast footings every day. It was getting pretty routine. The rules here allowed them to leave an excavation open over night, so they did as much each day as they could, and left it to finish in the morning.

The placement of the bolts was important. The structure being done in the plant needed to fit exactly on them when it came. There were a few standard repairs allowed, but getting it right was important to the crew, so it got checked several times.

All of which made it amazing when Paco walked in again and said, "The damn ghost took our anchor bolts out of B12!"

Everyone in the office stared at him for a minute. Finally Al said, "What ghosts?"

"The ones that move my footings, and screwup my layouts. But this is just too damn much .....There are

not any anchor bolts in that footing, and you know they were there when we cast it last night! You can't tell they were ever there!"

Al and Jim thought for a minute. Pretty strange. Someone must have come in after dark, worked them out of the rebar cage, and patched the concrete. Or maybe there really was a ghost.

Now there was no avoiding some design help. Al asked Ken and the structural engineer to come over to look at it, and then asked permission to use epoxy grout to glue some bolts in. He got some flack, but steel structures were routinely over designed, and one bolt that might pull out wouldn't endanger the building, so he got permission.

The effect on the people on site was harder. Many of them actually believed that the job was cursed in some way, and this was just the latest evidence. Talking about it just made it worse, so Al and Jim decided to ignore the whole thing, and hope the jokester got tired of it.

At the end of the day Al figured he needed to have the heart to heart talk with Lisa, so he asked her if he could buy her a drink someplace quiet. She agreed,

and they walked down to the Plaza to a nice hotel for a change. It was a nice change from the jobsite, and Lisa was looking as sexy as usual, so they made a good looking couple. “Oh, stop it!” he thought.

When they had a spot and a drink, he tried. “Lisa, you’re a beautiful young woman, but you’ve got to tone it down. Everyone on the job is getting wet dreams watching you come into work!”. He was sure that would leave her in tears.

Wrong again. She smiled, didn’t say anything for awhile, then said “Well...I’m glad I’m making someone happy!”

Try again. “Lisa, we have a job to do, and everyone needs to be giving it their full attention. If they are thinking about you, and making love to you, and how they can come by to be with you, they aren’t doing their job!”

Another smile. “Al, I know what you want. Let’s go back to your place.” And before he could open his mouth, she stood up and walked to the door. And looked great doing it. He threw some money on the table and followed her out. And down the street, trying to see how to end this without hurting her

feelings or making a scene. Every time he had an idea he opened his mouth and then realized how dumb it would sound. So from the outside it looked like they walked quietly back to his apartment.

Maybe when we aren't in public, he thought, so he opened the door and they went inside. She turned, put her arms around him, and gave him the sort of kiss he'd forgotten existed. And his brain left...

Boy, did it leave. He was aware of wonderful sensations, but no thoughts, for what seemed like hours. They made love on the floor, on the couch, on the bed. He stared at the ceiling, grinned, and went to sleep. When he woke up she was standing there, dressed and ready to go. She smiled, gave him a peck on the cheek, and said "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Well, hell, now what?"

## ***Chapter 12***

The foundations sprouted in sequence across the site. The summer was in full swing, and there were bands on the Plaza every night. The first steel deliveries arrived, and the columns began to chase the footings. Life went on in the normal way. Each week had it's meetings, issues came up and were resolved, and the status of things was reviewed at the end of each month. For most people things were fine.

Funny things kept happening, though. Sometimes it was missing tools, although people swore they had locked them up. Sometimes it was some of the surveying coordination points that were posted at the edge of the site, sometimes it was lines chalked on the floor one day, that were wrong the next day. None of this was fatal, but it made people nervous, and worked slowed down with all the triple checking. People joked about ghosts, but stories about Indian spirits like Kokopelli got more common. There didn't seem to be anything to do about it, so Al asked all his team to just shut up about it until they figured out what was going on.

Al didn't know what was going on with his own life. Lisa came in to work the next day looking cheerful and demure, and Al began to wonder if he had dreamed the whole thing. That went on for several days, and Jim congratulated him on the effect of "his little talk".

Then she knocked on his door late one evening, and came in, and it started again. It was so good, he just couldn't seem to say the words that would stop it. Gloria always liked to say "Men always think things are all right if they aren't talking about them." Well, he wasn't talking about them. He went back to Denver that weekend, thinking he was going to confess and get the courage to stop, but the family was wrapped up in the school play, and neighborhood events, and no one even asked him how he was doing. So he kept not talking.

Still, the job was going fine, staying on schedule and not having any more design questions or change orders than normal. There were some arguments between the Native American firms and craftsmen, and the out-of-towners, but all that was pretty normal too. Al's boss, Bo MacMullen, visited very two weeks or so, and seemed pleased with the way things were going. Al and Jim told him about the ghosts, and he just smiled.

The steel marched across the site, and the footings were almost done.

Ken's life had settled down with the routine of the job, and MacMullen's comforting systems and experience. He got some criticism when his plans were wrong, but the costs seemed to be fair, and sometimes there wasn't any extra cost. The IHS people visited, thought it all looked good, and went back to DC.

Valerie and Whitecloud seemed to be breaking up. She stayed late to work more, and they went to dinner more, but it was still sort of Platonic. Ken had all sorts of old fashioned advice in his head – “don't get your jam where you get your bread” – so he stayed as just a friend. He was careful not to say anything about her when for some reason he talked to Shirley.



## **Chapter 13**

The thing with Lisa was getting to be more frequent. Whenever he tried to talk to her about it, and had the willpower to stop, she just smiled and didn't seem to hear him. He didn't have the guts to tell her to stop, or just not to answer the door. At church on Sunday he found any number of verses that seemed to excuse human frailties and failures, and he told himself he was only human. He would have to break it off soon.....

Then it all hit the fan. One evening Lisa came early, they made love as usual all over the place, and then decided to order pizza, something Al had never done in Santa Fe. He thought it would be pretty good, even if it wasn't usually on his diet. Well, none of this was.

When the doorbell rang he went to get it, pants on, shirttail out, no shoes. Lisa was in the living room, in one of his robes.

“Hi honey, Happy Birthday! “ Oh crap, it was Gloria, holding a cake, and a neatly wrapped present. “I knew

you usually forgot your birthday, so I thought I'd drive down and surprise you". She pushed by to set the cake down on the dining table. It was only when that was done when she turned around to see Lisa. There was a long silence while she looked at her world crumbling, and hoped Al had a really good explanation. He couldn't think of a thing to say that didn't make things worse.

After a minute, she whispered "I see...", walked to the door, and was gone.

Lisa got up, went into the bedroom and got dressed. She came back out and said "I'd better go?"

Al was stunned, but he really didn't want to be alone. It seemed to him that his world was receding fast, and he wanted to stop it. "No, stay awhile. Hey, the pizza is here!"

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Next morning Al went over to the site early, and Lisa came later. The world seemed to be going on like normal. Paco was doing Job Safety Plans with some of the subs, and the electrician was bitching about the power company's temporary service, and the rebar

supplier was putting the bars in the wrong place. Al wondered how things could be so normal

He sat in his office, tried to think of a good explanation or an apology, or something. No good plan came to him, so he finally decided he needed to drive to Denver, and throw himself on her mercy. He looked out his door at Lisa calmly doing reports at her desk. “Damn Santa Fe”.

He didn't hear a word from Gloria for the rest of the week. It seemed as if she had written him out of her life in an instant. It just couldn't be that easy to destroy his life.

Odd things continued to happen on the job, too. They had started triple checking the anchor bolt layouts since some had come up far off, and one time each week there were some in the wrong spot. At least they were catching them before the concrete was cast.

At the end of the week Paco came in. “I've heard it all now. The damn carpenters are seeing faces in the

green concrete in yesterday's footing. Next we'll have the Virgin Mary in the floor slab!"

Al gave him a blank look. "Huh?" That was about his speed for cute replies today. "The last footing we cast last night has some uneven-ness in the surface, and some of the carpenters, whose racial heritage will remain nameless, have decided that it looks like a face, and that another place looks like a hand."

"Well, let's go show them it isn't!" Al jumped up, got a hammer and concrete chisel from a cabinet, and headed for the door. Paco followed slowly. He thought Al would just blow it off.

When they got out to the footing, Al had to admit that it really did look like there was a face there, but that was dumb. Before anyone could say anything, he jumped down in to the excavation and started chipping. It felt kind of funny. He kept at it for an inch or so until one large piece came loose.

Underneath it was a finger, with a ring on it. Al recognized the ring. It was Valerie.

## **Chapter 14**

And here is where I come in. My name is William Sage - Willie to my friends – and I am a sort of troubleshooter in the building construction business. Usually that amounts to telling people what they ought to do to get a job out of trouble, but occasionally it means being a sort of special investigator.

I don't do claims work. There is a large industry in settling legal proceedings in the business, but its dry work, and largely dishonest, so I don't do it. That leaves me free for more productive things.

Bo MacMullen called the morning after the fire. He sounded panicked.

“Willie, I need you there right now! I don't know if my guys had anything to do with it, but there is a body on our site in Santa Fe, and I need someone to run the job until things settle down. Can you do it?”

I thought a minute. The things I was doing weren't really time critical, and I had been bored at home for the last few weeks.

“I'll send you an agreement in a few minutes. Sign it and email back, and I'll get a plane this afternoon.”  
There was grunt at the end of the line, and it hung up.

There was a time when Bo and his wife and Elizabeth and I were the best of friends. I was building a project for MacMullen in Mississippi, and Bo was the project engineer, and so we all hung out together. We were older than they were, but there isn't a lot to do in Tunica, Mississippi.

Well, time went on. Elizabeth and I returned to our home base in California, and went on to other assignments. Bo got promoted to the home office, and in his own words, “outgrew Jane”. They never had kids, so a few years ago they broke up.

Elizabeth and I raised two boys, and had a good life. I have always gotten a lot from my work, and she was a great wife and mother. Then she got sick.

We had first met on a blind date on Valentine's Day. Twenty years later, on Valentine's Day, she was told

she had cervical cancer. Two years later, on Valentine's Day, she died. I feel like a part of me is gone, but I try to be realistic. Everyone dies, and we've been luckier than most. Sometimes I try to believe we will be together again.

So I bumped across to Albuquerque that afternoon,, drove up to Santa Fe, and stayed at the La Fonda like always. Bo was there at breakfast the next morning.

“They've been having some weird stuff on the jobsite, but it's been like pranks – markers moved and so on – and I thought it was some sub battle. This will shut us down for awhile, and I pray to God none of our people were involved.”

He told me about the victim, who sounded interesting, and the MacMullen people on the job. The cops had closed the job, sent everyone home but told them they couldn't leave town until the interrogations were done. They were hauling people down to the station today, and there was no activity onsite.

“Let’s go look at it, then go talk to the cops. Then maybe we can all get together in the site office.” He followed me out looking glum.

The crime scene people – I was learning the lingo – were still all over the excavated footing. They were at the point of trying to extract the body from the concrete, and debating cutting with blades, or water jets, or jack hammers. It was something I knew a lot about, but it was too ghoulish for me.

“I don’t get it, Bo. Someone would have had to sink the body in the wet concrete only a few minutes after it was cast. Wouldn’t someone still be around?”

“Well, you’d think so. But the tops of these footings aren’t finished, so we just load the excavation and go home if it’s getting dark. And Al tells me that we’ve been experimenting with a super plasticizer that gives a long open time on the concrete. So if someone knew that, they could come in an hour after dark, and probably get the body under some of the rebar. Pretty gruesome work – whoever did it must have hated her.”

And the someone had to know a lot about construction, and this particular jobsite.

So then we went down to the police station, to meet Sergeant Hernandez. The police station was on Cerrillos Road too, so the whole affair was going to be in a few block area.

Bo explained who we were and told him that we wanted to be helpful, but we wanted to get the job restarted also. What could we do to help?

The sergeant was tickled at all that. “Did you see the papers this morning? **The Lady in the Concrete!** Mr MacMullen, it must have been one of your people. As soon as you find out which one, you can restart your damn job. I don’t know what sort of people you are bringing to town, but this sort of thing just doesn’t happen here.” Bo turned white, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

So I tried. “Sergeant, I can see how you would think that. Once you are through with the crime scene, though, we need to get going, or all of the people from the job will be on their way to other places and other jobs. You will have a lot of trouble getting them back. So it’s in your interest to get it going too.”

That seemed to work. “OK, we’ll be at the site tomorrow to do some interviews, and some of your

people need to come here to be questioned, but maybe then we'll let it go again." He looked at Bo as if he could just pull the killer out a hat if he really wanted to, but we left in peace.

We drove back to the jobsite. We could have walked if we wanted. In the office there were a few people, pretending to work but really just hanging around wondering what was going on. Bo and I sat in the large conference room.

"Willie, here's the deal. I want you to take over as the project executive, office next to Al, and lead the team until we find out how all this happened. It's hard to believe all this built up without anyone seeing it coming, and if it's one of our people I don't want them to be able to do anything that destroys the trail. "

"OK. But I'm not a cop, or a detective, or whatever you call it. I'll try to make sure no evidence is destroyed, but I can't guarantee anything. It looks to me like it will be a few days to get going again."

Bo gathered everyone who was in the office, introduced me, and told them I was going to be temporarily in charge until the investigation was done, to allow the team members to do their part in the

investigation, and to avoid public criticism. It sounded to me like the most graceful explanation he could have made, but the faces around the table were clearly feeling under suspicion of something, they didn't know what.

We found me a place to office, and I made some times to talk privately with each person, and the meeting broke up.

And with that Bo got into the truck, and went back to Denver. I'll bet he stopped for a drink or two on the way.



## **Chapter 15**

I started with Al. “Al, do you have any idea who did this? It really looks like something only a contractor would know how to do.”

“Willie, I’ve got no idea. I don’t know who could have done it. No one I know has anything against Valerie, and it’s hard to see how anyone would plan it. We don’t know when we will leave workable concrete in an excavation, and leave the jobsite..... I just don’t know.”

We talked over all of the people onsite, and their relationship to Valerie, and got nowhere. Al thought that Ken sort of wanted a relationship with her, and that she had been seeing one of the docs, Jim Whitecloud, but that didn’t add up to anything. You always read that most murders are done by a close family member or partner, but there didn’t seem to be anyone like that here.

We talked over the status of the job for while. The superstitious feelings about the site were running wild

now, and dumb as it sounded, he was thinking of having some sort of ceremony to bless the site and drive out the evil spirits. I told him that had happened to me, and I had finally gone along, and it had seemed to help people. If we didn't, there would be some workers who would not come back, no matter what their bosses said.

Jim didn't have any better ideas. His view of each of the people was a little more cynical, but no one had both a strong feeling about Valerie, and a lot of knowledge of concrete footings. There were tensions of course, there always were. The out of towners might look down on the Pueblo Indians, the local subs might not like the out of towners, the medical pros might not respect the less scientific suppliers, and no one might like a Chicago architect. But normally no one died.

Paco was worried that only someone like him would know how to do this. He wanted me to know he hardly knew the woman, had almost never talked to her, and so on. We turned out to have some mutual friends, which helped some, but he could hardly think of anything except declaring his innocence. Mc Mullen had been doing the concrete work, including the footings, with their own people, so the men doing

the excavation, reinforcing, and placing the concrete had been their local hires. One of them, named Koko, hadn't shown up the next morning, but he may have heard about all this and just moved on. Paco had told the Sergeant.

Finally came Lisa. She was a cute young girl, and all this seemed sort of fun to her. Even though she and Valerie were almost the only women whose office was on or near the site, they had apparently never spoken personally, and all this seemed to be a TV show to Lisa. She looked like she would be fun in bed, if I was a decade younger and a lot dumber.

Well, that was the office. I didn't feel any closer to an answer, but at least I'd done the first thing. Now we could talk about getting the job going again.

With the cops gone, and all the tape down, we could get going as soon as we could get people back...but that would apparently take some sort of ceremony to drive the devils off the site. We debated who should do it – there was, of course, a Catholic archbishop, who might send someone, and Al had good connections to the Episcopal people through his parish in Denver. But the Indian part of it was a puzzle. All the various Pueblos had people who conducted

ceremonies for the traditional cleansing things, but they were something that one person was put through, and they took days, and none of the Indian experts could agree on what would comfort the most people. So finally we settled on a joint Catholic-Episcopal service, and a hope that the Indians would give us credit for trying.

Al and Paco and the MacMullen people in Denver got on the phone, and got some requests going for a ceremony on Monday morning. I thought it would be hard, but the news about the murder had it all on everyone's mind, and we got agreement in a few hours.

With that plan in place, we could call all the subs, and tell them that the job work would start up after the ceremony. And that, predictably, started the quest for more money.

In the United States, most building construction work is subcontracted, with the general contractor, MacMullen in this case, hiring specialist firms to do the steel, roof, windows, electrical, ventilation, and so on. There were often 50 subcontractors on this sort of building, and the general contractor would do less than 5% of the actual field work with his own forces.

The subcontracts were lump sum deals based on the original plans, and they were just the stal of asking for more money. The subs were usually small firms trying to remain in business, and subcontract additions were often the only way they could. So everyone wanted to say that being off work for a week would kill them, and what were we going to do about it.

The answer was easy – we weren't going to do anything. The murder wasn't the fault of the project team, it was just an external event, it was the luck of the deal. If they weren't back at work on Monday we would cancel the subcontract and find someone else. Tough business, but there it was. Most people said they would file a claim, but be there on Monday.

And that sort of left me free until then. I had been talking to a woman named Janet MacDonald off and on for a year. Her husband had been a part of a job I had worked on in Louisiana, he had been unfaithful, and she had replied in kind, With me. I had realized that was a bad idea, and stopped seeing her, but we still talked. She had finally decided to divorce, and it was just final. So maybe she could use a vacation.

So...I called to ask if she would like a weekend in Santa Fe. It sounded good to her, so I sent her an

airline ticket. She lived in Las Vegas, so it was a short hop. We didn't decide exactly what we would do, but there were a lot of choices.

## **Chapter 16**

Friday was a quiet day onsite. No work was going on, but we all began revising schedules, checking deliveries, and returning phone calls and emails demanding more money. A nice quiet “take it or leave it” seemed to get us back on track with most people.

Mostly I was waiting to pick up Janet. It wasn’t anything long term, I didn’t think. Elizabeth had been my mate for life, and I had no idea of anything like that. I just needed some nice female company.

I picked her up at the airport, and we went to eat at La Fonda. It was nice to be with someone who didn’t want me to solve all their problems right away, and to talk about entertainment. Santa Fe did indeed have a lot of choices. We could go out to the Opera, which was going on then, or drive over to the Grand Canyon and hike down that, or hang around Santa Fe. The city had a new museum district, Museum Hill, that had some exhibits that had gotten good reviews, and we could shop on Canyon Road, or visit the Gloria O’Keefe Museum. We finally decided to do that.

But first, we could go back to the room, and just enjoy each other.....

## ***Chapter 17***

When I put Janet on the plane on Sunday night I felt a lot better about the world, and a lot more optimistic about solving the Santa Fe Indian Hospital problem. After all, someone had done something very specific and difficult, and how hard could it be to find who did it? It just took some imagination.

But first, getting the job going again. When I got to the jobsite I found that Al had stayed in town all weekend to get a stage of sorts set up, and the various clericAl folks were assembling and planning. I've never been much of a believer, so I stayed away.

We had a good crowd, though, including almost all of the people we needed to get back to work, as well as all of the newspaper and TV people who wanted to get viewers with pictures of the concrete footing with a large piece carefully carved out of it. The Archbishops had agreed on a joint sort of service, without any sermons or homilies, and so in an hour it was done. People were unpacking tools, and starting equipment, and life was getting back to normal.

And that meant meetings. We would be back to organizing life around the items needed for the subcontractor meeting tomorrow, and the owner meeting on Wednesday. We all sat and went through the normal items, and what we intended to do about each of them. There was some catching up to do, but not much, since the office people had been sitting around for a week without any progress on site to bring up new problems.

One of the items seemed odd, though. A submittal on some of the expensive fixed medical equipment had gotten rejected by an owner review group of the doctors, even though it had been approved by the design team. All this was clear to all of the project team because. Like most modern jobs, this one used an electronic information system that tracked submittals, requests for information, change orders, contracts, and daily communications, and whoever set this one up had not restricted who could see discussions inside the design approval groups.

The issues looked like the docs wanted a different brand of very expensive units, and the architect checking the submittal felt that the contractor had met the specifications, which were normal for a semi rural hospital like the Indian Hospital. It caught my eye

because the doctors group was headed by Jim Whitecloud, and the architect reviewer was Valerie.

Oh well, I had to go talk to Ken, the onsite architectural rep, anyway, so I put that on my list. He had an office in the adjacent building, the Institute of American Indian Arts. I found him sitting there looking pole axed.

We had met last week, but I told him I wanted to learn some more about Valerie and the job, so I could help MacMullen get back on track. That set him off.

“Willie, someone with MacMullen did this, and I don’t want anything to do with them until we find him and put him away. It had to be a contractor to do it....”

Bad start, so I tried a shock treatment. “Not necessarily, Ken. You could have done it, and almost anyone else around here that had been watching the footing construction could have. They could have just gotten lucky that there was some wet concrete right there when they needed it. So until we get some better evidence, we’ll just need to work on the problem, and not go off half cocked.”

That seemed to do some good. “Well, you can think that, but I can’t imagine anyone else getting that idea. I can’t get the image of her in that concrete out of my head....”

I asked him to give me a short history of the project from his point of view. I guess he really wanted to talk, because he started at the beginning, and took me through the need for the building, and the design history, and the incident with Horst Paul, now famous, continuing through the contractor selection and the odd incidents and pranks to today. Long story.

Finally he stopped. “So, Ken, who had any reason to hurt Valerie?”

“Not a damn soul! She was a lovely person, and a good friend to almost everyone here.” I let that sit for a minute, and he went on. “Of course, there are pressures in every job. The Indians think that the gringos are taking advantage of them, and the white guys think the Indians are stupid, and the hospital building people think everyone else is not a pal of the club, and Valerie thought that the way we do some things in the US was weird – but those things happen on almost every job, and no one dies.”

I asked him when he had seen her last. I know the cops do that, so I was just poking around. “I told Hernandez, I left work early for an appointment with another client, so I didn’t see her late in the afternoon. After the meeting I went on to my apartment, and spent the evening at home alone. Guess I don’t have an alibi.”

I told him I didn’t think he needed one, and went on back to the site office. I still had no clue who might have done this, and I was getting tired of thinking about it.

Back on site the problems were more normal. Some of the MacMullen people, including the elusive Koko, hadn’t come back, and couldn’t be found, so Paco was trying to get some good people out of the union hall. That took some calling in of favors, since the people on the bench right now weren’t usually much good. He had gotten an excavator operator, and a couple of laborers, and was back to feeling OK.

The agendas for the week’s meetings were finalized, and the long lists of Requests for Information, submittals being reviewed, safety problems, schedule updates, and so on were ready. The army travels on its agendas....

I was about to call it a day, and go back to my room and call Janet to see that she was back OK, when Hernandez showed up. He had some more questions to ask each person there, and spent an hour getting blank looks and “beats me” answers. I didn’t feel like I could leave, being the company’s answer to the problem, but I didn’t have a clue either.

Finally he got around to me. “You know, “he said “it ain’t like the TV shows. We get maybe 10 homicides a year here, and all of them are obvious. Some guy thinks his wife is fooling around, and shoots both of them. We collect all this forensic stuff, and do these tests, but it’s to keep the defense lawyers from getting him off. No mystery. But this one is different. No obvious motive, fancy way to kill someone, almost everyone is from somewhere a long way away. So....you got any good ideas?”

“Well, no, I’m really a stupid contractor. What did the autopsy show?”

“Nothing, or at least nothing that wasn’t the result of being cast into a concrete statue and then jack hammered out. No bullet holes. She had concrete in her lungs, though, so she died by suffocation. Bad way to die, if you think about it.

Fully clothed, no recent sexual contact – much as you can tell. There isn't a whole lot of forensic data about concrete coffins.”

I thought that over. “The crew knocked off at about 5:00, and sundown was officially 30 minutes later. With this plasticizer the concrete would have stayed workable until 7:00. So sometime in there we could imagine that she was walking to her car, which would have taken her past that footing, and someone came up, bashed her head in, and put her into the concrete. Whoever it was would have had to get into the excavation with her, to work her on down. It's not really liquid, just sort of like cake batter. So when they climbed out they would be covered with concrete, and had to hose off, leave in wet clothes, go somewhere and clean up, dispose of the dirty clothes. Did you check for old clothes or concrete stains in people's vehicles?”

“Yeah, and everyone has them. It's what you guys are doing all day.”

We sat for a few more minutes, but didn't get any good ideas. This might be an unsolved crime



## ***Chapter 18***

The next day was my first appearance at a standard weekly jobsite fixture – the weekly sub meeting. After everyone got their crews to work, they gathered at the office, drank coffee, and practiced complaining.

The subjects were almost the same no matter what site and what state you were in. Everyone started with the safety report, and discussed any accidents or near misses that happened since the last meeting. No one had the gall to list the murder as a safety event, which showed how upset they were. Then Paco went over the short term schedule, and made sure everyone knew where their crews were supposed to be for the next two weeks. As usual everyone couldn't start something until everyone else was finished, and beside which the silly sob's were just screwing around and costing all of us money. In an odd way all this was a comfort to me, since it was so normal.

Then we went over the RFI status. An RFI was a Request for Information, which was a polite way of saying that the plans and specifications didn't tell us everything we needed to know. Because all of this was very legalistic, any real question got put into

writing, entered into an electronic system, and answered by layers of design and management people. If the answer could be seen as adding to the reasonably inferable cost of the work, then it became a change order request. All this was an elaborate game, but it too was comfortingly normal.

Then came the submittals being reviewed. It used to be that they got turned in and settled in the first few weeks, but the more technical buildings got, the more the systems were really designed by the specialty contractors that provided and installed them. These were coyly called “deferred submittals”, and they went on for months. The medical equipment one I wanted to hear about was listed, but no one present knew anything about it. Maybe tomorrow.

Finally new subjects and open discussion. Everyone wanted to know what the latest was on the murder, and how it would affect us here, and how it could have happened. I think a few of them got ideas of how to do away with their boss. And that was it.

After the meeting was a sort of weekly gossip session. It seems that the missing Indian workers, including Koko, had gone on to a job in Albuquerque, and were telling everyone that the Santa Fe site was cursed. The

subs that were about to start work, like ductwork installers, were finding some trouble getting people to go. Not a big problem, but one we all needed to watch. I got Koko's phone number from one of the guys, thinking that Hernandez really needed to talk to him.

I tried out an idea I had been thinking about. We would soon have cast the floor and roof decks, and winter was coming on. Some of my friends in California had been experimenting with essentially enclosing the building with plastic film placed outside of some scaffolding. That allowed the inside to be heated, and the work to continue through bad weather, and in much more comfort. It wasn't in Bo's estimate, but it seemed to me that it might pay for itself, and keep the subs from using recent events to delay until better weather. I asked people how they would feel about it, and got some guardedly positive responses. I'd see if I could get it done.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Most of the hard subjects brought up in these meetings were settled in later small meetings, and those things took most of the time. There was some moaning and crying, but in general people on a construction site figure that they are all in it together, and come to some common sense

solutions pretty quickly. I sometimes wanted to give the US Congress a set of plans, and see what they could do.

The next day was a different story. The weekly owners meeting included the IHS project manager, the tribal council president, the head of the medical committee, the architect, some engineers, and the builders onsite team, now including me. This group was less adept at bitching, but also less adept at getting over it.

Some of them were like Ken – they thought some MacMullen person must have killed Valerie. Some were just upset. As we went through the agenda no one wanted to make a decision, and several items were put off “until the investigation was over”. I thought about trying my approach to Ken, but I didn’t think it would work in a large group where we didn’t know each other at all.

On the subject of the medical equipment submittal, Jim told everyone that Valerie had been right – the specs didn’t require what the medical committee had later demanded. If they really wanted that, it was a giant add. The head of the medical committee was Jim Whitecloud, and he insisted that Valerie had been

wrong, that the equipment was what any first rate hospital needed, and if the design team hadn't specified it correctly that was their problem, they could take it up with the professional liability insurer. That got Ken and Janet Begay scared and defensive. No real conclusion, and the meeting broke up.

This looked more like a job for a diplomat than a builder, but I made myself a mental list of the shuttle diplomacy that would be required to get all these people back to doing their jobs.



## **Chapter 19**

At the end of the day I asked Paco if I could buy him a drink, and get some feedback on the idea of wrapping the building. I had some photos and other stuff I wanted to show him, and I wanted to try out the Blue Corn. He gave me a funny look, but followed me over there.

The HIPAA fabric idea – that’s what one type was called – looked good. You needed to leave some openings, and use some way to close them against the weather, but it gave people a place to work in the winter in comfort, and it might change the sub’s ideas about the job. It would cost MacMullen a couple of hundred grand, but it looked to Paco like it might be a game changer. Ok so far.

“Paco, if I’m going to help I really need to know what was going on between people here. Unless I get a better idea, the cops can’t figure it out, and everyone will go on thinking that someone with MacMullen is a murderer. That can’t be good.”

He sat for a minute. “I really hate gossip, Willie. Guys on jobsites are like a bunch of old women, only worse. I’ve always stayed away from it.” More pause.

“But maybe you are right. We can’t go on like we have been – people look at me funny in town, and I get a lot of people sort of staying away on the chance that I’m part of it. I really don’t know what to do....”

“Maybe it’s easier with questions. Did Ken have a thing going with Valerie that might have made him explode?”

“Well, I dunno. He looked to me like he would like to, the way he looked at her in meetings, but I think she was dating that Whitecloud guy for awhile, and them just working. If there was anything going on I didn’t see it. We had all the usual drama in our office, but I didn’t see it with her.”

“OK, what ‘s the drama in the office.” I was getting to think of myself as a shrink.

“Willie, there is always a lot going on. I guess you’ve heard about Al and Lisa....” I told him I was clueless as usual. “To make the story short, she sort of pushed him into bed, and his wife caught them, and now Al

only goes home every other weekend to argue with Gloria and do his wash. I keep thinking he'll wake up, and stop thinking with his dick, but it's been going on for a while now. Nothing to do with Valerie, though."

"You know, I've spent most of my life on jobsites a long way from home, but I never cheated on Elizabeth. Seems dumb to me."

"Me, too, Willie, but you know a lot of guys do, and figure no one will know. Even with Ken, who separated from his wife in Albuquerque a year ago, the fact that he was working with Valerie made his wife mad. She came by a few times, saw Valerie, and went away hurt. Ken thought about divorce, but he's pretty shy, and I don't think he wanted to give up entirely yet."

"How about battles on the site? Some people are always at war."

"Well, all our little mysteries had a lot of people spooked, but they didn't know who to blame it on. I never heard anyone say Valerie brought zombies or anything."

“Did she screw anyone on submittals? I know it seems stupid, but did she?”

“Not except the medical equipment thing you just heard about. Otherwise most of them have been fine, pretty smooth. Mostly she felt like the trade specialty subs knew more than she did, so she took their recommendations. Pretty nice lady, really.”

I thought a little while about that as an epitaph. Then, “OK, who would know about the long open time on the concrete? Usually you couldn’t do what this one did. “

Paco thought everyone knew about it. When Al had requested the addition to the concrete mix at approval, the structural engineer had been worried about it, and asked that MacMullen use it in some lower strength applications early in the job to see how it performed. That had been discussed at meetings, and around the site when people were surprised at how long it took the footings to set up. But the strength test had gone fine, actually up some, so they had been allowed to use it in slabs and walls, and so far it was all good. So the answer was “Everyone knew.”

But there was something different about that footing. It was one of the few without a tight layer of upper bars, which would have kept the body from sinking down. The only people who knew about that would be the people digging it, reinforcing it, and casting it. I asked Paco to write their names down; the only one I had heard of was Koko.

“So what’s the deal with Koko?”

Paco frowned. “Koko is the human version of the nutty hound who acts funny all the time, is scared of his shadow, but has one really strong talent. There has never been another excavator operator like him. If you want to make your numbers on excavation, he’s your man.”

“Think he had any reason to hurt Valerie?”

“Nah, even Koko isn’t that superstitious.”

And that was about all the useful information I could think to ask about. We had another beer, went through the formality of bitching about the quality of the construction plans, and went home. At least I had more to think about.



## ***Chapter 20***

The job went smoothly for the rest of the week. In an odd way the murder and the cleansing ceremony seemed to help – people seemed to have wiped their minds clean, and went back to routine. No one lingered or gossiped, though, so it was a quiet efficient jobsite.

We finished casting the second floor slabs, and started on the roof slab, which could be a future floor on this building. The extensive underground plumbing was going in at grade, so the first floor slab would be awhile. Bo bought into my idea about wrapping the building, so we started planning the scaffolding to hold it out away from the exterior. It occurred to Paco that if we could get a temporary roof on we might be able to keep the inside dry enough to start early on the water sensitive things, so we worried about that some. I didn't have many distractions, and Janet was busy with her work, so I stayed in Santa Fe and went to work every day. All work and no play makes Willie a dull boy....

That held up for the next week too. Bo came down from Denver, bought me lunch, and asked if I had solved the mystery yet. I had to admit that I hadn't, and any of the ideas I had had sounded stupid the next day. He went away thinking that my exterior wall film and I were going to cost him the profit on the job, but at least no scandal.

The controversy on the medical equipment had come up in the owner meeting on both weeks. Ken had gotten some outside input that reinforced the belief that the original specification had been the right one for a hospital like the Santa Fe Indian Hospital, and that the medical staff had delusions of grandeur. It also appeared that none of the outside experts was familiar with the vendor they wanted to use, which was odd in that closed little world. Finally Ken and the design team had approved MacMullen's submittal and ordered the equipment, over the objections of the medical committee. I thought Whitecloud was going to yell a Navajo war cry and stab Ken in the meeting.

Paco and I were asking ourselves what the hell that was about later on, when Lisa came in. She said, "You guys don't know? Dr Jim Whitecloud owns half of that company, and the sale at that price would have

made their year. That's what he and Valerie broke up about!"

"How the hell do you know that! You didn't even talk to her."

"Men!", she said, and flounced away. It had been awhile since I had seen anyone "flounce", and it was kind of cute.

It was about the first thing that I had heard that provided even the smallest motive for Valerie's death. But it didn't explain the way it happened, and I knew the cops had been told that the medical staff didn't normally go onto the jobsite, so any one of them would have stuck out. Still.... I'd ask him about it.

By the end of the week it was time for a break. I got a flight back to San Jose, and drove over to Los Gatos. The house had been closed up except for Aurora's weekly cleaning, so it was musty, but felt like home. I got some groceries, invited the one of my sons and his family over, and got the grill going. It was one of those times I missed Elizabeth desperately, but still counted myself lucky.

There were a million chores that needed doing, and I spent a good time Saturday and Sunday morning being a normal person. Then Sunday afternoon I got back on the plane to Albuquerque. I brought my fishing gear with me, though.

## ***Chapter 21***

Back on the job things still seemed OK. We had gotten the roof deck cast, and the exterior wall scaffolding up, and the blue protective film going on on the outside of the scaffolding. The building looked like a big blue faceless object in the middle of town, and drivers on Cerrillos Road were slowing down to see what was going on.

Monday was like every Monday – what’s the schedule, what goes on the agenda, why isn’t so and so here. I sometimes wonder why we make weeks seven days long, since we consume 40% of the work time starting and stopping.

We got another visit from Sergeant Hernandez, but it seemed to be a formality. They hadn’t made any real progress, he said. Valerie’s family, from Toulouse, had finally come, and the body had been released to them, still with some concrete on it. None of them knew what could have caused this, and they had acted like they were outside the civilized world. She had been insane to come here.

Later in the day I was walking the job – an old habit – when Paco came over and said “watch that excavator for awhile, Koko is back! “ All of the foundations had been excavated, but there was a lot of large trenching to be done, and apparently the mysterious Koko had decided to return to work on those crews. The machine was in high speed all the time, working so quickly that most of the crew gave it a wide birth so it didn’t hit them. It was almost dancing.

“Lets come by and talk to him at quitting time. He doesn’t slow down for anything till then.” So Paco and I came by at exactly 3:30, and we sat down in the little lunch tent on the edge of the site. I let Paco do the talking – Koko looked like he would run off if I opened my mouth.

They caught up on mutual friends for awhile. Then Paco said, “So why did you come back? I thought you felt like the job was jinxed.”

“Well, I did...all that stuff going on made me feel bad, and I thought that French lady was a Jonah...but she got hers, and you had a blessing, and I ran out of work in Los Alamos, and I heard things were going OK, so I decided to come back...” He looked a little wild eyed to me, but I guess that isn’t a crime.

Paco said. “Did the cops talk to you? I told them you had left the site, but they couldn’t find you , and it was driving them crazy.”

“Yeah, they caught up to me, and gave me a hard time for awhile, but I wasn’t here, I went to get a drink with friends, and so finally they left me alone. It gives me a funny feeling to think about her suffocating in the concrete, though.”

“You got any ideas about it? Seems like it needs to be one of us, but I can’t think who has any reason.’

“Paco, I feel like the spirits got her. She got mad at me once for getting dirt on her, and then things started going wrong around here, and I feel like she was just asking for it. Los of things were happening for no reason, and I think this is just one more. Maybe Kokopelli got her. ” He looked at me with the weirdest look, the whites of his eyes wide. Right now he was my favorite candidate, just on the basis of weirdness. I went back to the apartment wondering how I could get him to admit it.



## ***Chapter 22***

The job was blessedly busy, though, so I didn't get much chance to think about it for awhile. We had gotten the roof deck all cast, and the protective outer film was going on, and winter was coming on quickly, so we needed to get everyone moving on the next few steps. The exterior was metal studs, gypsum board, and a plaster layer that looked like adobe, and we got them started working within the new outer skin. It was something new, though, and it took awhile to get the bugs worked out of it. Once we did, though, it seemed like it would help everyone improve the usual sequence of construction. We put in more heaters and lights, and made a big deal about how comfortable it was to work here.

The "secret" deal with Lisa and Al gradually got less secret. Al went home every two weeks, but it looked like things there were pretty bad, and he usually only stayed one night. Sunday afternoon he was back in the trailer. When anyone asked him about his wife he mumbled "fine" and changed the subject.

All of this was about the only real human drama on the jobsite though, so I started thinking about how it could

have lead to something like Valerie's death. That seemed stupid, though, since Valerie didn't have anything to do with it. On the other hand, Ken's wife might have some thoughts. Paco and Jim thought Ken had the hots for Valerie, and maybe Ken's wife – what's her name – was mad about that. I filed that under “not too likely”. I'd ask Al about it, but he was pretty incapable of that sort of thinking right now.

More important, the trout fishing season was coming to an end in late November, and I hadn't gone. I decided that I would take a few days off, rent a nice sort of travel coach, and go up to Chama to fish. I had always wanted to see what those big things were like on a trip, and It seemed like a good time to get away before the bad weather closed in.

The weekly routine of meetings and decisions kept going on, of course. We had gotten past most of the early submittal approval battles, and now the weekly tension was mainly if the subs were on schedule, and why did things look different than people expected, even if they were like the plans.

On one of those meetings to find a solution I went over to Ken's office late in the afternoon. As I got there a young woman was rushing out, on the verge of tears.

She ran into me, said “Excuse me!” and stumbled on. She looked like a proper young woman, glasses and low heels, nicely dressed. But very upset.

Ken was just inside the door, looking like he wanted to go after her, but not knowing what to say. I made a “what’s going on?” face at him, and he responded “My former wife. Still is, I guess. Shirley. Damn I don’t understand women.”

It turned out that Shirley had hoped that the loss of Valerie on the job had made Ken want to get back together. It had made him unhappy, but not convinced that Shirley was the answer, especially since she wanted him to give up his practice in Santa Fe and come back to Albuquerque. They had just had another in what seemed like a long run of heart -to-heart talks that ended in her running out crying.

I asked him some questions that I thought were casual and disconnected, about her background and knowledge of his projects, and construction in general. The answers sounded like she really didn’t know much about his work, or his interests, and I wondered how they ever got together. But I guess that’s true of a lot of people.

After a minute, though, he caught on. “Willie, are you thinking Shirley could have anything to do with Valerie’s death! That’s bullshit . . .she doesn’t know concrete from maple syrup! And she’s the sweetest girl in the world! And I really didn’t have much to do with Valerie anyway, and Shirley really knew it, she’s just lonely and worried!”

I backed away, and we went on to debate a change order about the type of ceramic tile they really wanted. We reached a fair conclusion, that we could announce tomorrow, and I went on my way. But I didn’t forget Shirley, even if I couldn’t see how she could have done it.

I went back to thinking about a fishing trip. I had been to the little Cimarron River just north of Santa Fe, past Angel Fire, a few years back, and I wanted to go again. On top of that, I really wanted to try Chama and maybe on up into Colorado. And what I really wanted to do was to try one of those enormous motor coaches you see on the highway. The idea of taking off with your home on your back, and going wherever you wanted in comfort, was a sort of American dream that had been with me for awhile. With Elizabeth, I had been held back by common sense, and gas mileage,

and a dumb movie with Jack Nicholson, but now I wanted to try it.

I was shopping with the people in Santa Fe that rented those things, and I finally settled on a 34 foot Georgetown. It was kind of large for one guy, but I could take it for a week, and maybe go off and get some better ideas. I told Bo he owed me a week of vacation, and he seemed to take it OK. I hadn't solved any mysteries, but the job was going fine, and MacMullen hadn't been in any scandals. Yet.



## **Chapter 23**

So Friday night I went and got the rig, got a lesson in driving it, parked it on the jobsite, and Saturday morning I took off. At Eagle's Nest I stopped off at the fly shop and asked if there was a good place to park it near the river, not in one of the many roadside parks but someplace quieter. The fellow at the desk phoned a friend, who gave me permission to park on his land a little way from one of the streams feeding the river. I was in hog heaven.

I set up in a little grove by the stream, opened the poke out sides, and went fishing for awhile, even if it was the middle of the day. To prove life was kind, I caught two little brown trout for dinner.

There is nothing so conducive to clear thinking as trout fishing. It is usually slow, in rhythm with the water flowing by, in a beautiful setting, and it's pretty clear that the thinker is just a small piece of the natural world, not really too important. It was a good place to think about the Santa Fe Indian Hospital project.

Directing the team building the building was my main job, and that was going fine. But I had thought I could also find who had done that to Valerie, and I was stumped. It had been several weeks, the police had no real forensic evidence and no leads to speak of, the body had been examined and gone, and there wasn't any ongoing avenue of investigation. Zip.

I had only flimsy ideas of the possibilities. My favorite was Koko, since he seemed half crazy, thought Valerie was unlucky, and had initially run. Then there was Jim Whitecloud, who had some money motive, but Valerie's death hadn't really helped him. And then there was Shirley Anderson, who could have mistakenly thought Ken was deeply involved with Valerie. None of those ideas were very good, but they were all I had.

So OK, big guy, what to do? The obvious answer was "forget it, finish the job, go home". The only trouble with that was the image of Valerie suffocating in a pool of concrete.

By that time it was time to fire up the grill, cook the trout and some potatoes, and watch some television before an early bedtime. Yeah, it had a satellite TV.

Next day I was up early, working up the stream as it got away from the road. I managed to get all fouled up in several trees, so I settled down to jigging through an area of low grass and small ponds. Not a spot for large fish, but a good place for more small ones, and I got three in the next two hours.

I sat out and had a store bought sandwich I had brought, and approached the mystery again. Maybe there was something I could do that would flush out the information we needed. The cops couldn't run games on people – well, only some games – but I could try anything I wanted. I spent some time thinking about what I could do that would inspire Koko to confess, and again I came up dry. He might have a cleansing ceremony, watch some sun rises, throw some pollen in the air, but he wouldn't volunteer for the white man's prison.

Back to nature, and thinking like a trout. I sometimes told myself that I could imagine the balance of food and the energy of getting it that was the daily life of a top water fish, and deduce where I would be if I was a trout. Sometimes it worked, but sometimes it didn't, and if I was honest with myself it was probably just luck in any case. Nonetheless I enjoyed thinking I had

it all figured out. No great detective, but a hell of a trout.

That evening I sat in my mobile home and checked the fishing reports from Chama, further up in New Mexico, and southern Colorado. It looked a little better up there, and I wanted to see how this machine was on the road, so the next day I packed up and moved north.

The Chama River is a great place, but it is some work to get into it. If you are a sort of lazy goof who comes in a wheeled palace, you have to get ready for a three mile walk to get into the best areas. Nonetheless, it was great when I got there. I had been too uppity to stop and ask for advice this time, so I used my standard go to rig – an elk hair caddis and a beaded drop – and it worked great. I got four large cutthroat trout the first evening, and I felt like the original hunter.

The motor coach had been OK on the road, and the whole thing was fine, but I was beginning to see that it sort of changed your mentality from when you started out with a backpack and a rod for a few days. Maybe there would be a day, but it seemed like it wasn't yet. If Elizabeth had been with me it would have been

perfect. She never liked roughing it and this would have been a way to be together that she would have liked. Too bad.

I had about given up on some scheme to get Koko to confess. It even sounded stupid when I said it. Maybe there was something I could do to eliminate the others, and maybe if I stirred things up some I would get lucky.

On the other hand, I was getting an idea that might at least eliminate the other two people I had in mind, and at least qualified as doing something. I would go talk to Hernandez when I got back.



## **Chapter 24**

I fished the Chama River for the rest of the week, and drove back to Santa Fe on Sunday. It had been a good vacation, but as usual after a few days off I was anxious to get back to work.

The next morning I was at the job early, checking that things had gone according to plan. The blue wrap we had put on the scaffolding around the building was holding up well, but it gave the whole thing a sort of odd appearance. The newspapers had joked about it, but the guys inside were happy to be warm, and they had commented to the news vans that it was a great idea.

Most of the week's plans had gone OK. Sparky had gotten his permanent transformers, always a milestone. The windows were going into the half finished walls, and the window flashing had started. All of us had spent a lot of time in the last few years fixing water leaks at windows, and fighting off claims of harmful mold, so we all walked by each window several times while it was being placed. As usual, I thought that the

main function of lawyers was to scare the shit out of the rest of us, and so avoid some mistakes. The best law is the law you are afraid to use.....

By mid afternoon I could go see Hernandez.

“So, Sergeant, how is the investigation going?”

“Willie, you know as well as I do that it isn’t going at all. We don’t have any real physical evidence, we have only the weakest of motives, and no one at all has an alibi. I hate to think of her in that concrete, but the case went into our unsolved file last week.”

I told him about all my speculations and ideas, but I could see that he thought I had read too many books. Finally I said “Don’t you have her personal diary in your evidence locker?”

“Sure. It’s in French, of course, but we had one of our people read through it, and it didn’t have anything we could use.”

“Can I borrow it? I have an idea.”

“Sure, knock yourself out. I’ll check it out to you, since we have a copy.” I was surprised, but at that point I think he mostly wanted to get a looney amateur out of his office. We went down to the evidence room, he checked it out to me, and I got out of there before he thought about it all.

The book itself was lovely, a rich red leather with cream pages. It was the sort of thing that young girls wrote their secret thoughts in a long time ago, when they had secret thoughts that weren’t on Facebook. I took it back to my place to try to read.

Which didn’t get me anywhere. I had taken Spanish, once could read Don Quixote, but now just had jobsite Spanish, and no French. I gave up after a few minutes, and watched TV as usual.

Next day at lunch I visited a store I had seen on Canyon Road and got a thin disk, some even thinner special batteries, and at another store a leather case with a special concealed pocket. Undercover elephant strikes again.

The next morning I brought it in, put it on the conference table in my office, and went about our usual meeting dominated business. The MEP

coordination argument and proposed change orders were the subject of the day, so I forgot about the book for most of the day, and left it on my table overnight.

## **Chapter 25**

Right on queue the next morning, though, Lisa came in to my office and picked it up. She had been looking a little less tantalizing in the last few weeks, but I hadn't been paying much attention, and now I wondered what was going on.

“What's this?”

“It's Valerie's diary. The cops have put the case in the cold case files, and about given up, so they let me have it for awhile. It's in French, and I can't read it, but I'm going to ask Janet to visit weekend after next and go through it with me. The cops couldn't read it, and didn't care enough to find someone who could, I guess.”

“Pretty book”, she said, gave me a look I couldn't interpret, and walked out. Later I heard her giving the story to Jim, Al, Paco, and anyone else who asked. Tell-a-woman.

The week went on as usual, with the diary sitting there all day and night, and no one paying any attention.

I decided I needed to pay some attention to my co-workers lives, though, if only as a diligent manager. I didn't want to ask Paco for the lowdown again, but Ken seemed to have picked it up.

“It seems,” he said, “that Al and Lisa are breaking up, and Al is going back to his wife. He's been going home on weekends for a while, and not just for an afternoon to see the kids. Lisa doesn't seem that broken up by it, but I got that from the plumbing foreman, who she seems to have her eye on.”

I felt a hundred years old. “Isn't there anything there more than that?”

“Willie, I'm no authority, but it doesn't look like it.”

I had forgotten Ken's situation. “How is Shirley? Do you see her often?” I didn't know how to ask if she had killed his girl friend.

“She still seems to think I was involved with Valerie, so I just see her from time to time. I don't know how to prove it to her.”

“Well, if I get anything out of the diary I’ll pass it on.”  
He knew about it before I came in, thanks to the local network.



## ***Chapter 26***

The next day was consumed by the question of utility design, and who was really responsible. Our little myth that the construction documents told the builder exactly what to do was weakest on the point of the routing of utilities around the structure and above ceilings. That seems pretty easy, and most people would say, “Well, the consulting engineers lay it out, and the contractor puts it in that way.” The trouble is, the engineers didn’t really know enough to get the layout right, so they listed their drawings as “diagrammatic only”, and left the specialty subcontractors to actually produce the plans that told people in the field what to do. You can imagine what the sheetmetal detailers and piping designers thought about the consulting engineers.

When it all didn’t fit too well, the subs first tried to do the cheapest thing. When the engineers objected, the subs said, “OK, here’s what it will cost you.” Then we had a sort of well worn debate, and finally came to a conclusion in each case, allowing some change orders

and not others. I could hear the ghost of Valerie muttering “Stupidness!”, and I think Ken could also.

We got through it, and through the weekly sub meetings, and got ready for the owner meeting the next day. A regular day in the building factory.

In the breaks I got to walk around, see the windows getting flashed, the ductwork going in, and some interior walls being built. There were a few safety problems, but they got straightened out with a word, and the job seemed fine. They really didn’t need me here, I thought, but it seemed to make everyone comfortable, and it looked like Bo wasn’t going to take the chance of putting Al back in charge.

The owner’s meeting was the next day, and I had left Valerie’s diary out on the conference table, so Whitecloud would ask about it. When I told him it was Valerie’s, and we were going to translate it to see if that lead anywhere, he turned as white as a Navajo will ever get.

“Why don’t you mind your own damn business? It was her personal thoughts!”

“Well, Dr Whitecloud, the dead don’t have privacy rights, and in any event it is still evidence in a crime, even if the cops have let me have a copy. I’ll let you know if there is anything about you.” He walked out, took a walk around the site, but came back for the meeting. He was now neck and neck with Koko for the crime in my mind, but that’s no kind of proof.

The diary sat on my desk for the rest of the week, with me occasionally trying to translate, but no one else paying any attention.



## ***Chapter 27***

That changed on Friday night.

I had been checking my cell phone every few hours when I wasn't in the office. Some of the guys and I had gone out for a drink at the end of the week, and then to a local steakhouse for dinner. When I was through I checked my phone, and got the information I had been hoping for.

I had gotten a very thin location device at the Canyon Road store, and it was small enough and thin enough to insert in some pages of the diary, with a few pages coped around it. It sent a signal to my cell phone, in the same way that the "Find your phone" application worked for cell phones that were lost. I could see the little blue dot begin to move on my cell phone screen. Someone had taken the diary from the office, and was going somewhere with it.

I expected to see the blue dot move a small way to the current hospital to Whitecloud's office, or out to Las Campanas where he lived, or maybe down the

interstate to Albuquerque if Shirley had it. Instead, it moved north on IH25, toward Denver. What was that about? I got in the truck and followed it.

I was about an hour behind the blue dot, and it kept going steadily at the speed limit. It's a long drive to Denver, but I was hoping that the dot was going somewhere closer. I really had no idea where it was going.

Tracking the diary itself probably wasn't going to tell me much of what I wanted to know, so I had also included a modified cell phone in the diary case I bought. It had long life batteries, and I could turn on the microphone in the telephone from my phone without it making a noise, so I could hope to hear what was happening to the diary, or conversations, or something as I followed it. I could record the conversation on the voice recorder on my phone if I wanted. I would just have to take my chances with the batteries lasting, and the case staying with the diary. This wasn't the best plan I ever made, just the only thing I could think of in a week of fishing.

So I turned the phone on, to see what I could hear. What I heard was the car radio in whatever vehicle was carrying the diary and its case. After a few

minutes I decided I wasn't going to get a confession from the radio, and turned it off.

The blue dot went on and on. The drive to Denver takes six hours, and I had to stop a couple of times for breaks and coffee. The dot just kept going.

I got to thinking about Colorado. My great grandparents had left upstate New York to homestead in Eastern Colorado in the late 1800's, and moved to Cheyenne Wells to grow dryland wheat on 640 acres. They lived in a sod house, with a wind that my grandmother said had driven her mother almost crazy. They stayed for the two years needed to own the land, and then moved into Denver, and my grand-dad went to work for the railroad. They lived there, on South Pearl Street until they died. My grandfather had gone to the School of Mines, gone into the oil business, moved around. My dad had grown up in Dallas, went to Houston, then moved to California to head a small construction company. I grew up there, went to Cal Poly, and went into building construction as the most natural thing to do. We all had just bumped around the country, looking for the things that gave us satisfaction, and a better life. Now I was driving by the beginning of it.

We got into Denver, turned west on Highway 6, got off on Arapaho, and I followed my dot into a suburb called Lakewood. I drove by the house that it looked like the dot was in, and parked in an empty parking lot down the street.

It was 2 in the morning, but I turned the remote cell on anyway.

“...we’ll talk about it in the morning, I’m beat.”

“...what does it prove? I don’t believe a thing you say!”

“ OK...OK. It proves I didn’t have a thing to do with Valerie. You shouldn’t have hit anyone, but you hit the wrong person!”

“Al, you’ve ruined my life, and our family, and you want me to feel bad because you were screwing two women! No way!”

“Gloria, I wasn’t “screwing” Valerie. She was a perfectly nice woman you confused with someone else....who is also a perfectly nice woman I messed up and had a fling with. You picked the wrong one to conk over the head.”

“I don’t believe you, and a diary written in Greek won’t help.”

“Gloria, it’s written in French. You read French well, remember, since you spent two years there as a kid. You can see, if you want, that Valerie had nothing to do with me. I’d like you to believe that, so we can move on and get back together.”

Muffled sobs. I listened for a while more, but nothing more came out of it. I turned the phone off, and thought it over.

I thought I could see the outlines of the story now. It wasn’t like any of the things I had thought. Gloria had killed Valerie because she thought that Valerie was the one Al was having an affair with. The concrete business must have been an accident, or something.

I went and found a motel, and was sound asleep in 30 minutes.



## **Chapter 28**

I woke up late, turned the phone on, heard nothing for awhile, turned it off and went to IHOP for breakfast.

When I got back to the motel room and turned the phone on it sounded like the diary was still sitting between them.

“So, what are we going to do?”

“We’re going to say to ourselves we both made terrible mistakes, and go on. The kids need us, and we need each other. No one needs to know.”

“I killed someone, and no one needs to know...”

“Their knowing won’t help anyone, and it sure will hurt us and the kids!”

“Maybe you’re right. I’m so sorry...”

I turned the phone off, and sat and thought. It was Al McEntire and his wife Gloria for sure. What do I do now?

I decided that it wouldn't work to go confront them now. None of my evidence was admissible, and without it there wasn't any evidence at all. If I roused them now there would never be any.

So I made sure to save the audio files, and mailed them to myself just in case, checked out and headed back to Santa Fe. I spent the next six hours imagining scenarios in my head as I drove. I hated the thought of Valerie suffocating in the concrete, but I also hated the thought of a family with the mother running from the law, or spending her life in prison, or being executed because of a stupid loss of temper. But maybe it was planned, and she knew about the concrete footing somehow, and that's what she deserved. Who made me the judge?

I hadn't made up my mind by the next day, but it was Sunday, so I drove back to Eagle's Nest, and went fishing again, and finally came up with a plan. It wasn't completely legal, but I would take that chance.

## **Chapter 29**

The next day after the staff meeting I asked Al to stay for a minute, and shut the door.

“Al, there isn’t an easy way to say this. I know that Gloria killed Valerie. My evidence isn’t airtight, but once I give it to Hernandez they will dig until they find some that is. You need to go home and prepare her. If you return and surrender to Hernandez here I will withhold the evidence and let you shape her defense the way you want, but if you aren’t here by this evening I will turn over the evidence and let the law come get her.”

He didn’t look as shocked as I expected. “Somehow I knew it wouldn’t stay secret, and we couldn’t go on living that secret. We’ve been talking about it all weekend, and I think we are ready. I’ll go now, and be back here by 9 tonight.” He got up and walked out.

Well, now I got to sit around and be nervous. If they ran, I would have to give the audio to Hernandez and admit that I gave them the choice. That was probably some crime, although I didn’t know what you would

call it. I had thought all this out, but I was still feeling a little stupid.

I spent the day doing Al's job, getting ready for the weekly meetings, and walking the site. All the time I was thinking how lucky I had been to be faithful to Elizabeth, and to have a clear conscience.

After work I went to get a drink, and dinner, and went back to the office. As nine o'clock approached I looked out of the window, and saw Al's truck pulling in. Gloria was with him. They came into the trailers, and into my office.

"Gloria, we've never met, and I'm sorry to be the one to do this, but I think this is the best way."

She was a attractive blond woman, the picture of a suburban housewife with small children. Didn't say a word.

"Before we go over to the police, can you tell me how it happened?. I won't repeat it, but I can't imagine what happened."

She had a low, pleasant voice, and it sounded like she had been rehearsing the story.

“I came down to tell Al to his face that it was over between us, and that I would be filing for divorce. I was upset, and angry at the woman who had made him unfaithful to me and our family. I parked in the temporary lot and started across the site to the office. It was dark already, and I was picking my way when I saw a young woman coming from the office. I knew there was only one woman working there, and that was the woman who had taken my life away.

“I picked up a piece of rebar, and stepped behind one of the backhoes. When she got past me I swung as hard as I could at her. It hit her in the back of the head with an awful sound, and she staggered into one of the holes the men had been digging. I only realized then that I had probably hurt her very badly, and maybe killed her, and that I was in danger myself. I looked into the hole and saw that she was half sunk in concrete that was still wet. Then I thought that if I could push her all the way down the concrete would set, and no one would ever know, and I would be free. Maybe Al would come back, and things would be the same. So I jumped in and stomped on her until she was near the bottom of the hole. I got out, went back to the car, wrapped myself in a towel, and drove home.”

We all sat in silence for a minute. “OK, let’s go see Hernandez.” I had told him to be ready for something, and we arrived to a small welcoming committee. She got her Miranda warning, and called their attorney, and I went home.

## ***Epilogue***

Gloria plead guilty to manslaughter, and served two years in a New Mexico women's prison. Al visited weekly, and took another job to stay near her in New Mexico once the Indian Hospital was finished. When she got out they moved to Albuquerque and took up life about where they had left it. I don't really know how bad the kids suffered.

I finished the job with Jim, Paco, and Lisa. Bo was not happy that the murder had something to do with MacMullen, but the case had fallen out of the news and didn't get back in, so he rode it out.

Lisa dumped the plumber for the sheetmetal foreman, and they were together when the job finished. I don't know what happened after that.

When it was over I went home to Los Gatos, took a few weeks off, and started another job in Florida. I spent some pleasant time with Janet, but my appreciation for my life with Elizabeth had deepened, and Janet seemed to sense it. So it isn't serious in the long run. The only things that are really important to me these days are my sons, and my job.

The End

Damn Miami

A Mystery in Work Clothes

By

Warner Strang

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First Edition,

# **Damn Miami**

## ***Chapter 1***

“These dumb Spic dope-smoking hippies couldn’t build a two car garage! Damn Miami!”

Dan Brownell had come here from Raleigh to lead his company, Jones Construction, in a project to design and build some schools. He had been happy to be chosen – it was quite an honor to direct a team that was both designing and building a serious project. Now he wished he hadn’t been.

He was upset, sitting in his truck after a meeting on one of the projects. The trouble was that no one, I mean no one, knew what they were doing. The owner, the Miami Dade School District, didn’t know what they wanted. The building code people didn’t know what codes applied to the sort of schools they were doing. The architects Jones had hired didn’t have the educational experience Dan was used to. And to top it off, the building trades couldn’t walk and chew gum at the same time. That was the worst part.

Dan had come from a family of carpenters. He worked his way through school, back when you could do that, as a carpenter. It had always seemed to him that no matter how big the problem, he and his crews could work it out. But not down here.

The meeting he had just finished, though, was a building permit review , with the City plan checkers and the architect on one of the schools. The idea of these schools was to provide some additional space in schools near the coast, and also to provide storm shelter for really big storms. The code wind speeds were under review, though, and the code people couldn't really seem to say what the roof, walls, and particularly windows needed to do. They might give him a building permit on the plans being completed now, but maybe not. Put that in your detailed schedule.

He could go back and tell his clients that the Permit Department was holding him up and maybe costing them more, and ask for a change order. But that meant endless meetings with people saying something different each meeting, and no conclusion. So he would charge ahead, and build them something, and make them pay him.

Damn Miami.



## ***Chapter 2***

Dan had settled down by the morning, and went into the office for the weekly owner meeting in a pretty good mood. If you got too upset at things in this business, you were in the wrong business. He often thought that these projects were the hardest management tests in the world – prototypes, with people you hadn't worked with before, to a hard dollar cost, out in the weather. So relax.

He liked the office pretty well too. It was a trailer complex, but it had plenty of space, since they had plenty of people, and the site was nice, on Biscayne Bay, a little off the beach. It let you think about a hurricane, and see clearly what you were trying to protect from.

The place was humming, with people getting ready for the meeting, setting up projectors and boards, and screens. Weekly owner meetings were a normal thing on jobsites, but this one had a total of 26 buildings being done, and design as well as construction questions, so it had a small village to get it all done.

Dan had brought a few people from Raleigh, on a two year vacation he told them. Lisa Richardson was the office manager, and she was having fun directing traffic. She was a middle aged, very experienced manager who made life a lot easier. He didn't know what he would do without her.

Billy Ferrell was the chief estimator – really the only estimator, and he wasn't having fun at all. “I don't know how are going to make these minority hiring goals and still hire good subs! I just got some prices on the phone from a Haitian firm, and I'll swear they were sacrificing a chicken when they read them to me.”

“I wonder if that makes the price better or worse?”

He and Lisa and Billy and some other people went over the agenda, got it printed and laid out, and were ready for the meeting. These days all the information was projected on a big screen in the conference room, so they didn't have to print it all. There were an unending array of schedules, estimates, summaries, and problems to talk about.

“When is Joe getting here? I'd like to talk to him about the inspectors before everyone else piles on.”

Joe Rodriguez was the District's project manager, a pretty good guy. Lisa said "I haven't heard from him, and the rumor mill has it that he might get fired because of how slow things are going." Dan and Billy looked at her with alarm. "It's not his fault if no one around here knows what they want!" She shrugged and walked out to get more coffee before the meeting started.

Dan was sitting in his office at the official start time – nothing ever really started on time here – when someone came to his door. "Mr Brownell?"

He swung his chair around and stopped. The person in his doorway was a young woman, tall and very attractive. "I'm Maria Riojas. The District superintendent asked me to take over from Joseph Rodriguez for awhile, at least until we can get over the rough spots. I'll take his place in the meeting."

She handed him a card. He just stared for a minute, before his Southern manners kicked in. "I'm Dan Brownell. Welcome aboard. I guess we can start the meeting on time now."

He followed her into the conference room, and sure enough all of the District people were there on time.

He was having trouble processing all this, mostly because she was the most attractive woman he thought he had ever seen, and perfectly composed and professional in what for most people would have been a difficult setting. She had on the right safety gear, and a file that looked like she had read the pre meeting agenda. And she was still a knockout.

The meeting started the way they all did, with safety discussions, and reviews of the short term schedule for the program as a whole. Ms. Riojas was quiet, letting the other District people do their jobs. When they got to the project by project status updates the conversation turned heated. The Jones people wanted decisions and answers, and the Dade people wanted someone else to make the decision, or give them more information, or anything.

Finally Maria Riojas spoke, “Mr Brownell, please give me a list of the things that you think are holding you up, and your recommendation for the answer, and we’ll answer them by the end of the week. I’ll try to get you a list of the things that are bothering us about the process by then, and perhaps next Monday we can make this a more productive meeting.” And with that she walked out.

Everyone stared for a minute, looked at each other, and finally went back to work. Dan went back to his office. Her card was on his desk. It said “Maria Isabella Riojas y Zetina, PE, LEED AP, PMP”. Well, she was apparently qualified.



## ***Chapter 3***

The production of the decision list wasn't hard, but the recommended answers were. Dan asked everyone on the team to come back in the late afternoon to talk over the answers, and he and Lisa and Billy worked out their ideas. The trouble was that they didn't have much experience in running a school district, so they really didn't know what the District could do to force conclusions from the code people, or FEMA, or even their teachers. They made guesses, and the group worked out what they hoped the District could do. The architects were some help, but none of them wanted to press the District hard, because they would be here depending on them for work when Jones was long gone.

Finally they finished, and Dan started to send the list off by email. On second thought, he thought it would be better to deliver it, maybe get hers, but in any event to see her again. He thought he had been dreaming, and it would be better to know that before he spent the week thinking about it.

The District offices were downtown, and it took some time to get there. He asked the lady at the desk to call her, and got a badge and some directions. The lobby was full of people who looked like they were having problems with their kids.

When he got upstairs she met him at her door. “Mr. Brownell”.

“Oh, call me Dan please” She paused. “I think we ought to keep it formal, Mr Brownell”.

That took him a minute. “OK, Ms Riojas, here’s the list we worked out of the things that are holding us back. We took a try at the answers we wanted.” He didn’t say that they had found that some of the answers they wanted sounded dumb when they wrote them down, and so they had backed away from some of their previous positions.

“Very well. Here are some of the things that are bothering the District. Why don’t you work on them with your people, and we can meet on Friday afternoon to talk it over.”

“Great. Maybe I can buy you a drink later?”

“Mr. Brownell, we really can’t do that! This project is in trouble, and we need to be extremely professional. Thanks for coming over.” And she walked back to her desk, sat down and began to work. Dan understood he was dismissed. Wow!

He walked back to the truck, feeling put down. It had been a time since he had been talked down to, and it didn’t feel good. She might be beautiful, but that didn’t give her the right to look down on him.

He had rented a house out in Garden Groves, near where they had set up the office. It wasn’t too expensive, and it gave him a yard for his dog, Bear. Bear was the best part of life some days, like today.

Dan wasn’t much given to introspection, or “staring at his navel”, but sometimes he was surprised at how life had turned out, so far at least. He was a big, good looking, successful guy, so he had plenty of “relationships”, which he had always thought of as slang for girls to sleep with. The girls hadn’t really wanted more either, since they were worried about their own careers, and not being anybody’s servants. So he had cheerfully fucked himself through life.

Tonight that seems sort of empty, and somehow that was because he met a beautiful and accomplished woman that looked down on him.

“Oh screw it. Damn Miami”

## ***Chapter 4***

The next day started with a trip down to Homestead. Since Hurricane Alex had almost leveled the city a few years ago, that had been chosen to have the first of these hardened school additions, and the project was further along than the others. It had gotten designed with what now looked like little trouble, and the construction had gotten underway.

All of these buildings used a wall system called Insulated Concrete Forms. It amounted to putting up empty Styrofoam blocks, and filling them with rebar and concrete. That produced a very strong wall, with great insulation properties that cut down on air conditioning. And it was extremely economical – the more conventional stud, drywall, and brick wall cost \$30 per square foot, and this cost \$7. Further, it could be constructed by low skilled workers, and so it was used in many African countries. The idea to use these had gotten Jones the job. With a plaster finish it looked good, too.

But the system had some unsuspected problems. For one thing, it was unusual in South Florida, and the building inspectors sort of felt like Jones was selling the District a low quality product, so they were being extremely critical in inspections. There was a standard, published by the American Concrete Institute, and every inspector had one and seemed to read it to sleep each night.

Then the subcontractors Jones had hired to do the wall work looked awful to Dan. The people came to work in flip flops and shorts, half hung over, and careless about safety. This first sub was a Miami outfit that on paper had a lot of experience, but you couldn't tell it in the field. He had stopped work, run off people who were not dressed to work safely, and threatened random drug tests. That slowed the project down even more, and got everyone mad at him.

He pulled up at the job at 7:00 as work was starting. His superintendent was a long time Jones man that Dan had known since he was a kid, Jimmy Edwards.

“How's it looking, Jimmy?”

“Well, I hope your Cuban is better than mine, 'cause I've got a couple of problems I can't seem to solve.”

The first problem sounded simple. When the Styrofoam forms were being filled with pumped concrete, they kept shifting and getting out of plumb. You would think anyone who did this work would know how much to brace the walls, but the first wall cast was 2” out of vertical.

So Jimmy and Dan went to talk to the InsulCube foreman. “ It doesn’t look so bad to me...we can take most of it out with plaster on the outside, and drywall finish on the inside.”

That lit the candle. Dan said “The hell you will. It’s out of spec, looks terrible, the inspectors will give us grief and turn it down if we ask them to inspect, and never give us any credit after that. Tear that sonofabitch down now and get it right, or get out of here!” He must have looked pretty mad...the guy mumbled and backed away. He and Jimmy walked around for a few minutes so Dan could calm down. “I don’t god damn understand how anyone could respect themselves if they produced that crap!”

Jimmy said “Ready for the next one?” He got a nod. “ They walked up to a section of the Styrofoam forms that hadn’t been cast yet. “Look down at the rebar connections.” Dan looked down, and saw some

electrician's plastic ties on the rebar. "What's that?" Jimmy replied "Well, they had forgotten to tie the second tier of rebar to the bars coming out of the foundation, and when I pointed that out they took some of the electricians ties out of his box, and worked them down to where the ties should be, and they could pull them tight from above. It really looks stupid, but I can't find any ACI rules that says it has to be a steel tie wire holder."

Dan started to get mad again, but this one didn't have such a good answer. It was in fact possible that this stupid looking solution didn't violate any standard, and he bet that the InsulCube guy would pull off if he added one more demand. So he decided to accept it, and cast the wall as soon as it was braced, so the inspectors wouldn't see it and ridicule them.

And finally one more. The windows they had settled on were large, and gave the classrooms the natural light they needed. It had taken some heroic testing and pressing to get the code people to agree with their "projectile resistance" and strength in a hurricane, but it looked like it would pass. Now the bond beam at the top of the concrete wall opening was formed, and it looked like the work of a 4 year old. Dan and Jimmy thought it would fail when it was filled with concrete.

They were both silent for a few minutes. “OK, let’s do this – tell Jorge ( the InsulCube foreman ) that we are worried and want to help. Then put a scaffold frame under the center of it, with screw braces to support the center. That will probably get the first one to hold up, and maybe we can embarrass him into better work on the next pour.”

Jimmy doubted it, but didn’t have a better idea. That was the morning set of problems. Damn Miami.



## ***Chapter 5***

Dan spent the drive back to the office wondering how all this would turn out. He could imagine that all the subs would learn their jobs, that the District would make the decisions needed, and that Jones would get the time extensions and change orders they needed. But he could also imagine the alternate, a long set of lawsuits in which the attorneys were the only victors, and a failure on his record. Pretty scary. Judgment, he thought, was really just an ability to forecast the result of actions, and right now he couldn't.

Back in the office he copied the list Ms Riojas had given him, had it distributed, and called an afternoon meeting to discuss their criticisms.

Lisa came in and sat down. "You know, you're going to have trouble dealing with this woman with your tongue hanging out." Dan started to get mad again – it had already been a long day – but Lisa had been with him for some time, and was a little like his mother.

“Well, maybe I’ve just got to grow up. Somehow all this will get worked out – every building gets built, and these will too.” Lisa looked at him. “Yeah, but if you don’t mind your P’s and Q’s, Jones will lose its ass, and you will be holding the bag. So, call Stan, get an attorney down here, and start thinking like a lawyer!”

Stan was their corporate counsel. It seemed to Dan, and maybe all of the trade oriented builders in the company, that he represented the dark side of construction. He was a flurry of cover your ass memos, requests for change orders that would only slow things down, and a sort of internal police force. If you felt good about what you had done in a day, Stan was there to ask for another memo.

“OK, I’ll call him if it looks bad after the next meeting. But maybe I can grow up, work out a good documented plan with Ms Riojas, and we can all act like adults.”

Lisa looked at him like his mother, and went to get more coffee before the Jones team meeting.

The meeting, when it started, was not too productive. The District list mostly dealt with what the District felt

was the Jones' responsibility for anticipating regulatory and design problems, and being able to solve them without asking for District decisions. There was vague contract language in that direction, and vague contract language in the other direction, and so no real help from the contract.

“You know,” Dan said, “construction is really the easy part of all this. We can dig foundations, cast concrete, put in windows all day long, if we know what to do.” Everyone nodded. “But how do we get everyone together on what to do?”

A bunch of blank looks. “Well, let's summarize our side of it, and send it back for the Friday meeting. And they spent two hours covering their ass with words that really didn't solve the problem. They might as well be Congressmen.



## **Chapter 6**

Dan spent the rest of the week doing his job, or at least what he thought his job was. He visited the sites where some work had started, worked on the schedules for the others, met with the various architects. He stayed away from the various plan checking, permit issuing meetings, because he didn't want to lose his temper. He wasn't sure why that seemed right to him. But he was sure it didn't have anything to do with Maria.

Friday afternoon arrived. All of his team assembled for the meeting with the District. Right on time she arrived, with two other people. Ms. Riojas was dressed for the field – Dan thought of that as dressed right – but the other two were in suits.

“Mr Brownell, let me introduce Jorge Guerra, our general counsel, and James Murchison, the head of our public relations group at the District. I asked them to come with me to talk over our lists.”

Dan shook hands, offered coffee, and they all sat down and looked at each other. No one wanted to start, so finally Dan did. He said “ Folks, we aren’t doing too well on this project. By our own reports, we are behind in design, and getting projects into construction. There are problems with design approvals, permitting, and some with the quality of the construction work. When Ms Riojas arrived, we all felt it might be a good time to talk it all over and see if we could resolve those things.”

Dead silence. Guerra looked ready to bust, but didn’t say anything. Murchison looked like he was OK, but he didn’t start either.

Dan tried to set a tone. “We are responsible for designing and constructing some buildings to your specifications, but those don’t answer all the questions. From our point of view we get held up when you can’t answer questions on what you want, or when a code group won’t issue a permit based on your specs. From your point of view we are responsible for answering all those things without any information or decisions from you; we are sort of stuck.”

Finally Guerra felt like talking. “Looks to me like those are the things you took on when you took the

job! When you don't know how to do something, and ask us, we need to get a large organization to do the things we hired you to do. It takes some time, and causes some internal tensions, and we've about had enough."

Dan slowly counted to ten. "No amount of experience can replace you telling us what design choices you want! If you want us to just make those choices for you, staying within your specifications, then we will, and we'll hope you like the result.....but even if we never ask a design question again, we still need some help with the County and City plan checkers. All of them seem to be afraid of outside power, and we can't seem to get to the end of the permitting process on a lot of the jobs."

Murchison smiled. "Maybe we can give you some help there. If I, or Maria, go with you to ask for a ruling and a permit, maybe that will help them come to a decision. There might be some other problem, but at least we will look together."

Dan could tell that Guerra didn't like that idea either, but he didn't object. Maybe this could turn out OK if he just get the temperature turned down with some conversation, and some initial steps. "I'd like to

describe a couple of jobs that are lagging, and see if we can agree on a starting plan.” He went on to talk about Sunny Isles Elementary, where the school principal had a different capacity in mind than the one in their contract and kept begging the architect to design a larger building than the one in the budget. Dan had asked for some guidance from the District several weeks ago, and hadn’t been able to get it. So the design was stopped.

Dan looked at Guerra. “So we will tell the principal that the District wouldn’t authorize it, and go ahead and design to the original plan.” Guerra nodded. “And from now on we won’t ask any questions that we can solve within the specs.” Another nod. Dan was going to write a memo when this meeting was over.

“Coral Gables also has a city plan checker who wants us to design the windows to a standard that hasn’t been adopted yet, and which costs a ton. Without his agreement we can’t get a permit to get started with construction.” He looked at Murchison, “So will you come with me tomorrow to see them, and see if we can shake it loose?” “Sure will!”

The meeting went on in that vein for most of the problem jobs, and Dan was feeling better. Too soon.

As they were about to be finished, Guerra said. “Of course, some of these problems are just bad construction, and there isn’t any question that that’s Jone’s responsibility. If getting that right makes us miss the school opening, you know that damages will apply.”

Dan wanted to end this without a fight. “We have acknowledged that there has been some bad InsulCube work, that we have had to redo. So far it hasn’t put any of these jobs outside their opening dates. If construction itself does that, then we will have to address that when it happens.”

The meeting broke up. Dan said “Thanks for coming Maria, and forcing this.” She looked at him and said “Just doing my job, Mr Brownell.” Guerra and Murchison shepherded her out the door, but she glanced back and smiled as she left. Dan wondered what that meant.

It was Friday afternoon, and he was tired of this damn job, but he had Lisa call all the various architects to set up a joint design meeting on Monday, and he wrote Maria a nice thank you letter that happened to contain the documentation of the agreements they had reached. It was a kind of kissy face cover your ass combination.







## ***Chapter 7***

Dan spent the weekend doing home chores. He liked mowing his own lawn, and building cabinets, and playing with Bear. Behind it all he couldn't get Maria Riojas off his mind, so late Saturday he went down to South Beach to hit some bars and chat up some ladies, but none of it seemed to appeal to him, so he was home and in bed early. Sunday he went fishing. That was the weekend.

The Monday design meeting was interesting. The architects listened to his rendition of the conversation with Miami Dade, and the instruction to make their own decisions, but they were skeptical. John Willoughby was the most vocal. "These people say that, until you show them something they don't like, then they shoot you in the back! We've all been down this road before."

"Well, I think we will be going again, but this time we have a clear mandate, and it doesn't look to me like we have a choice. You need to be sure that any decision you make complies with the building codes and the

educational specifications, but after that we are full speed ahead. I'll write that down for you this afternoon, and then we can start on the final design reviews and permit completions. We need to get this show on the road!"

They all grumbled, but agreed – on point of getting replaced – and left. Willoughby glared at him on the way out. Dan wrote down his commitment and sent it to them. Then he went back to the basic job of planning the work, and working the plan.

Designing and constructing a building was a fascinating chore, if you could put up with human frailties. It was a new product each time, designed and built by groups of people who usually hadn't worked together before, done under the pretense that you could tell ahead of time what it would actually cost the various participants, and done out in the weather. Sometimes it seemed like going to the moon.

In response all the players tried to impose some order on it. The week had a schedule – owner meeting on Tuesday, sub meeting on Wednesday, individual issue meetings on Thursday, RFI's submitted or answered by Thursday afternoon, change order requests dealt with on Friday.

Information technology had helped organize the process too. Now you could see all the questions people had asked about the plans, and the answers, and the request for more money, at the touch of a button. So all of the summaries, and the meeting preparation, and so on were done more quickly. Sometimes that just told you that you were in trouble more clearly, and on a more regular schedule.

Dan got ready for the owner's meeting the next day, which meant going through a bunch of cost and schedule and inspection reports looking for signs of trouble. He got the information ready for Lisa to prepare, and then took off. The addition at Ransom Everglades was on the way home, and he wanted to see how this crew of InsulCube guys was doing. He was hoping for better than Homestead.

But it didn't happen. The first people he saw were in gangster shorts and flip flops; the stored Styrofoam pieces were in a mess, and his superintendent – one he had added here – wasn't there while the work was going on. He gritted his teeth, and tried to be pleasant but firm about protective equipment and stored materials. Midway in that speech his superintendent came back from an errand. He listened, but it was clear that he had never really been on a well run job,

and thought that this one was really fine. Dan made a mental note to get someone else.

And that was Monday. Tuesday was owner meeting day, and Dan found himself looking forward to seeing Maria again, even if she was looking down her nose. She showed up on time again, properly dressed, with all of the necessary school district people. Since most of their pressing questions had been removed, the bulk of the meeting was explaining when plans would be complete, and scheduling the permit reviews that would be needed next. There were some Non Compliance Reports – inspection failures – to be discussed, but Dan agreed with most of them, and promised better work in the coming days.

James Murchison agreed to spend most of Thursday with Dan going to various permit bodies and asking for release of the permits. He seemed to understand the importance, and think he could help. Dan had his fingers crossed. He asked Maria – Ms Riojas – if she would come with them to one heavily Hispanic meeting in Coral Gables, and she agreed. It would be hard to imagine any male plan checker turning her down.

So the meeting ended well. Dan started to ask her out again, but decided not to press his luck. It had been enough for one day. All the dignitaries left.

Lisa came into his office as he was getting ready to go home. “You wanna hear about Maria Riojas?”

“Well, your expression makes me think I don’t, but I do. Who have you been talking to?”

“One of the main office secretaries is Jane’s sister in law. It seems that Maria is in fact from Bolivia – we are supposed to be able to tell that from her accent in Spanish. She is the daughter of a prominent family, and was a leading candidate in the Ms Universe competition there, a contest she entered over her family’s objections. She entered their university as a freshman, but then something happened – no one knows what – and she withdrew, and got late acceptance at Purdue in Indiana. She went there, apparently never went back to Bolivia. As a sophomore she chose civil engineering as a major, and graduated at the top of her class. She got an offer from Miami Dade, and took it immediately, over a lot of others. Now you know....”

Dan was sort of overwhelmed. “ I guess I’ll think about all that, but it looks to me like I need to forget about anything but work.....”

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted you to understand.” Lisa gave him her mommy look, and walked out.

## ***Chapter 8***

The rest of the week went fine, and so did the next few weeks. Jim Murchison turned out to be a help, and the permits for several jobs were finally issued in part because he went with Dan to the review meetings. Life was OK.

Then came the meeting with the plan reviewer for Coral Gables. The fellow, Carlos Ruiz, had been unwilling to release plans or permits on a job planned for there, because of some maybe upcoming changes to the International Building Code that affected areas with high winds. Some of the drafts of the changes had required designing for winds of 150 miles per hour, and for windows that would repel a projectile traveling at that speed. That really meant that every window would be bullet proof, driving the cost way up, and losing Jones a lot of money or a contentious change order. The draft was unlikely to be approved, it wasn't the current law, the permit could be issued now under the current code, but Carlos felt that the new proposed rules should be followed, cost be

damned. Dan – and Jim – thought having Maria there might help.

And it seemed to for awhile. Carlos was welcoming, talked mostly to Maria, and replayed some of the conversations so far. But when Jim Murchison told him how important it was to the District to get started, the meeting turned cold.

“I won’t let you do a poor job, Mr Murchison, even if you bring a beautiful little woman with you.”

Dan got red in the face. “Carlos, damn it, I think you should.....” but Maria was first. “Mr. Ruiz, I know you don’t know me, but my master’s thesis was on some of these subjects at Purdue, and I can assure you that the code you seem to think is necessary is in fact excessive. And now I think this *little woman* will be on her way.” And she got up and quietly left.

After a little quiet Dan said, “Well, I hope you can see your way clear to giving us a permit under the existing rules. If there is anything else we can do, please call.” And he and Jim joined Maria outside.

She looked like a statue of ice. They drove back to the District office downtown, and Jim quickly excused

himself. Dan didn't know what to say, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Mr. Brownell, if you ever try to defend me again, it will be the last time we work together. I do not need your help!”

“I guess not – it's just a natural instinct I suppose. I'll try to get rid of it.”

“Please do.” And she turned and went inside.

He went out to Sunny Isles to cool off. One part of him was the usual voice that said no one really understood women, they really were from another planet, he was trying to help, and so on. But another part really was beginning to understand that what she wanted was respect, and only respect. Anything else was resented, and maybe was frightening. He filed all that in the back of his brain for later thought, aided by beer.

The superintendent out here was someone from Miami that he had hired here, Ted Banda. Ted had an OK reputation, a recommendation from one of the Miami

firms that Dan knew slightly. And after all, it wasn't a hard set of jobs to oversee. So Dan had put him on, sort of crossed his fingers that he would pass the drug test, and started him when it came out OK.

The job was no way to cheer up. The formed walls seemed to be plumb, the rebar was properly tied, and the bond beams above the windows looked OK – but they hadn't formed the corners with the right Styrofoam pieces, and his superintendent hadn't caught it. If they cast the wall as it was formed, they would part the corners easily.

Ted Banda hadn't been on the jobsite when he drove up, but he was responsible for three jobs a few miles from each other, so he was probably on one of those.

For some reason it didn't make him as mad as usual. He got people together, quietly explained what they needed to do, gave them some more time than the schedule to make the changes, put off the concrete for the next day, and had a talk with the superintendent. It all seemed like a normal event in a very screwed up world. Then he went on home, trying to imagine why Maria felt the way she did.

## **Chapter 9**

He got a visitor at the office the next day. Jose Guerra, the Miami Dade lawyer, stormed into the office. He was having trouble containing his anger.

“God damn it, Brownell, you’ve upset Ms.Riojas yesterday. You leave her the hell alone!”

Dan was much more at home with angry men. “Good morning, Mr. Guerra. It’s nice to see you again too. What do you feel I did to upset Ms. Riojas....and why is it your business?” Dan put on his best dumbass smile. He was hoping Guerra would take a swing, so he could flatten him. Guerra looked like a Latin lover, but Dan had 50 pounds and some karate on him.

“I don’t know what you did, but she was in tears yesterday, and broke a date with me....if you get near her again I swear I’ll have your contract shoved up your ass by the School Board!”

“Mr Guerra, you know she agreed to help with the permitting problems, to avoid the sort of legal trouble you seem to relish. If you want to know about the

meeting, ask Jim Murchison. Now if you don't have anything else, please get out."

"Brownell, you will be damn sorry if you touch her again!" And he left, slamming the door.

Dan sat there a minute. Gradually all the people in the office came and formed a little circle outside his door. Billy was appointed spokesman. "What the hell was that!"

"Well, an angry Hispanic lawyer. Right now that's at the bottom of my favorite stereotype list, just behind Nigerian pirates. Don't worry about it." And he gently closed his door on them.

Dan needed a break from all this theater, and fortunately he had one scheduled. Jones Construction had a Miami office, that was how they had gotten this job. The office itself was run by Reuben Quiveda, a Cuban fellow who was well known in the community and in addition someone Dan liked and respected. Reuben was a member of the South Beach Rotary, and Reuben had invited him to a luncheon meeting. Dan was a Rotary member back home, and he was interested in what one looked like in this environment.

Reuben picked him up, and they drove out the causeway. “I think you’ll like these guys. They are about the most gung ho Americans you’ll ever meet”. Dan doubted it

The ride out to the restaurant was good. It was a cloudless day, the surf was down; the beaches were pristine. Dan could imagine Christopher Columbus being relieved to land here, thinking he was in India.

When they crossed the bay on the causeway and got into the restaurant, Dan found he was wrong. Most of the members were Hispanic, from Cuba and South America, and looking like his morning visitor. But he was wrong. From the pledge of allegiance, the singing of the national anthem, and sitting down to lunch, they all seemed genuinely happy to be in the US. Then they started talking about their military service to the United States, and their children’s current military and community service. By the end of lunch he doubted that he had ever been in a more genuine group of patriots. “Nothing like a convert” he said to himself, but he was impressed none-the-less.

The speaker for the meeting reviewed some of the current political questions before the Congress and the state legislature, and tried to explain the other side of

the issues politely. The Audience listened, but all of the questions were of the form “Don’t these people understand that Castro (and Gorbachech, and the Muslims) are just plain evil, and will enslave us if we give an inch!” At the end of the meeting, Dan halfway expected a boat to depart for the Bay of Pigs.

Reuben was quiet on the way back from lunch. “That was a little more lively than usual, but they are all pretty conservative. You folks in North Carolina probably feel the same way, but you are quieter.” Dan had to admit he was right.

## **Chapter 10**

Life went on for awhile, with few upsets. The District seemed to accept the design decisions that Jones made for them, happy not to have to have the arguments. The InsulCube guys finally learned their trade, sort of, and the walls of most of the schools went up OK, Maria came to the weekly meetings, was treated respectfully but stayed formal, and life went on.

Then at the end of one of the owner meetings she said “Dan, could I see you for a minute?” “Sure, let’s go in my office.” He was actually blown away to hear his first name, but he was cool...

She was nervous. “ We have an awards banquet for the District next week. I’m getting an award, so I have to go, and I need an escort. Will you come with me?”

His heart leapt like he was a kid. “Certainly, I’d be honored.” He stopped, not sure what the next words should be. She said, “Thanks. This is still a formality, so I’ll meet you there. We can have a drink afterward, but then I’ll need to get home.”

He managed to say. “I’ll look forward to it…” before she got up, smiled, and walked out.

He sat there, amazingly pleased, for a minute. It occurred to him at some level that this was sort of like the seventh grade prom, and he was a real fool, but that wasn’t how it struck him.

He walked out of his office door into the equivalent of a Greek Chorus. Lisa was standing there smiling, and Billy and Jimmy Edwards were about to burst into song. He told them to get back to work, dammit, and went out to drive out to Sunny Isle again just to get out of the teasing.

When he got there he wandered around on the site for a few minutes, talking to the InsulCube people, the plumbers and electricians doing their rough ins. It wasn’t difficult construction, but for once the work didn’t look too bad. He thought to himself that it was probably that he was in a better mood than usual.

“Anybody seen Ted lately?” “I think he’s in his truck in the lot, talking on the phone”. Dan walked on to the lot, and over to Ted’s truck. The windows were tinted, but there was someone in there, and Dan tapped on the window.

After a few minutes, the driver's window came down, and Dan was hit by an overpowering smell he knew well – meth. It smelled like rotten eggs. “Ted, come on out and let's take a walk.”

Ted was groggy, but made it out and started walking. Dan said “Ted, you know we just can't have meth on our sites, or in you. Please tell me it won't happen again, even if you need to ask for time off for rehab. What do you say?”

Ted concentrated on walking for a few steps, then said “What happen again?” He tried a puzzled look, and almost fell down when they came to a curb. Dan said “Ted, you smell like a one man meth lab! Have you been on it long?”

“I'm not on anything! I'm just feeling a little bad, and I've got some gas. I'll be fine in the morning.” Dan thought it over, and decided to give it one more try. It wouldn't be easy to get someone to replace Ted in a hurry, and there was a small chance he really was just sick, although the smell was really hard to mistake. “OK. But you know that if you're like this again, we've got to do a random test, and the result will get put into the system. Please don't do it again! And today, let me take you home.”

Ted nodded, went and sat down in Dan's truck, and gave him some directions. He turned out to live in a small town back toward the Glades, in an old rundown farmhouse. There was a barn out back that might have been a meth lab, but Dan didn't want to press it any more today. He let Ted out, said "Hope you feel better. If you can't come in tomorrow call as early as you can, and we'll get someone to watch the job for you. And with that he drove off, hoping that was the end of it. It was the end of the day, and the end of the week, and he wanted to go home and think about taking Maria out next week.

## **Chapter 11**

On Monday morning early Jimmy called into the office from Homestead. Lisa answered the phone.

“Is Dan there?” “No, he hasn’t come in yet...I don’t know where he is.”

“Well, there was some kind of accident out here this weekend. It looks like a truck got loose and rammed one of my concrete walls hard. These rinky dink InsulCube walls fall over easy before they are all poured, and this one is a pile of rubble on the slab. The thing is, the truck looks like Dan’s.....I kind of want to hear the story and get some insurance people out here before I start cleaning up.”

Lisa didn’t know what to say. “I’ll phone around, and let you know. Leave everything as it is until I can find him.” She sat for a minute, thinking of stories to explain that. Maybe he went out there to see how it was going when there weren’t a bunch of people around, left his truck running but in Park, then when he had gone a little way away it slipped into gear, and

ran toward the wall. Maybe he was talking to his insurance agent, renting a car, calling the cops right now. That must be it.

She tried his home phone, and left a message. She tried his cell phone and got no answer. She sent a text to his phone to call her. She called Reuben to ask if he had heard from Dan, and was told that he hadn't seen him since the Rotary meeting. No more options.....

The phone rang immediately. It was Jimmy. "Lisa, there was a phone ring from that pile of concrete out there. I'm gonna clear it out as quick as we can, and I've called the cops. I'll have someone take pictures, but we can't ....."

He put the phone down in mid sentence, and Lisa heard "What? Oh shit!" "Lisa, I got to go. There's someone under all that concrete, and my guys think it's Dan!"

## **Chapter 12**

And here is where I come in. My name is William Sage, Willie to my friends. I'm a construction superintendent and project manager. In the last few years I have drawn assignments that involved finishing jobs that have run into trouble of some kind, usually some that trouble that included serious crimes or suspected crimes. The companies involved need someone they can trust, when their own people may be involved or responsible.

I need to emphasize that I'm no kind of detective – just an experienced jobsite hand, although a curious one about things that seem odd. I've been present at the solution of several of them, but it's more luck than brains.

I live in Los Gatos, California, although now I seem to work all over the country. I was married to a wonderful woman for twenty years, have two fine sons. Elizabeth and I met on Valentine's Day, were married the next Valentine's Day, and she died of cancer twenty years later on Valentine's Day. I'm not

very religious, but I hope to be with her in the great future.

I got the call from Lloyd Silberstein with Jones Construction in North Carolina. Lloyd and I had worked together in San Francisco on PacBell Park, and then he had taken a job as Executive Vice President of Jones.

“Willie, we need someone to run a design build job in Miami where the main guy just got murdered. It’s big news there, and I don’t think I have anyone that can operate in that sort of spotlight. Are you busy?”

“Not very. I finished a sort of giant hand holding for the County two weeks ago, and I’m planning a fishing trip to Montana with the boys. But we could switch it to tarpon on a fly rod.”

“Well, we really need you. Send me one of your famous contracts to sign, and tell me how soon we can meet there, day after tomorrow at the latest.”

I filled in what I knew on a contract form, gave him a pretty high monthly rate plus expenses, and emailed it off. It came back signed in ten minutes. I booked a

flight for tomorrow, a long old flight across the country, and planned to meet him tomorrow for dinner.

The next day was Tuesday, and I spent all day getting to Miami, with a long flight and the time difference. I got a car at the airport, and met him at a fancy hotel he had booked a room for me in.

We went into the restaurant and spent a few minutes catching up. Lloyd's wife had wanted to go back to North Carolina, and it seemed to have worked out well. His daughters were in college now, doing fine. We talked about how hard raising girls was – every man I know with daughters wants to tell me that. Jones had treated him well, and he had helped them get a good body of work on the East Coast, so in general things were fine.

Except for Miami. The job had gotten behind its original schedule for the usual reasons with school programs. The fellow running it, Dan Brownell, had made some good progress in the last few weeks in solving the problems, but it was still not yet all solved. Lloyd had no idea what might be behind the brutal murder of Dan Brownell.

He described the scene, and the insulated concrete form walls, and what he knew about the police findings, which was almost nothing.

“We have an appointment with Lieutenant Smith first thing in the morning to tell him what I know, and hopefully to find out more. Then we will go over to the job office, I’ll introduce you and say a few words, and then leave you to it.”

“Lloyd, you know I’m not going to solve any crimes here. I’ll get the job going, and tell the cops whatever I can, but I’m no Sherlock Holmes.”

“I know, but you’ve screwed around and solved some in the past, so maybe you will again. I just want to make sure we aren’t blamed for it, and sure that none of our people were involved.”

We finished dinner, and I went off to bed. Tomorrow I’d find some extended stay place close to the site, and get to work.

## **Chapter 13**

Lieutenant Smith turned out to be with the Miami Dade Metro Police Department in downtown Miami. Even though the crime was done in Homestead, the locals relied on the larger department to investigate serious crimes. I had been expecting something like *CSI Miami*, but as usual the facts were far different than television shows. It was a sort of rundown office building, and the Lieutenant didn't have a Hollywood look.

“I'm glad you guys came by. We'll need to question your people at the office tomorrow, and the site needs to be sealed off for several days as we try to find some evidence of who did all this.”

“So what do you think so far? Is there a chance it's a stupid accident?”

Smith stared at me. “Sure, he left his truck running, walked over behind the wall, and the truck slipped into gear and ran into the wall fast enough to knock it down on him. Come on!”

Lloyd tried to bail me out. “Willie is just looking for some information. He will have to be answering questions for days from our people, and we need some information to give them some sense that all this will be straightened out, and I guess that they aren’t in danger. Have you finished the autopsy?”

“No, the coroner is seriously backed up. But the body looked just like someone who had a wall fall on them – no gunshot evidence or anything. We assume that someone knocked him out, and then ran the truck into the wall.”

I thought to myself that that didn’t sound like a surefire plan to me, but I didn’t say anything. The only people who would know that the ICF walls were that weak were people who worked on the job.

Smith continued, “We’ll be over tomorrow to do the interviews. Meanwhile that job is off limits. Don’t go playing cop, or letting people gossip until we’ve talked to them.” Fat chance, I thought. Construction sites were more gossipy than beauty parlors.

We thanked him and left. Lloyd voiced what I was thinking. “Unless someone left his business card on Dan’s body, those guys don’t have a chance.”

We drove up the coast to the main office site. It was on a site next to Biscayne Bay, and the fluffy white clouds and white topped waves looked like a picture postcard. The parking lot in front of the bank of trailers was full, but inside the office was subdued, with people sitting at desks and tables with laptops, sort of pretending to work.

Lloyd got everyone together to express his sadness at Dan's death, determination to get to the bottom of it, and to introduce me. "I want all of you to give Willie your best effort to keep the jobs on track, and get him up to speed. He has had some success in some similar things, but he needs all the help he can get." I could see that going into one ear and out the other.

I started out. "First off, we will probably need to cancel this week's meetings, since the cops will be here tomorrow to interview everyone. The jobs can keep working, except Homestead. Who can get that word out?" I had been introduced to a woman named Lisa, and she raised her hand. "Good, please do that. I'll want to talk to each of you individually, but let's let that wait until after the police have gone tomorrow, and spent this afternoon getting me up to speed on the job. Let's all be back here in 30 minutes, with a regular weekly review."

Everyone seemed to be glad to have a direction, and went off to get the information they would normally have presented at a weekly owners meeting. Lloyd looked like he had handed off a problem too, wished me the best, shook my hand and left promptly. It seemed a little like a thankless task, but I was used to it.

The projects review was well done. Dan's staff had a good understanding of a sort of top down summary of all of the jobs based on cost, time, and quality issues, with lots of the good graphics that owners liked to be able to transfer to their websites to tell the voters that they were doing a first class job. The trouble was, these graphics weren't telling a story the District would want to put on the public website. The stoplight reports were red for fourteen of the projects, a problem the reports attributed to "delay in design decisions" and "permit uncertainty".

The crew gave me the unedited facts about the delays. Schools were unable to make some hard decisions about who got what space, and found it hard to accept that the contract limited the size of each school to a predetermined area. So they had simply stopped making decisions until the District gave them more, and design on some projects had come to a halt.

The reports also said the time problem had been solved by the District delegating any design decision that did not violate the contract or the building codes to the design builder. I had never seen that done, and I could imagine that there were a lot of people who said to themselves “I could kill that guy!” – but I doubt they meant it.

The permit problem was also said to have been solved with the help of the District. I got a sort of formal description of the help of two of the staff members. The tone of voice made me think I would hear more tomorrow.

The cost picture wasn't bad – insulated concrete walls seemed to have produced some remarkable costs. Even though the jobs were behind in time, they seemed to be mostly within budget. There were some that had had some requests for change orders for concealed conditions, and those were apparently in dispute, but the total was small.

On the other hand, the quality picture was as bleak as the time picture, and here it was hard to blame anyone else. Lloyd had told me that Dan came from a family of carpenters, and I could imagine that he was having trouble reporting all of the Non-Conforming Work

reports from the inspectors, and the safety violations. We talked for a while about terminating a lot of the subcontracts and bringing in people from other parts of the country, but that looked like a prescription for lawsuits and losses, so the staff here was trying their best to train the locals in craftsmanship and safety. I got a few stories of Haitian subs in shorts and sandals sacrificing chickens on the jobsite.

That took the afternoon. I told them that Lieutenant Smith and crew would be with them tomorrow morning, and I would stay away until lunchtime getting a place to stay and a long term rent truck, and then we would talk one on one in the afternoon. Everyone seemed more comfortable to have a plan. I went back to the trendy hotel and had a hamburger and TV night in the room.

## **Chapter 14**

The next morning I called up all of the extended stay hotels in the neighborhood, went to see some, and got a good place to stay for several weeks. This sort of thing used to be hard, and I'd spent some months in a grandmother's back room when I started out, but now it seemed like all the chains had an extended stay place, and each wanted to add to my one million points. I drove around, and picked one.

The same was true of renting a truck for several months. I wound up with a nice one, for not much money, paid by Jones. It all wasn't Los Gatos, but I sure couldn't complain.

Back to the office. The cops had been there, interviewed everyone, and left. The prevailing opinion was the same as Lloyd's – they would be lucky to find their ass with both hands.

I started with Lisa. “They don't have an autopsy, they don't have any physical evidence from the truck, they don't know anything about the business, and they don't seem to really care! We miss Dan badly, his

family has been here for two days, and absolutely nothing is happening!”

“Well, Lisa, maybe it’s not as easy as TV. What would you be doing?”

“I don’t know how, but I know who. That spic lawyer thought Dan was going to take Maria away from him, and screamed he was going to kill him. He ought to be in jail already!”

That got me the whole story of Dan and the reluctant princess. Even discounting for Lisa’s theatrics, it was a fascinating story. It gave a sort of motive, in a fairy tale way, but it didn’t say how it might have been done, and there didn’t seem to be any evidence. Still.....

One of the superintendents, Ted from Sunny Isle, was in the office, and I took him next just to get an emotion break.

“He was a good boss...I was sick the other day, and he took me home to make sure I could get there. We will all miss him.”

“How’s your job going?”

“Pretty slow. Dan was down on the quality the guys are doing, but most of them just came in on a banana boat, so it’s a sort of learning thing. They feel good when they only have to do something twice to get it right....which drives their bosses crazy. My candidate for this is one of the Haitian contractors.”

We talked a little about the firms involved. Most were not Haitian, and some had come from pretty far away. I never had done a job with these insulated concrete forms. It seemed simple, but everything in construction had a need for experience with what could go wrong, and how to avoid it. It looked like Dan had started to hire people from Middle Atlantic states to do the jobs, and that and the losses from inspection rejections probably did make some locals mad.

“Well, OK Ted. Thanks for coming in. I guess we can all get back to work, and hope the cops figure it out.”

“It don’t look like it, but I hope they do.”

Next in line was Billy Ferrell, the estimator and buyer. He had been an old friend of Dan’s in North Carolina, and he was sort of poleaxed by the whole thing. “I just

can't believe that someone could just kill him, and not get caught....I guess I don't believe it yet, that's all."

Billy was a little more comfortable talking about the buying decisions made on the job, and their results of good costs but doubtful quality. "I guess we assume that people who have done this before know what they are doing, but it turns out that most of the insulated concrete forms work is done on beach houses where builders just cover up their mistakes. The school inspectors are all over us on this one, so we can't do that, even if we wanted. Which we don't....."

I wanted to talk to someone about the design delays, since those were as big an issue in the project as poor quality or personal vendettas, but no one felt comfortable talking about all of the things that had slowed things down. There wasn't someone called a Design Manager, and it looked like Dan had sort of hired architects and aimed them at each school. Then the architects had asked their clients for decisions, and hadn't gotten them, and stopped. Well, duh.

Lisa gave me the name of one of the architects, John Willoughby, and I arranged to go see him the next day.

I wanted to go see the Homestead site and talk to the superintendent, Jim Edwards, but the cops still had the site shut off, so I asked Jim to come into the office.

Jim had been with Dan for some time, and Dan's father was his carpenter foreman in Raleigh for years. Jim had watched Dan grow up, and go to school, and become what he thought of as one of the best project managers in the country. He talked for a while about the good old days, when architects and engineers knew what they were doing, and people were interested in craftsmanship. Some of it was true, but whining didn't change anything, so I tried to bring it down to earth.

“Jimmy, who would know that those walls would fall that easy? That's the only thing about all this that points me to a construction person.”

“Well, it's pretty common knowledge around here, because we've had to knock several down when they didn't pass inspection, and people are amazed at how easy it is before they are tied in to the perpendicular walls. The joke is that you can't even let people lean on them. The people on many of the jobs, and the inspectors, and probably the school district people who come around to see how we are doing, all know.”

The only people that let out were occasional muggers who might have got carried away in a random robbery on a Sunday in Homestead. Apparently almost everyone else connected with the project might have known.

We talked for awhile about restarting the job next week if the cops would let him. He was afraid that his InsulCube guys were long gone, and that we would need to get someone else to finish the job. That looked like the standard jobsite argument, so we planned on who we would get to finish, and what it would do to costs. He wanted one of the firms from North Carolina that Dan had started to use lately, if he could get them.

And at that, I called it a day. It was a sparkling day outside, and I drove around for awhile to see the city before I went to my new place. I had expected Miami to look pretty rundown, but the general impression was of a well run, sort of exotic, place, with a lot of happy people. Los Gatos is near the ocean too, but that ocean was a lot deeper and wilder, and this one looked more like Latin beauties in bikinis. Not a bad job, if no one bumped me off.

## **Chapter 15**

The next day was Friday, and the office was beginning to return to the usual Friday problem solving routine, so I took off to pay my call on John Willoughby and to visit the jobsites.

Willoughby's office was in far north Dade county. He had a middle sized office with about 15 people in a nice little building. The girl at the desk showed me into his office, gave me some coffee, and let me wait for him to come in. I was used to that – the architectural profession has a different body clock than the rest of us, and in fact I sometimes think people become architects based more on circadian rhythms than anything else.

“Willie, I was real sorry to hear about Dan, but I've got to tell you that I regret the day I signed up on the Jones project. Dan thought about architecture in about the same way he thought about sheet metal work, and the result is some pretty plain design.”

And with that I got a lecture on the horrors of design build projects, and the bastardization of architecture, and the breakup of the architects duty to his clients

welfare, and so on. By this time in my life I have done a number of these projects, and I know to keep my mouth shut.

“Well, OK, John, but what should Jones have done when the client just can’t make a decision, and they have a schedule and a lump sum price!”

“How about, not take these contracts? Not get between architects and their clients? Let us be the ones to coax a decision?”

We talked for awhile longer, with me trying to explain the attraction to owners, and him not wanting to listen. Finally we got down to the details of the latest unilateral decisions he had made on his design work. All if them seemed to conform to compliance with the educational specifications and the building code, even if they were going to be unpopular with half of the stakeholders. With constant written support from Dan, they were hurrying along and picking up some of the lost time.

I thanked him for the briefing, and his help, and got back on the road. It is amazing how many different kinds of people there are in the world.

Since I was in the north, I stopped by Ted's job at Sunny Isle. The insulated concrete walls were up, and the whole thing looked like a giant beverage cooler. The steel erectors were putting in support angles and joists, and Ted was there doing his job. So far so good.

From there I went to most of the jobs that were under construction – one at North Beach, one at Biscayne Elementary near our office, one at South Point, one out on Biscayne Key that I was pretty sure would really get submerged in a storm, no matter what they said. Then down to Coconut Grove, and on to Homestead. Jim was sitting there on the jobsite, talking to some of the guys who were kept off the job by crime scene tape.

“They say they will be through today, and we will be able to get going Monday. If any of these superstitious Haitians actually shows up.”

“Anybody confess yet?”

“No. They don't actually look at me. They think I'll kill them on the off chance they did it. But some of them think it's the spirits punishment for the way they were treated. All in all it ain't a happy ship.”

Well, I'll come by Monday and make some sort of speech that may make them feel better. If they don't get started then we'll have to cancel the subcontract and find someone else, and that's a pain in the ass."

And with that I went back to the office, answered all the mail I could, and shut it down for the weekend.

## ***Chapter 16***

So what do you do if you're in Miami on a weekend, and don't know anyone? Go fishing!

Surf fishing had never been interesting to me – I was sort of raised to think that real fishing was for trout in a mountain stream. California is a paradise for that sort of thing. But this was another country, one I hadn't worked in before.

So I went and bought an inexpensive surf rig, and took off down Highway 1 to the Keys. All of us have read about the 90 mile drive to Key West, but I'd never been on it and it turned out to be a remarkable experience. The causeway stretches from island to island, two lanes mostly, with only a few businesses to line the road on the land. I stopped off on Key Largo and bought some bait, feeling sort of like I was cheating not to use some sort of fly. Then I found a beach with no one on it, waded out, and cast, not expecting much.

I got way more than I expected. It seemed that the redfish were clustered here, and in an hour I had more weight in fish than I had ever caught before. I had to give it up and go find a giant cooler to put them in. Then I drove on down to Islamorada to see how it was different.

I stopped off in a roadside bar to have a beer and ask about fly fishing for tarpon. I got a bunch of “Why do you want to do that!” looks, but it turned out that it was possible – even if the locals thought it strange – and there was a good guide that I might talk to in the future. The week with the boys was looking up.

I left there, and drove on down to Marathon to see how that was different. The drive was along a series of skinny low bridges that didn’t look like they would stand a good hurricane, but I guess they had.

Marathon turned out to be a little sandier, with some back country beaches on the Bay side that had nice cypress trees in them, and looked like they might allow for wading and fly fishing. I kept up with the surf gear, and caught a few more fish. By that time it was getting to be mid afternoon, and I decided to go on down to Key West and see if there really was a Margaritaville.

And damned if there wasn't. It was crowded, but I managed to get a drink, and go out to watch the sun go down on Duval Street. Everyone was friendly and talkative, so I got a good dose of Key West culture. It seemed to be very non aggressive in a different way than California. In Los Gatos everyone is reluctant to criticize, but you have an idea that they are evaluating whatever you are doing. Here it wasn't clear that they even knew you were there. I filed that away for a good long thought.

After a good dinner, and an even better sample of Margaritas, I found a place to stay for the night and crashed. There were some ladies who might have liked to go home with me, but I guess I'm getting to be an old man. And I wished I had Elizabeth with me.



## ***Chapter 17***

I wondered into the office on Monday morning with a headache and good memories. The job was back up and running, getting ready for the weekly routine. Lisa and Billy came into my office with the drafts of the owners meeting reports, and started in on the pressing issues of the day. I know they were just being businesslike, but it seemed like Dan had turned into last week's news.

This week's news was pretty good. We had finally gotten our permit on Coral Gables, and the expected revolt from Jones making design decisions had not happened – yet – so the various master schedules and forecasts looked a little more possible.

There wasn't however, a letup in the continuing construction quality problems. We debated cancelling some subcontracts and getting help from other states, but some phone calls made me think that insulated concrete forms were mostly installed by low skilled people, and that we might as well train them as import them from somewhere else. We started work on a

training and quality control program for all of the subs, as a condition of staying on the job. I debated on how that would go over, but we didn't have a lot of choices. We did an outline of the program, and I picked one of our young project engineers to be the program leader. He spoke Spanish, and presented an admirable figure for the participants. Willie the great educator....

After that I left early, went back to the room, had four aspirin, and went to bed.

The next day was the weekly owner's meeting. The school district people began coming in early to chat, and see how things were going to be. We all tried to be somber but business like, and to keep the talk on the job. It wouldn't do anyone any good to speculate right now.

At about the official start time I saw a young woman walking in from the parking lot. I had heard that the District had a young woman in charge, but no one had mentioned how attractive she was. I was busy making some attitude adjustments when another person stopped her in the lot to talk, and the words drifted in my window. It was in Spanish, and my Spanish isn't good, but it wasn't hard to see that he didn't want her to come into the office, and she wanted him to shut up

and go away. The difference was made greater by her beautiful Castilian accent, and his rough Cuban accent. It always seems to me that the class differences in Hispanic countries are even greater than in English speaking countries.

Finally he gave up, walked back to his car, and drove away. She came into the office, said hello formally to Lisa, and knocked on my door.

“Mr. Sage, my name is Maria Riojas. I’m the District’s project manager, and before the meeting started I wanted to express our sadness, and horror – at Mr Brownell’s death. We didn’t always agree, but he conducted himself well, and seemed to be making progress. I hope we can go on as we were.”

I mumbled what I thought I ought to say, and we went on into the meeting. We stayed on work subjects for two hours of going over estimates, schedules, and quality reports. The atmosphere seemed to be good – no one wanted to fight, and it was clear that we had all told our people not to talk about Dan’s death and to refer everyone to the cops. It wouldn’t stay that way long, but it was the right place to start.

I spent some time thinking about how much of our discussion was changed by talking to a beautiful woman. Part of it is sort of a subconscious desire to attract and be thought interesting – a kind of low grade mating urge, I guess. Where I – and every other man in the room – might have said “Oh bullshit! “ a few times in any normal jobsite conversation, here we were elevated to “...on the other hand, Ms. Riojas”. It probably did the conclusions a lot of good.

On the other hand, we didn't naturally accord her assertions with the weight of hard won experience, because she probably hadn't had any hard experiences at all. We surely wanted to shelter her from them.

It must be hard to be a very intelligent and ambitious beautiful woman.

## **Chapter 18**

The next morning we all gathered to hear Danny Gaitan's plan to train all the InsulCube subs to stop screwing up. He had talked to the manufacturer in Albuquerque, and arranged to have an instructor come for three training sessions next week, one in each area of the city. The subs working on jobs in that area would all gather on that jobsite, watch the InsulCube people, Danny, and Jim go through some of the ways to put things together that applied to our projects, and go over some of the things that had gone wrong. We would do all of it in both Spanish and English.

My job was selling it to the subs. No one likes to be told that he needs to be trained to do a job he contracted for, particularly by some guy from California. But I was damned if I was going to pay their people to be trained in something they should already know. So we had full and candid discussions with three firms during the day, and got agreement. Until we got to the Haitians.

The sub's company name was Magesco, and their general manager was Marc Gauthier. I asked to come see him, thinking this was going to be hard, and we set

a meeting for the morning. I spent some time understanding – or trying to – what things might look like to someone from Haiti. I had never paid any attention to the country, other than as the source of voodoo jokes. I wound up with only the view of a poor struggling country often taken advantage of by others, and not really capable of progress on their own.

Which got me in the right mood for the meeting. Their office was in Overtown – bad hood – and other than a palm tree in the parking lot it looked like a rundown warehouse. I walked into a bare room with some portable tables in the corner. Some workers were tying up pier column steel in one half, and others were sitting around a large table drinking coffee. There was a long rifle rack in the corner, and it looked like they were involved in target shooting in their free time. Mr. Gauthier offered me coffee, and we went to sit at his desk in another corner.

We talked about nothing much for a few minutes. He spoke an accented English, but clear enough, and he seemed to understand me pretty well.

“Marc, we are going to conduct some training classes next week to overcome some quality problems, and we

are asking you to have your men attend the one on Wednesday at Homestead”

Silence for a minute. “Mester Sage, your project is one of the worst things that have happened to us. You and the stupid Inspectors tear down perfectly good work, to torment us. We are losing a fortune! Then you kill one of your people – no loss – and some blame it on us! My men think the job is cursed, and only a few will go there. The police have been here three times, and wanted to carry away all my papers! I don’t want training – I want to quit!”

That wasn’t hard to predict. “Well, Marc, we can terminate the subcontract, according to its terms, and find someone to finish the work. You won’t get paid any more until it is finished, and we see if there is anything left of the contract sum.”

“You have hardly paid at all, and we are half through. I will sue you!” There followed a string of sounds that might have been Creole, since it sounded a little like French.

“Marc, you’ve been here long enough to know that our civil legal system is just a punishment for people who can’t agree on things. The winners are punished less

than the losers, but the only real winners are attorneys. Sue if you like, but it will just make things worse.”

All eyes in the warehouse were on this conversation in the corner. I could see some of the men thinking that killing this guy too might be a good idea.....but it would be a little obvious.

One more try. “Marc, I hadn’t thought of it, but the training will have to be in Creole, right?”

He gathered what dignity he had. “Yes, that is our language.”

“If you will bring your men to Homestead on Wednesday, I will find an interpreter and we will practice a little before you get there. We will give everyone who goes through the training a brass tag, and only those people can work on the project after that. Do you agree?”

Silence again. It was a bad set of choices, but not really hard to decide.

“Ok, we will be there. We can pray that things go smoothly from here.”

I thanked him, no hand shaking, and walked slowly out. There haven't been many times in my life that I was literally glad to be out of a place alive, but this was one of them.

I sat thinking in the truck for a minute. I had forgotten the cops in the last few days. They were on the way back to the office, so I stopped by.

Lieutenant Smith was in, but wasn't any help. “The autopsy showed he died of a crushing of his skull, but it could easily have been a blow on the head before the wall fell on him. “ We've interviewed everyone, and done all the forensic stuff we can, but there isn't any real way to hang someone with it. I kind of like the Haitians for it, but it just comes down to them being weird....”

“So, do you have anything else going on in the investigation? Say, the movements and witnesses to the lawyer who threatened him, or old enemies, or community grievances?”

“We’ve interviewed Mr Guerra, but he’s a lawyer, so he got another lawyer and shut up. He did say he was home all Sunday, but there isn’t any backup. Mr. Brownell’s phone records show a call from a throw away phone, but we can’t trace it. No one knows of any enemies other than your damn subcontractors. So....we are stuck. I’m about to put it in the cold case file!”

The few times I have any contact with the police, I’m amazed at how few crimes get solved. They catch the dumbest 20% of the burglars, and the dumbest 40% of the murderers, and that’s it. What it amounts to is that any planned crime has a real good chance of succeeding. TV drama is just make believe.

## ***Chapter 19***

Thursday was RFI and change order day. Construction subcontracts are based on plans and specifications that are officially thought to completely describe what is to be provided. But firms compete, largely on price, to provide it, and then must ask for relief from any condition that isn't perfect. If there is some justice to it the general contractor, Jones in this case, either eats the cost, or tries to pass it on to the owner. One big advantage of a design build project is that the owner doesn't have to defend most questions of incomplete design, but there are still some he has to accept.

So we entertained all of the week's requests, and reviewed the evidence, and listened to all the whining. Most we turned down, with what I hoped was sympathy, but a few got approved to pass on, and one we decided to eat. Normal day in the building factory.

Then we got to review the costs for the previous week. It used to be a several day task for a bunch of guys in the main office with adding machines, but now it is input in the field on Wednesday evening when weekly

payroll is done, and we see the reports the next day. I often wonder why it is that we don't seem to build any better, with information that is so much better.

It took a while to learn how to read the report. But then one thing looked funny. The weekly cost for jobsite expenses had a high number for the portable toilets at Homestead. That could be caused by all number of things, but it looked like it had been going on for a time. It's the sort of thing that gets overlooked because it's usually explainable, but it seemed odd to me. Lisa and Billy didn't have any idea why, and sort of looked at me like I was focusing on the wrong thing. Overall the predicted cost on completion still looked fine.

The training sessions continued to be organized that afternoon and the next day. A lot of the InsulCube suppliers didn't seem to believe they needed training, but we were clear that if their people didn't have their brass tag, they wouldn't be allowed onsite. Gradually I could see that Lisa and Billy and the others thought they should have started this earlier, and maybe Dan would still be alive.

The weekend went quickly for me. Reuben had invited me to play golf at Del Mar. I hadn't brought

my clubs, but I had wanted to play there for awhile, so I accepted and rented some. I didn't play badly, and I got a little more of character of the upper class in Miami, a little north of my usual social experiences, and a long way from the Haitians. I guess there is a wide range everywhere in America, but it's always a surprise.



## ***Chapter 20***

The next week Monday and Tuesday were normal, with preparation for the owner meeting and having it done in a calm way. We all kept waiting for the inevitable reaction to our making design decisions, but it hadn't happened yet.

We told everyone about the training sessions in a quiet way, as a sort of InsulCube refresher from the manufacturer. Maria Riojas showed an intelligent interest, and I invited her to the Friday session at Homestead, in part because it would give the Haitians something else to think about.

The training sessions started in the north on Wednesday. The InsulCube trainers came in Tuesday night, set up onsite at Sunny Isle on Wednesday morning. Ted Banda was there, looking a little under the weather. All of the subs in this area were English speakers, so we didn't need a translator for the first day. The trainers went through a series of framing checks and ways to brace and assure alignment that most of the viewers had obviously never seen. They talked about the ACI rules and code compliance standards, and gave all of us some tips on when to do a

set of inspections that we hadn't thought to do to catch problems early. From my point of view it was an excellent day.

I saw Ted on the way out, and asked what he thought. He wanted to say that anyone would have known that, but it had been clear a few times that he didn't. So he said, "Well, I think it does them some good, at least to be reminded that someone is watching."

"Yeah, I think so. You don't look so good – do you need a ride home?"

"No, I'm OK – I just have a bug I can't seem to get rid of. "

"Well, stay home tomorrow if you need to. These porta-cans are an awful place to be sick in.....you haven't had any trouble with the company, have you?"

"No, they've been right on time, and in good shape – why?"

"Just some billing problem out at Homestead that I can't figure out. Hope you feel better."

And I went home, thinking about the smell I got from Ted.

The second session was at Pinecrest Elementary. Coconut grove would have been more central, but we still hadn't solved the permit problems there. The subs on this and the nearby jobs were some English speaking, and some Spanish speaking, so we held two separate sessions. Some of the InsulCube reps spoke Spanish – Colombian Castilian Spanish – so the communication was fine. I got to thinking about all the places in the country where the bulk of the construction workforce spoke Spanish at home, and whether we shouldn't be requiring all us supervisors to learn Spanish to keep our jobs. I wonder if I could pass the test.

Friday arrived, and we got the Creole interpreter lined out at Homestead. The superintendent, Jimmy Edwards, was having some trouble getting over our giving classes in what he thought of as a doggerel language, but he was doing his best to be welcoming. The Haitians that showed up were mostly mad at having to do it, Marc Gautier included.

At the scheduled hour Maria Riojas arrived, properly dressed for field work as usual. She was really a

deeply beautiful woman in many ways, and I wondered at her choice of career and demeanor, but it was a passing thought. You could see it stuck with the Haitians for longer, though.

The discussion went smoothly, allowing for a language that sounded sort of familiar, but which we couldn't really understand. The things they were saying, and translating, were the same things we had been hearing for the two previous days, though, so it seemed OK.

About halfway, we were all standing in front of the building, looking at a wall that had been cast in the styrofoam blocks, and talking about the proper bracing. Maria and I were standing together, listening to see if we could pick up the language, when she dropped a pen. I bent down to pick it up, and saw a splash of red on the wall, followed by a loud bang from a long way away.

She fell on top of me, and everyone around hit the dirt. When I looked up, it seemed like everyone thought we had been shot at. There was a period of quiet. I murmured "You OK?". She whispered back, "I think so. It feels like I got shot!"

## ***Chapter 21***

I managed to get up, check that there didn't seem to be more gunfire, and get Maria moved to the side of the building. She had been hit in the shoulder by what looked like a very high speed bullet, which left a gaping exit wound. We bound it up as well as we could, got her down and covered, and tried to keep her from going into shock until the paramedics got there.

Everyone else had crawled around to the other side of the building, and tried to figure out what was going on. The cops arrived with sirens blaring, secured the scene in front, and herded people into the main elementary school building. Maria was taken off in the ambulance to emergency.

I never felt more clueless in my life. I had no idea of what might motivate someone to shoot at her. Or me, maybe.

Lieutenant Smith finally arrived, and took us through it all again. “Willie, do you have any idea why someone would want to kill you or Ms Riojas?”

“No. I can imagine that someone might think we were getting close to knowing who killed Dan, but that’s far from right.”

“Well, the bullet damn near went through the concrete wall, so it’s probably a long range target rifle. Got any enemies like that?”

I decided not to tell him about the rifles I saw out at Magesco the other day. They may not be the same kind, and he could do his own detecting for awhile.

The questions went on for an hour, but turned up nothing helpful. The shooter could have been half a mile away, nobody seemed to leave a nice shell casing, no one saw the shooter. So much for *CSI Miami*.

I followed him over to Miami General Hospital, where Maria had been taken. She had been examined, no surgery was necessary, and put into a non-critical room. When we got up there there was a cop on the door, but the District lawyer, Jose Guerra, was in the room. When I walked in he was furious.

*“Hay que ir al Infirmo.. Desde Jones, todo el mundo esta in peligro.”*

Well, I could understand that. “I’m sorry, but we didn’t kill or shoot at anyone. *Tal vez, la problema esta aqui!*”

That was about as much Spanish as I had, and we glared at each other while Smith began talking to Maria. “Ms Riojas, do you have any idea who might want to shoot at you? It’s almost always someone you know.”

She was pretty drugged. “I don’t know anyone like that, and I’ve never even seen a gun like you describe. I think they were shooting at Mr. Sage.”

Smith got us to describe our last few days, looking for something that might tie to Dan Brownell’s death. It all sounded as routine and quiet as most of our days. There wasn’t any issue more pressing than usual about the job, and it had seemed that most of the big issues were being worked out. After a lot more of that he gave up, and we got ready to go. Maria asked Jose to leave also, since she needed to try to sleep. He didn’t look any happier than he had been, and I tried out the idea that he had been the shooter and was shocked that

he missed. It was hard to imagine that he was that good an actor, or that good a shooter, but Smith went off to check it out.

I went back to the office, sat around with people to let them know what had happened, and went back to the room to think.

I needed to get a plan. There hadn't seemed a great urgency before, and I hadn't known enough about it to dream up an approach, but now someone was shooting at me, and I needed to do something.

At times in the past I had gotten an answer by putting myself out as bait, telling everyone I really knew the answer. With someone shooting at me already I didn't really want to look any more like bait in a trap.

I could sort of set all of the possibles I knew against each other, and see what happened. Trouble was, that might get an innocent person killed by accident. I dreamed up all sorts of surveillance schemes with high tech gadgets, but all of them sounded goofy. Finally I got out a nice bottle of wine, drank it, and went to bed.

## **Chapter 22**

The next day was Saturday. I went into the office to see how everyone was taking all of this. There weren't many people there. I spent a little time checking the cost reports, trying to see if the sort of questions I had about the portable toilets occurred on any other item. I couldn't find any – the cost results looked fine so far otherwise.

Finally I gave up and decided to go fishing again, down the Keys. Homestead was on the way, and I drove around the site trying to see where the shooter had been. It was mostly a built up area, but the beach was only 200 yards away and there were some reed patches, so that was the most likely spot. There was what looked like a security camera on a pole that monitored the parking lot. Surely the cops had checked it. I called Smith – he was off duty, but I left a message.

I stopped at Key Largo and found a nice beach to cast on. I had gotten a little better surf rod, and some bait hooks. I had always been a fly fisher for trout, and using live bait seemed to me to be cheating, but I tried it anyway, and got dinner in an hour or so.

It was a good place to think.

All of us were thinking that this had to be the Haitians. It happened at the place they were working, they were mad at Dan for criticizing them, they had the rifles, they were probably mad at me for making them go through the training. Most of us were probably thinking, but not saying, that Haiti was a fourth world country with savage people who still practiced Voodoo. All this fit them for the role. It was so good that it might also be a setup.

Trouble was, there wasn't any other option even close. I didn't think much of Jose Guerra, but why would he shoot at Maria, or me for that matter. Maybe Maria had some long ago lover from South America who was stalking her – there must be some reason she was so formal and perhaps worried. Or maybe Dan had some old enemy from North Carolina who thought a crime in Miami wouldn't get back to him. All these were sort of chances, but not good ones.

With those things on my mind I headed back to town, with scenarios and grilling my fish on my mind. On a chance I stopped off at the hospital to see how Maria was doing, and at least ask a question.

She was in a private room, and it was visiting hours, so I went straight up. The shoulder was in a sort of mechanical thing, but she looked alert and healthy otherwise.

“Mr. Sage, thanks for coming. Have they found out anything about the accident?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ll go see the cops tomorrow, but I’m not very hopeful. It looks like you are doing OK, though.”

“Well, it hurts, but they tell me it didn’t damage anything much and that I’ll be out of here tomorrow, and back at work in a week, so I have a lot to be thankful for. I just can’t imagine who did this or why.”

“Maria, I can’t either. Is there a chance that it is someone who knew you from Bolivia and is somehow stalking you.....? Pardon me, but you are a breathtaking woman who looks like you have run away from home.”

She was silent for so long that I thought I wasn’t going to get any answer. Finally, she said “I was raised in a certain way, to be attractive and entrancing. When I

got to be full grown some of my family took advantage of me.....I didn't know what to do, but I was sure I didn't want to live that way. I was lucky to have an American uncle who taught at Purdue, who got me in there and out of the country. I don't ever want to go back, or to be that way.....I don't think they would do this, but I'm not sure."

Now I was the silent one. "Can you give me their names, and we can check that they didn't come into the country?"

She took out a piece of notepaper, and wrote down two names. Her face was blank, and I got the feeling that she was turning off her mind to do what she thought she had to do. I took the note, kissed her cheek, and left.

## ***Chapter 23***

The next day was Monday, and back to the office. Shooting, murder, or not, the routine kept up. It was time to do all the monthly reports on cost, time, and quality, and turn them into the District, who hoped for good results that they could send to the papers and TV stations.

Project management information systems have come a long way, so that if we kept up with our daily cost and schedule and inspection inputting the monthly reports were nominally a matter of punching a button. The Jones team had been doing a good job of keeping up to date, but there was still a process of projecting the future at the end of each month, and everyone came into the office for a long look at the projections they had made.

The overall news was that although the construction cost numbers were still good, the remaining design work was slowing, and that put some of the opening dates at risk. The reason for the design work pessimism was that the idea of the design-builder making any decision that was within the educational

and facilities specifications – the idea that Dan had moved to to keep going – was finally hitting some problems. Some of the school committees were pushing back, and the local architects were hiding so they didn't get caught in the middle.

We explored all that case by case. Lisa and Billy and others went through how they had come to this spot. We could force the issue and compel the design to proceed, or wait it out and build our legal case, or try to give the jobs back to the District. I thanked everyone for the input, but said I needed some advice before we picked an approach. We would issue the monthly report, get some local input, and spend a week or so to make a decision.

I went back to my office and thought how little running these projects had to do with being a builder or a designer, and how much it had to do with organizational behavior and politics. It seems more and more that all you need people for is dealing with other people.

On that cheery note who should show up but my favorite local cop, Lieutenant Smith.

“OK, Willie, any idea who shot at you?”

“Nah, I’m counting on the local cops. I hear they are terrific.”

“Must be our off day.... I don’t have a clue. No witnesses in the neighborhood, no shell casings, the slug in the wall is a mess. But usually people know who is trying to kill them, at least trying this hard. No idea, huh?”

I told him about my idea about the beach park, and the camera that recorded cars coming in. I asked him if he could track Jose Guerra’s cell phone location for the times we were shot at. I told him about Maria’s fears about her family. I asked what other things they were doing.

“Well, I went back out to talk to Magesco, and got a stone wall. If we had some physical evidence I think we could get one of them in and crack it, but without it I can’t move. Same for tracking cell phone locations – you have to get a warrant with probable cause, and no judge here wants to proceed on “Gosh, could have been!” I can get immigration to check on the Columbians coming in on their passports, but I think everyone in South America has a fake one.”

“Law enforcement must be a lot of fun, ‘splaining what you can’t do.”

“Yeah, I’m looking for an upgrade to bricklayer, but there aren’t any open jobs.” And with that he left.

Well, that was my crime solving for the day. I called the Jones office manager, Reuben Quiveda, to talk over the right response on the design delays. We wound up meeting for a drink after work to try to get a better idea.

“Well, Willie, I’ve been holding my breath since Dan picked this direction. There really isn’t a good answer to an undecided owner other than a good legal case and strong social pressure. So, I think we should call Lloyd, get Stan down here to write a plea to the District, and start having hand holding meetings with the Board. That won’t make you popular with the staff, but it’s a part of work these days.”

“OK, both of us should give Lloyd our point of view. I’ll hold off telling the staff what we are doing until Stan is through.”

I went home thinking about the role of a builder in project creation. Many of us old schoolers had grown

up with the idea that we were the practical, productive, uncomplaining part of our industry, and that we didn't have much need of self protection. After all, we were just doing what the contract said, and depending on our clients to do what it said they would do.

But the life of a builder was increasingly full of grief. The public seemed willing to believe that every delay was the fault of a lazy guy who just wouldn't do what he had said, and we spent more and more time making sure we had the documents to prove the reverse. Bummer. It was still a good job... there was a nice building when we were through.....but not a good as it was.

Monday night was my night for talking to the boys. Elizabeth and I had two- Joe and John. They had been in college and high school when she died, and mostly through her raising them had turned out fine. Joe was an attorney for a venture capital group in Menlo Park, and seemed to be making a lot of money. John was a computer scientist type and worked for Google in Mountain View. I tried to check in with them every Monday night.

The call with Joe was short – he was at dinner, talking about buying some other start up for someone, with a

goofy sounding name and a purpose I hardly understood. The family was fine, and the kids were back in school OK. He would like to hear more about a fishing trip.

John was more productive, from my point of view. I told him about the restrictions on following a cell phone without a warrant, and asked what options we had. “Well, Dad, it’s not hard to get that information. All I need is the number, and the times you need to follow it.”

“Isn’t it illegal?”

“So far as we know, it’s not illegal for a private citizen to have. Getting into the firms data probably is, but they don’t want anyone to know how easy it is, so there probably wouldn’t be any problem. People around here sometimes snoop on their girlfriends, so I’m guessing I won’t go to jail. You can pay me back in airfare on the fishing trip.”

“OK, I’ll text you tomorrow. “

Then to get all this off my mind I called Lloyd Silberstein, even though it was late. He hadn’t even heard about Friday’s shooting incident.

“Holy shit, Willie, I didn’t think I’d be getting you shot at! Are you going to stay there?”

“Yeah, for some reason it doesn’t feel dangerous, so I guess I will. I’ll be a little more careful about pressing people who might be the shooter though, and sort of stay out of rifle range. What I really want to talk about is the chance that all this is some old enemy of Dan’s who saw a chance to put him away a long way from North Carolina. Any chance of that?”

They had debated that when it happened, but not come up with anything. Dan had been well liked in town, and besides, who would know about the flimsiness of the InsulCube walls before they were tied in. It was hard to see someone from Raleigh flying to Miami, getting Dan to Homestead, clubbing him, and knocking the wall over. I told him about Maria’s revelation, and we decided not to work on North Carolina options.

Then we moved to the continuing design delays, and Reuben’s idea of how to play it. After some debate we agreed with him, and Lloyd said he would get Stan on the plane as soon as he could. We cursed the need for lawyers, but it was just for show.

And with that I decided that the evil was sufficient to the day, and went to bed.

## **Chapter 24**

The rest of the week went off as usual. We had our owner meeting on Tuesday with the school district staff, who were very quiet about the shooting and everything else. No high ranking officials showed up to give us any trouble.

I had another final permit meeting on the last job to get a permit, and invited James Murchison along. We finally convinced the people handling the Key Biscayne Elementary School that it didn't need to stand a 160 mph wind, since that wasn't part of any code, even in the most negative views.

Murchison had been helpful all the way through, so I asked him how he would suggest we handle the remaining design delays. He sort of admitted that it was a District problem, but was clear that no one would admit that out loud. We might, however, transfer the blame to the code authorities for some of the permit delays, and get a change order of about the same size from the District on that basis. We agreed that that was weasel-ish, but might be necessary.

Stan came down on Thursday, interviewed all of us, and holed up in an office preparing his own record of the facts. It looked like a two week exercise. We all remembered when any public works contractor came with a superintendent and two lawyers, and we told ourselves we were lucky.

When all that settled down I finally got back to my job cost reviews. I still couldn't see why Homestead had so much extra portable toilet costs, and I was tired of the office, so I went out to Homestead to talk to Jimmy Edwards. I asked him to stick around for awhile after work – I didn't want to admit it, but I was afraid there was someone there in working hours that might just pull a gun and finish off what they had started. Lord knows why.

Things were quiet when I got there. Jimmy came out of his little office and walked me around. The walls were all up, the roof was going on, and the product looked like it would pass inspection. I asked "How are your Haitian friends behaving?"

"Well, much better. They are about finished, and we've gotten sign off on most of their work. The training helped, and I think they are trying to get out of here while people have only suspicions. "

I showed him the cost reports I was puzzled by. He got out his work tickets for the last two months. None of the questionable things was among them. But the billing copies we got in the office had his signature on them. We sat and looked at each other for a minute.

“Willie, I didn’t sign those tickets! We call them whenever we need to, and all the real tickets are here in my desk. Someone is doing a little scam!”

“OK, Jimmy, I believe you. I’ll just need to go see the company.” It was a small amount in question, but I was getting the feeling that there might be a lot of things going on that we weren’t catching in the office.

That night Joe called back with the results of our cell phone tracking on Jose Guerra. It seems that he, or at least his phone, had gone to Orlando the weekend that Dan died. When the shots were fired at Maria or me in Homestead, his phone had been in Orlando. So.. cross him off, at least for now. I debated telling Smith about it, but decided that confessing to a crime, even an IT crime, wasn’t a good idea. He wasn’t spending time on Guerra anyway.



## **Chapter 25**

The legal jostling heated up the next week. Stan had gotten enough background to want to talk to the District about a potential request for a change order because of some of what he thought of as neglect of their duties. That meant a conference with my friend, now innocent, Mr Guerra.

Stan started, “Mr. Guerra, the project seems to be doing fine on costs, but it has been falling behind our original schedule, and that of course raises our costs. I would like to explore your ideas of the reasons, and share with you our research on the causes, so we can find ways to resolve any problems.”

“All that sounds perfectly reasonable, but the facts are a lot different. Jones has fallen behind through a lack of decision making on design choices that were not ours, and that may damage the District if it can’t be made up.....so I don’t think we have a role in resolving anything. You just need to recover the schedule, and resolve the quality problems, and finish the job!”

That went on for while, with Stan talking about the implied duty to cooperate and Jose listing instances of quality control failures. Finally we agreed to disagree, but to keep each other informed, and we left.

“Boy, that was fun.”

“Willie, it’s just theater. Each of us could have played either side of the conversation, and all we found out was that both of us are informed and prepared. We just have to go to the next step. That’s the Board. Reuben said he would start setting it up this afternoon unless we got a good reception.”

Even after all these years, I’m still surprised at people. All of us get all this education in how to do things – engineers like me, lawyers like Stan and Jose, doctors and all. Then after a few years of doing something productive, we get elevated into conducting political theater for a living. We all ought to major in manipulating others, and minor in some technical field. As usual I gave thanks to be doing something constructive.

Back at the office we were going through the routine of getting ready for the weekly owner meetings, sub

meetings, RFI prep, change orders, issue meetings. It looked better after the morning session.

All that involved more work on cost accounts. When the important stuff was over I went back to thinking about the extra portable toilet charges. If Jimmy hadn't signed the tickets, then someone else had. Then it occurred to me that the procedure on every jobsite for deliveries was that the superintendent signed for them, then at the end of the month he brought the signed tickets in to be matched by whoever processed the billing. Here in Miami that was probably in our jobsite office.

I asked Lisa about it. She gave me that "Did you graduate from the third grade?" look, and said "Sure. Jeannie does that. Her office is the third down the hall." So I went down to Jeannie's and asked about the matchup of jobsite invoices, trying hard not to look like I was criticizing.

Jeannie was a middle aged motherly looking woman I had seen around but never spoken to. "It's nice to meet you, Willie. We don't have perfect performance from the superintendents on turning in their tickets – I've been doing this for a long time, and that's always been the way it is. Jimmy is one of the worst, so if the

vendor copy has his signature, I go ahead and pay it. Hasn't that been your experience?"

I had to confess that I'd never even thought about it. "Is everyone guilty of not having all their tickets?"

"Some are better than others. Ted is the best, and some of the others only miss a few each month. It doesn't seem like a big deal to me."

I had to admit she was right. This wasn't a very large job, but it had \$3 million a month in bills to pay, and we weren't talking about very much in doubt on these tickets. Still, it bothered me.

## **Chapter 26**

The next day was owner meeting day, so we went through the usual routine of overall summaries, project reports, and discussions of critical issues. Maria wasn't back at work yet, and all her associates seemed uncertain about how to act. Neither Jose nor Murchison were there, so it all went off as normal. I busied myself on day to day construction issues, of which there are always several, and let the accounting puzzle settle.

In the evening, though, it was still on my mind, so I called my son Joe. It wasn't Sunday, our usual day to talk, so he knew there was a reason.

“What's up Dad? I know you never get out of your routine, so I assume the world is ending and you just want to say hello.”

“You know, I know I deserve a smart ass kid, but I'm sure your mother did a better job than that.” Once the

words left my mouth I regretted them. We all held her up as a goddess, and it wasn't something to joke about.

“I just have another phone number for you to check out the locations on, for the same time and places I gave you last time. Is that a problem?”

“Nope, it's getting easier and easier. Since the law enforcement people are making regular requests, the phone companies have created a sort of secure pathway, so now we can hack into it and don't even have to think up a stupid reason. I'll have it for you tomorrow.”

We planned a little more about a fishing trip, and rung off.

Next day was the sub and superintendent meeting. Most of it is about short term planning, and moving crews around, and who is screwing who with imperfect work. With the Haitians mostly out of the way, we had some better communications, although it was still a sort of United Nations of construction. Still, among the plain spoken working people of the earth, agreement seems easier to reach.

When it was over, I asked the superintendents, all six of them, to stay behind. “This month we are trying to improve on some of our accounting routines, and I need all of you to make sure you save all your signed delivery tickets, and get your copies to Jeannie at the end of the month. You all need to be as good at it as I understand Ted is.”

Everyone one said “Yeah, sure”, and walked out. Ted looked a little odd, but he didn’t say anything.

The rest of the week was involved with solving little construction problems, and beginning Stan and Reuben’s assault on the Dade County School Board. It turned out that many of them were happy to meet, and talk it over. Most of them were naturally on the side of the administration, but like any public body, some of them weren’t. Stan put the case to them, and asked for their help in granting a change order for delay time if it ever came up. It was a sort of pre-emptive educational tour, and at the end of it I had to admit – to myself – that in today’s world that sort of thing seems to be necessary.

The construction problems were a lot more interesting to me. Florida is largely a sandbar left when the Gulf of Mexico receded. The foundations for most

buildings are large spread footings set on shallow sand that depend on nothing disturbing the sand from below. In one of our little buildings there seemed to be something eating away at the spread footings, so our concrete walls were sort of spanning over holes in the ground.

There are a variety of solutions, and we were willing to do them, if we could figure out and stop the erosion. After a bunch of testing, out of our pocket, it turned out that there was an old storm drainage line running out to the beach, with several ruptures, and the sand was sifting away into them. We fixed the line, then pumped cement slurry below the foundation to raise it back to the proper elevation, then asked for a change order for the hidden unforeseen condition.

The answer was quick and hard to refute. The contract didn't say "unforeseen", it said "unforeseeable". If an ordinarily experienced person could see that that might occur, then it wasn't the owner's cost. The line wasn't on the plans, but Mr Guerra enjoyed pointing out that there were two storm sewer manholes on the site that must have a line between them, and it went right under the footing. So the problem was foreseeable, and Jones' cost. I secretly applauded him for putting it that way.

So the week finally ended. I went in on Saturday, but went on to the Keys, and spent a sort of low pressure fishing weekend on Key Largo. When I got back on Sunday there was a call from Joe.

“Well, Dad, you got it right this time. That phone went out to the Homestead tower the afternoon the fellow was shot, and back the afternoon they shot at you. Looks like you found the guy.”

It was Ted.



## ***Chapter 27***

Next morning I was in Lieutenant Smith's office.

I explained what we knew, and what I assumed the reasons were.

“It looks to me like Dan had been following up on the accounting questions that had begun to bother me, without telling anyone. He probably didn't want anyone to be falsely accused if it turned out to be normal errors. He must have talked to some of the vendors that had been a part of it, and it got back to Ted. I think Ted must have a crack business on the side, and somehow use the money and vendors to fund his supplies. We know he went out there that Sunday to see Dan, and killed him. Then I showed up and started in the same way, and he took a shot at me, thinking how easy it was to frame the Haitians for both of us. So now we've got him.”

Smith gave me a funny look. “Willie, think about what evidence you have! There is no physical connection in any of that, except for an illegal, warrantless phone data search. I can't arrest a guy

based on that evidence. I can't even get a search warrant based on it. The judges around here will throw you in jail, not him!"

I was stunned. I guess I sort of supported a right to privacy – except when you were killing someone, and trying to kill me. Then I was solidly against it.

“Willie, there has to be a way to get some physical evidence to work on, but I don't see what it is right now. Maybe we can catch him dealing, and use that as an excuse to get phone records, and work into it that way.”

“Right. Meantime he gets me, and skips. Maybe I can just tell Dan's family, and buy them a new squirrel gun. Or maybe use mine, dammit.”

“Don't do anything yourself, or goad someone else too. If there is a case in here, that will end it.”

I sat there for a minute, looking for a way to make a move, but it didn't come to me. Finally I got up, looked at Smith, and left. I sat in the truck for awhile being amazed, but it didn't get me anywhere, so I went back to work.

The next few weeks were excruciating. I stopped my little accounting investigation, and stayed away from Ted as much as I could, but he still was in one meeting a week, and I needed to act sort of normal. I called Smith every few days, and he said they were watching Ted, but they didn't have the people to watch all the time. So maybe I ought to stay out of rifle range....

I did one thing in self protection. Radio Shack sold those little bugs that you could put in things to find them with your phone, so I bought one, and put it on Ted's truck when he was off at lunch with some of the other superintendents. So I could tell on my phone where his truck was. Unless he was smart enough to find it, and put it on someone else's truck. I was getting a little tired of technology.

Meanwhile the jobs were going better. We had gotten past the InsulCube issues, and back to regular old steel, roof, and drywall, so the inspectors let up, and the subs knew what they were doing. We speeded up some of the work with some overtime, and it looked like most of the jobs would finish before school started next year. Stan and Reuben went around to the Board members to update them, and politely say we might want a change order for the extra time the District had caused, but it wasn't serious yet.



## **Chapter 28**

Maria had recovered, and was back at work. She hadn't resumed her role on the project, though, so I hadn't seen her in weeks. Finally she called.

“The Homestead job is close to finished, and they would like to have a completion ceremony so the community out there knows they have a new shelter if they need it for a summer storm. For some reason they think that you and I are heroes, and should at least attend. Can you make it?”

“Umm, sure, but we ought to get the Haitians and others to attend, to show we don't hold anything against them.”

“You don't? I thought you were sure they were the shooters!”

“No, Smith had some good evidence that it wasn't.” I hoped she didn't ask the next logical question, but maybe she was too smart to do that.

“OK, well, I’ll tell them. It’s Friday at 2:00 o’clock out there. I’ll be at the owner’s meeting this week, and see you then.”

A few weeks of thinking hadn’t given me a good solution to all this, so maybe we needed to set a trap for Ted. Trouble was, I was the cheese.

Smith didn’t think it was a good idea. I asked him what his solution was. He didn’t have one. “Well, if you don’t think of one by Friday, be ready to go where Ted’s truck is, and watch him setting up to shoot me!”

I invested a bottle of good wine that evening in considering if I was nuts, but the result was that if I didn’t act I wouldn’t respect myself much. Perhaps I should have spent more.

So, I made a big deal about the open air completion ceremony being planned for Homestead on Friday. It was on the agendas, and on the feeds everyone got on their phone, and in the sub meetings. If Ted didn’t know about it, it wasn’t my fault.

I paid special attention to my tracker. It had looked like Ted went from home to work and back home, with

an occasional stop at a bar near his house. Blameless life.

So, the day arrived. I made sure Smith knew that he should be following him, and told him that I would let him know at 2:00 where I thought Ted would be. By this time he knew better than to ask me how I would know.

After lunch I drove out there. The District had set up a nice stage and chairs, with a line of site to the place the previous shot must have come from. It was the logical place for a ceremony, but I was wondering if Ted had a helper, or maybe if I had all this figured wrong. The school staff were setting up, and preparing to listen to the sort of speeches that you get at these affairs. Ted's truck was still at his jobsite.

Maria and I went through the jobsite, sort of making a mental punchlist. There were a lot of things that needed to be completed or fixed before school started again, but everyone there seemed happy to have a safe place to go if there was a big hurricane.

Ted's truck finally moved. He headed south on IH95.

All of the dignitaries from the school district assembled. That included Board members, PTA members, local State and US politicians, and a bunch of their staff members. I guess I have the working guy's idea that all this is silly showing off, but it happens whenever there is something that anyone can take credit for, even if they didn't know it was happening yesterday. They all assembled on the stage, and began a series of recognitions and "brief remarks" that all seemed beside the point to me, but the crowd lapped up.

Ted's truck had pulled into the beach park a few minutes ago. I called Smith, his phone was busy, I left a message. If those guys lost him, and didn't listen, I'd be dead, and really mad at them.

Finally my turn came. I got up, faced the makeshift podium. "I went to thank all you for coming, and for your support in this effort. Jones Construction has been pleased to be a part of....."

My phone text lit up .... "Got him!"

## **Chapter 29**

They had arrested Ted with his Mauser trained on me. The charge was attempted murder, and that let them subpoena the phone GIS records we already had, legally.

Then the system ground it out. He wanted to plead down, the DA wouldn't have it. There wasn't some racial interest group picketing for him, so he went to trial, and got the death penalty, still legal in Florida. He'll sit in Florida State Prison in Santa Maria, built by some friends of mine, until they finally inject him. Small loss.

The Miami projects finished up in good order, Jones didn't need to campaign for a change order, there wasn't a bad storm that summer. The boys and I went fishing, caught a tarpon among others, went down to Key West and had a good time. Maybe sometimes good really does win out.

THE END

