

AN ACCIDENTAL HOMICIDE

RKF ADAMS

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The Uniform Code of Military Justice is the governing code for the Armed Forces. Chapter 47, Subchapter 10, Section 919, Article 119 Manslaughter

<https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCODE-2009-title10/USCODE-2009-title10-subtitleA-partII-chap47-subchapX-sec919>

The things he had come to know in this war were not so simple.

~Robert Jordan

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Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own.

~Deuteronomy 24:16

01 ECHO CHARLIE

“Paulina, this is Paulina, Addison is next.” The perky yet manly automated voice of the Chicago Transit Authority announced my stop. I clung to a steel support slick with the sweat of a thousand riders as the train lurched to a stop. An old crone blocking the doors stumbled. I reached out to catch her and she hissed at me. I stepped back with one hand up in mock surrender and let her exit first. Her full-length sable dragged the ground behind her, sweeping the dirty concrete. She stooped under the weight of her moth-eaten treasure. The day was too beautiful to argue.

El Nino pushed February’s arctic veil back into Canada. The temperature tiptoed past thirty-seven and melted the ugly black snow mountains into dirty snow hills. Long icicles dangled from gutters and shattered like glass bottles on the sidewalk. All three million denizens of the city wandered out from their caves to soak up the last sunshine we would see until May.

I unbuttoned my coat, jammed hat and gloves into my pocket, and strode north as if it were the first day of spring instead of a mid-winter anomaly. I passed the wall bed store housed in a converted two-story home. Merchandise in the tiny front window had not changed since I moved to the city a year ago. Perhaps there wasn’t much to say about a bed that folded into a wall. I settled into an easy rhythm, briefcase swinging in my right hand, sunlight on my face.

Crack. A single gunshot. A wave of sound rushed down the street. A second shot sliced through the echo of the first, rolling down the canyon of three flats and two story homes lining the street. The dead never hear the echo, but it provided me the approximate location of the shots. Due north.

I ran toward the sound, into the sound before it died away. Marines never run from fire, they run into it. Except I wasn't a Marine anymore, at least according to Uncle Sam. With my free hand, I hiked up my skirt and pressed forward, willing my legs faster.

I used my briefcase as a battering ram cutting through clumps of mouth-breathing statues that gaped toward the sound of the gunfire. This was not a neighborhood where a lot of shooting occurred. The last major incident occurred nine years ago, it was mob related, and referred to locally as NHI – no humans involved.

I crossed Addison running full out trying to time the east bound traffic. I hopped the curb narrowly missing the front end of a blue sedan. The driver laid on his horn to alert me that he was perturbed at my passing. No time to flip him off, I kept moving, shutting off all thought except the need to move faster.

A ring of gawkers blocked the sidewalk. I dodged into the street, in front of a yellow cab, which had stopped and was blocking the southbound flow of traffic. I clipped the bumper with my briefcase and stumbled. A break in the human wall displayed two bodies down in front of my house. Oh sweet Jesus.

I shoved through the crowd and slid to a stop on my knees. Chris lay draped across Pam with his face to the February sky. Blood, too much blood, spreading in a pool underneath his head. His dark hazel eyes looked past me, not seeing me. A third eye, dark and bloody stared back, below the part in his hair, a half inch off center. The earth tilted, my stomach lurched. The face of death. Oh weeping Jesus, shit shit shit.

A woman was screaming. If I found the source of the screaming and shut it off, maybe I could stop my brain from bouncing around. The noise was coming from Pam. She was alive, legs trapped underneath Chris, her eyes screwed shut tight enough to scrunch her whole face. I stood, circled around behind her, grabbed the shoulders of her coat, and yanked her out from under her boyfriend. The body of my best friend and business partner threatened to roll over, but dropped back to the sidewalk with a wet slap. The shoulder seams of her overcoat ripped as I pulled backward. She landed on top of me, knocking out the air. Size zero my ass, she felt like four hundred pounds. I pushed her off and rolled up onto my hands and knees to suck in a full breath. She struggled to sit up. I crawled to her and grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard. Her head snapped back cutting that damn noise off mid scream.

“Pam, it’s Jess. Stop screaming. Tell me what happened.”

Unresponsive, she opened her mouth and poured forth an unrelenting wail.

I snapped her back and forth again and yelled in her face, “Pam, stop this now, what the fuck happened?”

Her eyes flew open. “You, he, Chris is...”

“Can you hear me,” I asked.

“Did you hit me?”

“No, I shook you. What in God’s name happened?”

She looked over at Chris and opened her mouth, taking in a lungful of air to launch another scream fest. I slapped her hard enough to rock her head back. Her eyes widened in surprise then focused sharply on mine. She reached up and rubbed her reddened cheek.

“You hit me.”

“Yes, I hit you. Tell me what happened.”

“We, we were walking home. It’s such a nice day. It seemed almost...” she trailed off, but a little shake brought her back. “I heard a loud noise. Bang. It was huge. It was a ... I’ve never heard a gun close up. Was it a gun? Who would shoot us? Chris fell on me, he dropped the bags, his arms were out, he was... Oh my God. He’s...”

I tried to put my arms around her. She shoved me away and draped herself over Chris. She wrapped her arms around his torso, laid her head on his chest, and wailed. I had to get her out of here, into the house, a cab, anywhere but here. Oh Jesus, oh God, what the hell happened?

I squatted down next to Chris and sat back on my heels ignoring the cold and the murmuring crowd. I whispered comforting nothings at Pam and stroked her hair. The looky-lous had given us a wide berth like grade school kids watching a playground fight,

their faces blurred into one mass of disbelief and horror. Time had stopped. How long did it take to run four blocks? I heard the first shot after passing the bed shop, but how far? Not yet at the first cross street. I'd been on the ground here maybe thirty seconds. Add three minutes, maybe four to run from the point I heard the second shot, which came on the heels of the first. Four goddam minutes ago my best friend walked in the rare winter warmth with his lover, listening as she chattered on about her busy day. Maybe he was telling some stupid math joke. Like when three engineers walk into a bar, one should duck. Oh Lord, he has the worst jokes.

Two grocery bags lay on the ground, paper sides ripped open, their contents scattered. Raw shrimp glistened next to scallions, a loaf of whole grain bread, oranges, pea pods; a tableau of urban life in a genteel neighborhood. By the time the evening news began its broadcast, Chris would be reduced to an anonymous statistical entry within the Unified Crime Report. He'd be another homicide victim in a city where the media quit reporting homicides because it spooked the tourists and angered the last standing taxpayers. My head filled with white noise, huge and deafening. Ice trickled through my veins. I shook my head, forcing the oncoming shock back into a corner.

Sounds of the city broke into my consciousness: horns, engines, voices, the constant static that existed only in very large cities. Sirens approached from the north and south. Someone had blocked Paulina somewhere because the police were coming up the wrong way. The yellow cab effectively blocked the one-way street.

Instinct developed by years of training reminded me to secure the scene. I braced my hands on the sidewalk, pushed myself up and yelled “Stop, no closer.” I looked at no one in particular. The herd paralysis had abated and people were edging closer. Too close. The sound of my voice stopped them, but not for long.

I crouched down next to Pam and put an arm around her middle and tugged gently. “Come on honey, the police are here. Please come with me.” I had to get her up off the wet concrete, out of the blood. She wouldn’t budge.

“We ... we ... we...” Pam’s voice grew smaller. I wanted to slap her again. I needed to know what happened. I’d never get a straight answer when the police took over; I needed to know who was going to die by my hand for killing my friend. Anger raised her little red head out of her little black box, where she lives less she gain the upper hand of my emotions. I shoved her back down because now was not the time.

“Pam, Pam, Pammy, look at me, hon. Come on. I need you here with me. Tell me who you saw.” I used my soft voice, the purring voice of the crazy whisperer. With a dirty hand, I stroked her cheek, nudging her to look at me. “Pam?”

She looked through me, “We walked to the market. It’s such a nice day. We ...”

“And?” I prompted her.

“We were walking and someone behind us yelled Chris’s name. A man’s voice, loud, but kind of high-pitched, not really real. Chris stopped and turned around and then a big thunder clap, and then I was on the ground, I was under him, he was on top of me. There

was so much blood. He wouldn't move." She sat up grabbed the collar of my coat in both hands yelling into my face. "Two big bangs. Two. Why would someone have a gun? Why would they shoot twice? Were they trying to hurt me too?"

"Pam, stay with me, come on, honey, you're okay, you're okay. Nobody can get to you now. I'm here, I'll stop them. I promise. Tell me what else you saw."

She released my collar and turned back to Chris, stroking his brow, chubby fingers brushing over the wet hole. I swallowed the bile clustering in the back of my throat.

"I didn't see anyone. I told you Chris stopped to see who yelled, I turned. I think, maybe, I'm not sure. A truck, one of those big gas guzzlers, black. With all that silly silver trim. The glass was black, like a celebrity car or something."

Before I could get any more out of her, the cavalry arrived. One squad car skidded to a stop inches from the front end of the yellow cab blocking the street. A second, a big Crown Vic, tires squealing as the driver locked up the brakes to avoid the back end of the first car. More patrol cars moved into position north of the civilian cars trapped in the street.

I wanted to yell "shut off the damn sirens," but the driver of vehicle two was currently engaged in yelling at the cab driver to move his car, which was now trapped in the street between patrol cars. I watched, detached from the scene, as more cars materialized, more men appeared, sirens drowned out all sound. No one seemed to be in

charge. Seemingly hours were passing, but shadows cast by the winter sunlight had not moved.

In the future, people would ask, ‘Where were you the day, the hour Chris Wald was gunned down in the 3700 block of north Paulina?’ Ten thousand people would proudly proclaim that they were there, saw the whole thing. When Babe Ruth single handedly beat the Chicago Cubs in the 1932 World Series, a million or more people must have been at Wrigley that day because everybody had a brother or an uncle who could recount the exact story. This was that moment. The crowd had grown to epic proportions. Everyone talking at the same time. I pictured the ivy on the brick, the sunshine on my shoulders, ice cold beer in hand, the crack of the hickory. Do they still make bats out of hickory? I shook my head back and forth, hard trying to dispel the lethargy that had set in. I couldn’t feel my legs anymore.

Blue and red light reflected from every window like a Christmas display for the mad. Four more of Chicago’s finest hustled through the crowd, creating a loose perimeter around Chris, Pam, and me. All four male voices were yelling at the same time, mostly at the crowd, some directed at us. They overlapped each other. The driver of the taxi leaned against the dented front end. I waved at him. He shook his head at me. I’d have no help there.

I pulled in a deep breath and yelled, “One at a time, guys.” That spent a lot of energy I was running out of. I hadn’t let go of Pam, and she hadn’t stopped stroking her

boyfriend's brow. The shaking from her sobs and her shock were impossible to tell apart and I was having trouble holding on to her.

The officer closest to me had a single bar on his winter jacket. I couldn't read his name plate, but I knew what he was. "Lieutenant, help me with her, she's not hurt, but I can't get her up. She won't let go." He frowned down at me. Should he trust the blood covered woman who recognized his rank or be responsible for leaving two women sitting in a pool of blood on a cold dirty sidewalk? That image might not play well in the clean and manicured suburbs. The man leaned down and took Pam's arm, I got my feet underneath me, grabbed her other arm, and pushed upward. "Come on hon, let's let these men do their jobs, they'll take care of Chris." I cooed at her until she let us haul her upright. Sidewalk debris clung to the blood soaking her slacks and her jacket. My stomach lurched again.

As soon as she stood, she glommed onto me and almost took us both over. The lieutenant righted us. "This is our house," I said, nodding my head toward the stoop of our building. He steered her, hands on her waist, while I pulled her toward me, backing toward the porch. I sat down, pulling her down with me. I pushed her into a position that resembled sitting. She shook uncontrollably and her teeth chattered, knees jammed into mine, her arms around my shoulders, head in the crook of my neck.

Another officer, youngish, mid-twenties, badge shiny, picked up my briefcase. I'd tossed it at our front stoop when I slid into Chris. The patrolman turned the case around to flip the latches.

“Hey, Rookie, that’s my case. Not part of the problem here.” I held a hand out for my property. He was two feet from me. I could have snatched it away, but sudden movement didn’t seem prudent. He stood it up on the bottom step, unopened, and held his hands up, “Sorry lady, thought it was his.” He nodded at Chris.

The lieutenant spoke quietly into his radio. Probably telling dispatch not to hurry with the ambulance. He turned, caught me watching him, and asked, “Did you see this happen?”

“No, sir, I heard it. I had stepped off the train, and started up the street. I heard the shots and started running.”

“Which stop?”

“Paulina.”

The rookie interrupted. “So how’d ya know where the shots come from? You coulda been running into a situation.”

The rookie sounded like a caricature of a wise guy on television. I ignored him and addressed the lieutenant. “It was one shot, a short pause, and then a second shot. I’ve lived here long enough to know what a drive-by sounds like. This wasn’t a bunch of bangers popping off a sunny afternoon. It was, shit I don’t know, planned, timed. The shots were close, but not in a hurry.” The lieutenant nodded as if he understood.

“God damn, Archer, every time something hinky happens, here you are.” Detective Sergeant Zabrovsky was a walking fireplug and not much taller. Years of cheap whiskey

and unfiltered cigarettes gave his bulbous body its hectic coloring as well as the sweet voice of rusted car door. The last of a dying breed and good riddance, Zabrovsky was the embodiment of a corrupt city cop. Most of them had been weeded out through successive administrations, retirement, and death, but like cockroaches, they bred more of their own kind. I had run into the sonofabitch on two prior occasions. The second of which ended with him flat on the ground. I wanted to tell him to blow it out his fat ass, but the rookie interrupted, yelling, “Sir, sir, I’ve got a weapon in property indicated as hers.” The kid was pointing at me, he’d been rooting around in my briefcase while I was talking.

The young officer and Zabrovsky drew their service weapons and aimed them at my head, thus completing the theater of tragedy this day had become. Instead of applause, I heard the collective gasp of the assembled crowd.

“Shit, lady, really? A gun?” The lieutenant picked up the weapon, a little Smith and Wesson 36 Chief, five shot revolver, with a no-slip rubber grip. It looked like a shiny toy. He unloaded it, stowing both bullets and gun in his pocket. “I’ll keep it for now.” He sorted through the contents of my briefcase, laying out my treasures on the step. Half a dozen pens, two floppy disks, a couple of zip drives, a pack of gum, notebooks, personal hygiene products, and a package of cheese crackers. The lieutenant held up one of the three and a half inch disks and raised an eyebrow in question.

I shrugged. “Who’s gonna steal those?”

Since 1982, legally possessing a firearm in the city of Chicago, county of Cook, was highly irregular due to murderous government restrictions on law abiding taxpayers. But my gun was registered and I had an Illinois Firearm ID card. The dates may not have been strictly kosher, but the paper itself was. I was legal, it was legal, and the weapon was stowed in my briefcase so I could legally transport the damn thing. Locked in a briefcase, the weapon was useless for self-defense, but force of habit kept it in there.

“I’ve got the card in my wallet. The gun is registered here in the nineteen, at your shop, and contained in a locked briefcase. Legal according the municipal code.”

The lieutenant shook his head and gestured at the kid, “Search her.”

Zabrovsky said, “I’m senior on scene. I’ll do it.”

“Pratt will do it. Give him some experience.” He looked at me and asked, “Unless you’d prefer to wait for a female patrol officer?”

I shrugged then nodded at the kid. “Have at it.”

Color drained from Pratt’s light brown face and hectic spots appeared high on his cheeks. Maybe his mother raised him well. I stood slowly, stepped off the stoop, and held my arms out, waiting patiently for the rookie to decide how to use his handcuffs. I held my arms out in front and let him snug the bracelets. I stood obediently, trying not to giggle as he carefully patted up one leg, and down the other. Nothing too intimate, but it was still the closest thing to a date I’d had in a long while.

He told me to turn around. He was standing too close. I could have kicked him in the nuts and disarmed him. I looked over at Zabrovsky surprised not to see spittle running down his chin. Anger surged over the top of my grief, and given the opportunity, I would take the anger out on Zabrovsky, cop or no cop. I felt sorry for the young officer upon whom Zabrovsky would take revenge if he were given the opportunity.

Pratt found a lip balm, another cheese and crackers, and house keys in my overcoat pockets. He patted up my torso and down my arms. He squinched his eyes to slits as he reached in to pull out my wallet, inside breast pocket of my suit coat.

“Nothing dangerous, sir,” Pratt reported. Zabrovsky held his hand out for the wallet, but the rookie tossed it to the lieutenant. I awarded Patrol Officer Pratt three points for unexpected intelligence.

The lieutenant pulled out each piece of paper and made careful study. I knew what was in there, including the cash. One picture of me and my late husband in South Carolina, wrinkled and spotted – the picture, not us. Recently minted Illinois driver’s license, bank card, motor club, Uniformed Services I.D., and the FOID – firearm owner identification card. He smiled and shook his head then put everything back from where it came. “Let her go, she’s legal.”

“What the hell? How come she got a card? That ain’t right.” Zabrovsky reached out for my wallet.

“I appreciate your patience. I trust Officer Pratt behaved properly.” The lieutenant waited for the officer to free my hands, then handed back my wallet. Standing in front of me, I could see the plate on the lieutenant’s jacket. It read Kelley. An Irish cop in Chicago, big surprise there. A dark haired green eyed Irish cop in Chicago. Oy vey.

“Yes sir, Officer Pratt was perfectly professional. His mother raised him well.” Pratt wouldn’t meet my gaze as he mumbled an unnecessary apology.

“Goddamit, we got a body, we got a weapon, why ain’t she in cuffs?” Zabrovsky demanded.

“Secure the scene, direct traffic, and shut the hell up.” The lieutenant’s tone left no room for discussion.

A crime lab truck arrived. The driver used his lights and siren to break up foot traffic, which had risen to parade density and blocked the north and southbound sidewalks as well as the road. Saw horses materialized and crime techs unrolled yellow tape from the barrier to the rail on my front stoop. Flash cameras popped like lightning bugs. Radios chattered, people milled about murmuring and whispering at strangers, creating topics for this evening’s dinner table, hoping to see themselves on one of the city’s eight news outlets.

Pam was no longer on the stoop. Scanning the crowd, I spotted an ambulance. Paramedics helped her onto a gurney, covered her with a blanket, then buckled a safety strap. One medic stepped out of the back, slammed the gate shut and got behind the

wheel. He activated the lights, but did not fire up the siren. The ambulance turned onto Waveland. They'd probably run her up to Methodist. I could catch her there once the police cleared the scene.

I buttoned my overcoat, sat down on the stoop, laid my head on my bloodied knees, and stared at the ground. I would not cry in public, and definitely not in front of cops. Chris asked me to help him pick out a ring for Pam this week. Me. What did I know of diamonds and clarity and settings? But he asked and I said yes, I'd be honored.

Three hours ago, I sat at a fine restaurant with a potential investor and discussed the potential of selling our nascent and semi-functioning encryption protocol. I was cold and wet and fighting shock. My jaw was stiff from clenching it to stop my teeth chattering.

I smelled Zabrovsky before he opened his mouth. He stepped close enough his shoes were directly in my line of sight. He never polished his shoes. They were a disgrace. I refused to acknowledge his presence.

“You and me are gonna have a nice long talk, Archer. Up close and personal.”

I didn't move.

“Get up, let's go. You can ignore me some more in the car.”

I was not going anywhere with him. One of us would not survive the trip to Belmont. When he bent down to grab my arm, I shifted sideways and screamed, “Don't you touch me.” All movement stopped as heads snapped toward the sound of my voice.

“Sergeant.” The lieutenant yelled, making his way over. “You got all your detecting done or is she the sole focus of your search?”

“Who’s the detective here? Me or you? She’s a goddam suspect, found in possession of a weapon at a shooting. I’ll take her in if I damn well find it necessary to the investigation.”

“Funny. This little bar on my jacket says you do what I tell you to do. And you shut the hell up about it. I’ll take her to the station, I’ll take a statement, and I’ll do this when you’ve cleared the scene.” He gestured at the barely controlled chaos. “Which is clearly not finished.”

“Lieutenant Kelley, sir, you don’t know who this goddam woman is, she’s been – ”

“Enough.” The lieutenant leaned in and poked Zabrovsky in the chest. “You will shut the hell up and process this crime scene or you will go home now. I’ve tolerated all the insubordination I am going to. One more goddam word and you will be stripped and walking a beat in Englewood regardless of any connections you think you still have.”

Zabrovsky shook with anger. He was a hair’s breath away from a formal reprimand. I wanted him to go for Kelley, get his ass kicked, and then maybe, if there was a good and just God, the bastard would be fired. Then I could pay him a visit, alone, personal, no cops, no guns. Just me and my anger. After a long pause, he choked out “Yes sir.”

“I’d like to get to the hospital, check on Pam.” I said when Zabrovsky had moved away.

“Pam. The woman on the ground? Last name?” Kelley asked.

“Martinelli. I’m sure they took her to Methodist. I promise, I’ll come in and make a statement after I see her, if you need it. I didn’t witness anything. I heard the shots and ran. I came up and found them.”

“Are you family?”

“No, sir. Chris is my business partner, my friend. His last name is Wald. We use the first floor of the apartment for an office. Pam is his girlfriend.”

“You won’t get anywhere near her, so you and I will have time for a talk. About the Martinelli girl, your beef with Zabrovsky, maybe a couple other things that pique my interest. As you can see I’m a little busy at the moment. You can sit in the patrol car and wait.” I knew an order when I heard it. I picked up my briefcase and followed him to his squad car. He held the back door open. At least he didn’t put his hand on my head when I got in. No door handles for back seat passengers. Big cage separated the guests from the driver. Man sweat, dog shit, and desperation mingled with the fresh pine scent of industrial solvent. I leaned back against the seat and tried not to think of all the little louses and bacteria crawling up the back of my head. I dozed off. I learned a long time ago to catch sleep when I could no matter the situation.

Kelley slammed his door hard enough to wake me up. He looked at me in the mirror and asked, “Tired?”

The pressure change popped my ears. I covered my mouth to yawn and nodded back at him in the mirror. I just found my best friend with his brains blown out and his girlfriend covered in blood. Yes, I was very tired. He drove to the station house in silence, which I mimicked.

The lieutenant gripped my arm while we waited to be buzzed through the secure entrance. I left my briefcase with the desk sergeant. He opened it, searched it, tagged it, and told me I could get it back if I left before his shift ended, but he wouldn't guarantee where it would be after that.

The open floor plan, a quarter the size of a football field was broken by short cubicles walled with carpeted partitions. The place was noisy and crowded, and it smelled like the zoo in July. Cigarette smoking had been outlawed some years back, unhealthy perhaps, but it masked the unholy smells of a poorly ventilated government building and human waste. Kelley steered me down a dingy hallway and banged on doors until he found an empty interview room.

He gestured to a chair and asked if I wanted a drink. I told him a Coke would be nice. I needed caffeine, but I needed the sugar more. The lock clicked when the door swept shut. Voluntary statement my ass.

Kelley returned with my drink. He opened it and handed it to me. My hands shook, my teeth chattered, I needed to throw up, and wanted to lie down under the table. I drank

off half the can, stifling a burp behind my fist. He smiled and shook his head. Maybe his normal interviewees didn't bother covering their mouths.

Although ringed with red from the cold, his eyes were bright green, like spring grass with tiny specks of gold near the pupil. Eyes that color distracted a person. Especially a person who hadn't had a date in a very long time. I took a deep breath and clutched the soda can. I avoided his gaze by studying the warning label. This man could prove far more dangerous than the sugar. So could I. I took another swallow and banged the can on the dented table top.

He flipped the first page of yellow legal pad and pulled a pen from his uniform pocket. "This is a voluntary statement. You are not under arrest. You can theoretically leave at any time."

"Door's locked."

"I said theoretically. Do you want to leave?"

"I want to go home and crawl into a bottle of bourbon. Barring that, there's no place I'd rather be than here with you."

He smiled some more and waited for me to say something. I waited for him to start. It was his house and he was my host. It was a polite showdown at high noon. I stared at the bridge between his eyebrows to avoid looking into those eyes.

He broke the silence. "You seemed a little too calm, recognized the bar. You served?"

"Marines. Left a year ago. Finished with my wings singed but intact. You?"

“Ranger. Bounced around the desert shooting at camels and handing out candy.”

“I provided your air support.”

“Sightseeing while the rest of us cleared the hostiles?”

“Something like that.” I finished my soda and waited some more, staring outside the danger zone of those eyes. After shock was making me delirious.

“Zabrovsky hate you for a specific reason?” He tapped his pen on the yellow pad. It sounded like Morse code.

“My truck disappeared last summer so I came over to make a report. Didn’t bother with 911. It was hardly an emergency. I walked over, it was a nice day. The good detective offered me special services. He took offense when I didn’t behave in a more grateful manner by accepting his proposition. I decided my truck wasn’t really that important. I mean what are the odds the thief would be caught and prosecuted? I got out of the building before he got uglier. By the way, I did find my truck. Just off Addison and Central Park. Radiator yanked, battery missing. Chris and I, ... We...” I wiped my eyes with the back of a dirty hand.

“Christopher Scott Wald.”

“Did you get his wallet?”

Lieutenant Kelley nodded and scribbled something on his yellow pad. “And Zabrovsky? What did you do to him?”

“I didn’t do anything. Like I said, I wasn’t grateful for his unwarranted attention so I can only assume he forced himself on someone else.”

“Rumor mill wrapped him up in an assault recently, yet nobody filed a complaint. He was pretty banged up.”

I leaned back in the hard steel chair and folded my arms across my chest. “I’m not comfortable talking about this with you. The man is a menace, but he’s your man. Brothers in blue and all that.”

“He’s my responsibility. He’s a decorated officer. If he’s demonstrated a pattern of dangerous behavior, I’ll deal with him.”

I sighed. Locked in a room with a cop about a murder, and he wants me talk about a dirty cop, his dirty cop. My mother was right, I was an idiot. I took a deep breath and said, “Fifteen November, late morning. Chris was out, Pam was out, and I was still in bed. I was half awake and heard glass break, coming from the living room. I grabbed my gun, and flattened myself against the wall in the hallway. I yelled that I was armed and would shoot. I didn’t hear anything more so I crawled to the living room window in time to see a man type figure running north, black clothes, too far to see any skin. I did not pursue. I got dressed and called it in. Zabrovsky and two patrolmen responded. Zabrovsky and I had a misunderstanding. Your boy misunderstood what he was supposed to be doing at my house. For reasons known only to Zabrovsky, he put his hands on me. I got angry and made him stop.”

I neglected to share the part about jamming a knee into his crotch and sucker punching him in the head as he doubled over. Two armed patrolmen on either side of me, two more outside my front door, and I was so mad I didn't care if I was arrested or worse. As it turned out, Zabrovsky was the only non-human in the room. The event ended quickly and quietly as the two patrolmen in my house half carried and half dragged him to their car. I got the distinct feeling from their apologies and regrets that they were okay with the outcome regardless of the risk posed by an injured and pissed Zabrovsky.

“A misunderstanding. Uh huh. No complaint, no report so I guess it's none of my business. Hey, I'm just the lowly lieutenant here, but believe it or not, he's a decent detective with a good close rate. Got a nose for it like a hunting dog. But he can rub people the wrong way.”

He leaned back in his chair, looking at me, but not seeing me, thinking about something else. “I've been here a long time. So has he. Always been rumors –” Kelley stopped himself. He sat forward and doodled on the yellow pad. “Jesus, now you got me gossiping. So you live with the victim?”

“It's Pam's house. If I remember correctly, she said her grandfather bought it for her as a college graduation gift. She let me have the bedroom off the kitchen, back of the house. Chris and I turned the downstairs living room into an office, lined the walls with shelving, put a table in the middle so we could spread out the equipment, toss notes at each other. Chris and I work ...” I took a shaky breath, “worked there. He and Pam share

the second floor. She keeps talking about making the third floor a rental, but we never got around to doing it. It wasn't important. We were making progress on our work."

"You said you were coming back on the train. From where?"

"Swanky restaurant on north State. Meeting with a potential investor, a guy I served with, retired. He contracts with the Defense Department now. I was hoping to handshake one of those friend-of-a-friend deals for a piece of software Chris and I are working on – were working on. I exited the train at Paulina and started north. I heard the first shot, just passing that bed store. I recognized the sound. It had to be on the street I was on. It wasn't muffled and the echo traveled without losing momentum. The sound was rolling over me when I heard the second shot. Maybe four seconds. It broke into the first sound wave. No more came after that. I started running."

"You seem pretty sure about it being on your street, ahead of you."

"Knowing the location of an active shooter is a useful skill to hone, lieutenant. Keeps one from walking into a sticky situation."

He waved his hand to continue.

I blew out a heavy breath and said, "Not much else. A white pickup truck passed me near Waveland. I was focused straight ahead. A Taurus damn near took me out crossing Addison. He wasn't watching the lights. It's after two? Nice day, lots of cars out, lots of walkers."

I closed my eyes to remember. “I know I passed three maybe four cars coming south when I started running. Nobody moving too fast. Nothing out of the ordinary.” I opened my eyes and looked at Kelley “A red Honda sedan, a box truck, like a moving truck, and a black suburban. Not quite gangster, but more chrome than off the lot. I should have paid more attention, but, but ...” I looked away from him and wiped tears on my sleeve.

“What did you and Chris do?”

“Write custom software for accounting stuff, boring mostly. Some security, new protocol for transmitting data securely. Again, nothing exciting. We landed a few local contracts where we install the programs and provide support services for them. Enough money to pay for beer, but nothing huge, not yet.”

“Anything that would get him killed? Or maybe you?”

“No way. It’s mind numbing. Math, logic, code, more math, testing, find the errors, change the code to fit the need. Chris and I market to the small shops, the guys who can’t afford to rent bodies from the big shops. The big shops come with a lot of overhead. We don’t—”

He held up a hand to stop me. “So you arrived on scene, what did you see?”

“Chris down, Pam down, people milling, a yellow cab blocking southbound traffic. I scanned for but did not detect any active threat so I approached. No one waving a gun. I stopped paying attention to the street. Chris was down, he had fallen into Pam, knocking her down, trapping her. She was screaming. There was blood. He fell into her, had her

trapped, but he was looking up, at the sky, not face down.” I let out a shuddering breath, “left of center ... a hole, it ... Jesus, Mary and Joseph.”

I held out a shaky hand for his pen and grabbed the notepad, pulling it around toward me. I flipped the page he’d been writing on and drew stick people on a stick street with box buildings to approximate angle and location. I added a compass to get the positioning data correct. “Chris and Pam are here. They were walking south on the sidewalk, street on the west – the right, houses on the left. It’s a one-way street so the shooter was southbound as well, to their right. The shooter would have been just past – north – by feet, from the position of the body, judging from the entry wound and exit damage. Chris was prone, face up, slight diagonal to the sidewalk. He must have stopped, turned most of the way around to see who was calling his name, not just turned his head. He would have died instantly to land like this.” I stabbed at the paper with the pen. “Arms out, flat on his back, with enough force to knock her over as well.”

I tossed the pen on the tablet and shoved both back to him. “I threw my brief case at the stoop, dropped to my knees and checked for a pulse. Chris was dead. Pam was screaming. I pulled her out from under him, patted her down for injuries. I sat with her until you all showed up.”

“Do you know who her people are?”

“Sure, I’ve met a bunch of them. Big family, brothers and sisters, tons of aunts and uncles, cousins. I don’t socialize with them on a regular basis, but I’ve been included on occasion.”

“You worked with Wald, how did you know him?”

“Through the work.”

He stared at the yellow pad. I couldn’t tell if he was doodling or taking notes. I continued the narrative, hoping to wrap this up before my teeth rattled out of my head.

“When I left service, I called Chris, made sure our agreement was still solid.”

“What agreement?”

“Partners. Information services. Reasonably priced hardware and software solutions to the smaller businesses until we got big enough to start taking market share away from the larger body shops. Chris said I could stay with them, him and Pam, until I found a place of my own. The day I move in, I can’t drive down the street for all the damn cars so I drove around the block and parked behind some bar on Irving Park, then hiked to my new home. The place was packed, they were having a blessing of the house? I don’t remember exactly what the event was for, but the door was open. I stepped inside and, Pam, whom I’d never met, welcomed me as if she knew me, introducing cousins, aunts, uncles, her folks, her grandparents.

“And this didn’t concern you?”

“You asked me that already. What’s to concern? Everybody has family, good, bad, or indifferent, they’re your family. She’s from a big one. The old man, she calls him Pop-pop, comes over to see Pam a couple times a week. As far as he’s concerned, I’m furniture, a worker bee for his granddaughter’s boyfriend. He’s polite, says hello, asks how the work is going.”

He scribbled on his notepad for a while, flipped the page over to a clean sheet, and asked, “What you are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. Pam initiated the contracts, she’s good at selling, got a degree in business. She brings us a proposal, we decide if we have the time, the resources, if the money is reasonable, then Chris and I create the product. I’ll finish the work we’ve started then see if a body shop, a consulting agency, might want me full time. I can bring our maintenance contracts to the table. I’ll talk to Pam, ask if I can keep my room for the time being, find a new place if she wants me out.”

“Why would she want you out?”

“I came for Chris, to work with him. Pam and I got on fine, but who knows what she’ll do. Somebody just gunned down her fiancé in broad fucking daylight. She’s gonna be pretty broken up. She may want a friendly face around or she may want me gone. Hell, for all I know she might blame me. I’ll deal with it when the time comes.”

He stared at me, waiting. Laugh lines radiated outward from the corners of his eyes, slightly lighter than the surrounding skin. The lines were not in use. I cleared my throat

and asked, “Can somebody drive me back? My clothes are ruined and it’s cold.” Both stockings were torn, knees dirty and scabbed over. My coat and skirt were stiff with debris and blood.

He stood. “Yeah, come on, too many calls to service with you wandering around looking like that.”

I waited like an obedient child inside the security doors while the lieutenant retrieved my briefcase. In the patrol car, he cranked the heater high enough to melt what was left of my shoes. It was long past dark by the time he pulled in front of my building and double-parked.

“Pam Martinelli’s status changes the investigation. The whole thing might be a coincidence, but statistically speaking that’s horseshit.”

“I’m tired, Kelley. You keep dancing around something and I am too tired to play. What do you mean her status, what coincidence?”

“Her grandfather, the man you called Pop-pop, is Vincent Bonalino.” He stared at me in the glow of dashboard lights searching for recognition. Receiving nothing in return but a blank stare, he continued. “Vincent Bonalino is organized crime. He runs the Lakeview sector, which includes this whole goddam area. Wasn’t ten years back, a shooting – here – on Paulina, two blocks north of you, still unsolved, started a war. The result was two districts rolled up into one and he took control. That was the start. Blood was shed, a lot of it because control doesn’t change hands democratically. And it’s a family affair. His

brother Francis runs the Region, from Calumet around the lake into Indiana, and it's even bigger and dirtier. You live with his granddaughter and you don't know who he is. I am not buying it."

I laughed out loud at the thought of Pam as a gun moll, a gangster. "Nope. No way. There's nothing to buy. Pam is, is ... the old man calls her Kitten, for God's sake. It's a little nauseating, but it's still kinda sweet. And it's not exactly the nickname of a stone killer. She sold our accounting software to six local businesses. She got us an interview with a larger company. She's a salesman. Sales person, whatever. She drinks skim milk and reads romance novels. She gets an allowance and shops the sales at Nordstrom. Her mom sells real estate, and her dad's a stockbroker. They don't come into the city very much. They're out in one of those look-alike suburbs. Winnetka."

Kelley studied me long enough that I wanted to chatter some more, squirm in my seat, bat my lashes. I spent the last of my flagging energy sitting still. He shook his head and exhaled audibly. "You're serious. You know nothing of her family?"

"I'm not from here, Lieutenant. I spent most of my life in the service, and before that, on a little spit of land in the Gulf. I've been here a year and all that time working. Hell, I don't watch the local news except for scores. Whatever her people do or did or you think they are, that business has never crossed the threshold of that house in my presence. But if there is something involving your mob and Chris, you better have some damn strong evidence. He's a nerd, a math dork. He wouldn't remember to eat if Pam didn't put food in front of him. He, he --"

I grabbed the door handle and turned back to him. “Without Chris, I’m just another code jockey in a city filled with programmers, gamers, cheap imports, and hackers who are a whole lot younger than me. Not necessarily smarter, but they don’t have the largest chunk of their lives stamped USMC on the timeline. In our brave new world that rating doesn’t help my resume.” With a dirty fist I knuckled dust out of my eye..

He pulled my gun out of his pocket and held it out grip first. “You might need this.” I broke open the cylinder. Empty. I flipped it shut and shoved it in my coat pocket. I didn’t question the breach of protocol. I should never have seen my weapon again. I should have been in lockup awaiting arraignment for a weapons charge, card or no card.

I opened the door and climbed out of the patrol car. A dark shadow, a stain on the sidewalk under the lamplight indicated where Chris had died. The tape was gone, the street empty. The temperature had dropped back into the teens. False spring had ended.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said, and slammed the door before he could say anything more. I skirted the kill zone, ran up the steps, and jammed the key in the lock. The prowler engine idled outside as I pushed my way into the darkened house. Kelley pulled away after I shut and locked the door.

Stupid cop with the pretty green eyes was right. This wasn’t random. Coincidence was a word to describe seemingly random events too big for my puny brain to connect. There was an undetected and unknown factor altering the current orbit of entities. Entropy intruding on the calculus of our lives. The mob. Christ, might as well have been

space aliens. I possessed zero intelligence in this matter. I was exhausted and heartsick and a little off-kilter. Thinking straight was not an option, but neither was inaction.

I wanted to pull the covers over my head and sleep, awaken when true spring arrived, after my grief had subsided a little. Why the hell would anyone shoot Chris? Shoot me, yes, that I could understand. I spent my life making enemies, but Chris was sweet, gentle, funny – he was such a dork. He rarely raised his voice except when he was excited about a piece of code working out the way he'd planned. He was the kind of boyfriend all the girls talked about but none would ever take, except Pam. She loved him. And I had come to love both of them, as a unit. I had to go see her. They'd probably keep her in the hospital overnight, but it was far too late to visit. I'd wait until morning.

Chris always said the world would end on a Thursday. God help him, he was right.