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When the Past Comes Back

By

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**Chapter 1: When The Past Was The Past**

He sat in his vehicle and looked down the crowded street that was full of empty cars. His ride resembled the rest that were lined up on the corner of the intersecting streets on one of the better sides of town. This was not really his ride, but one that was given to him to make it here and then to leave a short while later. A message had to be delivered. He was the messenger.

His was the last parked car at the tail end of a long line of them on the two streets. It was a nice car, but one that was way out of his price range. He was okay with that though. It isn’t everyday a guy like him gets to drive a fancy ride like this. Damn, he thought, the seats in here are better than those in my apartment. For not the first time he wondered just how much a car like this cost his employer. Ultimately it didn’t matter, but the thought still went through his mind. He knew his boss could afford such luxuries. And he also needed to fit in to his surroundings on a job like this, thus the reason that a guy like him was driving a car like this.

His job was rather specialized. The best part was that it did not require any real education, no previous work experience, just a can do attitude. Just about anyone could get into the business if you knew the right people, but it took someone with a special psychology to be able to continue in this line of work. Sometimes role-playing or dressing up was involved, just like tonight. He had never done this particular type of job before. This was big. There was a lot riding on this. This meant a lot to his employer.

Mark Long stopped admiring the seats and looked into the rearview mirror. He reached up and angled it so that he could see himself better. His five foot seven inch, 135-pound frame was decked out in a tuxedo that he had only picked up earlier that day. It was straight from the rack. No alterations. He didn’t plan on using it more than once. It was a little loose on him and a little long in the arms, but overall, it was still a pretty decent fit.

“Damn I look good,” he said to himself. And he meant it too.

Coming from the side of town he was from one never got the chance to wear something like this. Or drive a car like this. Or hell, even be in a neighborhood like this unless you worked on the lawns or were planning on breaking into a place. And he was going to a party! He wondered if he could get used to a life that required such a look. Nah. He preferred blue jeans and large shirts. Beer over wine. Real women versus uppity, rich, snobby ones. He had never been with a rich girl before, so he had no real way of comparison. But he could imagine.

Mark took out a pair of black gloves and put them on over his hands. The gloves were longer than normal ones, as they reached well over the cuff of the tuxedo arms. The gloves themselves were not special or particularly top brand. They were shiny though. He followed that by taking a couple of black rubber bands and stretched them over the ends of the gloves, securing them tightly to his arms. He flexed his fingers into fists and back out again to make sure he had good mobility. Except for a couple of places where the white of the outfit showed, he was totally dressed in elegant black. There was a chill outside, so he put a black scarf around his neck and mouth as well. He was pretty sure he made quite a sight, but it was near winter and a bit cold. He figured he fit the picture of belonging quite well. He wished that he could have had a Polaroid picture of himself right now.

He opened the door and got out and faced the interior of the car. He reached in and pulled over a thick briefcase that was lying in the passenger seat to the driver’s side. He opened the case and looked inside. He smiled to himself. Inside was a modified gun sling that could hold multiple handguns and there were also twelve pistols, all of which were .32 caliber Berretta. These types were known as Cheetahs. Each had a sound suppressor already on them. And they were all black. Just like his tux. Look at him, getting all color coordinated. Mom would have been proud. Well, kinda.

“The Cheetah”, Mark said quietly to himself, testing the heft of the gun to get a good feel for it. “Well, tonight I need some speed.”

Mark started putting the guns into the carefully made strap that wove around his body, mindful to wipe the guns down all over before doing so. He had already done that with each of the bullets before he got to the site, and also the guns. One could never be too sure though. Each gun held twelve rounds. He had one hundred and forty-four ways of making himself smile. He loved his job. He loved going to work.

When he finished, he closed the case and moved it back to the passenger seat. He then reached into the center console of the car and removed a long wicked looking blade. His personal favorite, the Bowie knife. Made popular by the frontiersman Jim Bowie in the 1800’s, this blade was made with one purpose in mind. And Mark had the mind to use it for that purpose. He slipped it and its sheath in one of his outer pockets. Hey, you never knew when a knife could be useful. Always be prepared. Mark would have been a perfect Boy Scout.

Mark then reached in, grabbed his black overcoat and put it on, put the keys into the ignition, turned off the interior light and pushed the door gently into the frame without actually closing it. Preparation was everything. The car was prepped for a quick getaway. A nice neighborhood like this meant no one was going to be snooping around for a joyride, so he felt confident that the car would be there when he got back. He turned and walked towards the house at the corner of the two streets.

His shoes clunked loudly on the asphalt but he didn’t mind. This wasn’t one of those jobs that demanded a great deal of stealth. He looked and acted like he belonged in the neighborhood. He walked around like he knew the place, which meant he wasn’t looking around drawing any extra attention to himself if anyone was looking. He even put on a big grin, even though it couldn’t be seen through the scarf. He hurried to the house.

The home was hosting the Torlinni wedding and there was a party being held in honor of the bride and groom. The groom was the heir apparent to the Torlinni family fortune and the next in line to lead that family in their business dealings, which happened to be a criminal enterprise. The Torlinni Family was a direct competitor to the family that Mark belonged to. That made this job that much more important. Which is exactly why he was put on this job. That and the one request Mark had when he signed up to do this.

There was so much noise and merriment from the party that it didn’t matter how much noise Mark made coming from the street. Hell, the shindig had been going for about an hour and everyone in there was probably lit up like a Christmas tree. He walked right up to the front door and adjusted his overcoat to hide his small arsenal. He then knocked and used the doorbell. It chirped out some classical music tune that he recognized. He put his right hand into his jacket, grabbed the knife, pulled it out, and moved it behind him, out of sight. Then he waited, but it didn’t take too long.

He heard someone move the handle and then open the door. Wow, thought Mark. They had a butler. And he looked good too! Nice suit! We could almost be twins! The butler was slightly shorter than him and was going bald.

“Good evening!” said the butler. His smile was genuine and he looked like he was having a good time. “And which party are you with tonight, bride or groom?” Mark thought he could smell some alcohol on the man’s breath.

Mark simply smiled at the butler, the type of smile that puts someone at ease. He turned his body ever so slightly to the right. As he did so, he quickly scanned the area behind the butler and saw no one else. He then twisted his body quickly and violently to the left and brought the knife up as he did, jamming it into the lower part of the butler’s jaw and driving it to the hilt. The butler had no time to react and no way to let out even a startled gasp. The knife sealed the butler’s mouth together and the tip went through the upper palate of the jaw and firmly lodged itself into the brain. Leaving the knife in place, he caught the butler’s now limp body and eased him down to the floor. Mark wiped the bloodied glove that had held the knife off on the butler’s outfit, stood up, and then took off his overcoat and scarf. He hung them on the coatrack that was at the door, easily blending in with the ones that were already there. He grabbed the hands of the butler and dragged him outside and into the bushes that surrounded the mansion. Mark gave a quick glance around when he was done and saw that no one had seen what had happened. The hard part was over. He was in and still no one was the wiser.

Mark went back into the house and pulled out two of his guns. He took a step, heard then saw a man and woman coming down the stairs. They were acting like two little kids and both had stupid grins on the their faces. They were guilty of something naughty. The man was well built and dressed much like him and about as young. The woman was not unattractive and wore a single piece dress with a slit that went half way up her right leg and a plunging neckline that showed some ample cleavage. They made a perfect match, like a couple that had recently gotten married. Mark pointed at them with both guns. The young couple saw him and the grins fell from the their faces. They froze into place, looks of equal fear and bewilderment. Didn’t matter. Mark put a bullet into the guy first.

The movies never get this stuff right. First, there is no such thing as a silencer for a gun. Sound suppressors deaden the gunshot, but it doesn’t take out all of the sound entirely. And it does not come out as a quiet fart like you hear at the movies or at home. There is still a gunshot, but it’s just not as loud. Secondly, people do not go flying backwards when they are shot. Newton had a law about that, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. For a guy to go flying backwards from a gunshot, then the shooter would do the same. In this case, the young man took a bullet to the middle of his chest and basically stood there for a split second, more in shock than anything else. He had enough time to grab the wound and then stumble back into his lady friend. If he had any memorable last words like they do in the movies they were lost in the blood pouring into one of his lungs and out of his mouth. Gross, very gross. Thirdly, people just do not react when something like this happens right in front of them, at least not immediately. There is always this brief moment in time that the mind goes numb, similar to being in shock. If that person has never been trained to handle these situations like they do in the military or police forces, then they tend to lose a second or two until the brain fully processes what just happened. The young lady had this happen to her. She stared straight at the young man and then turned to look at Mark, giving a look of terror and utter disbelief at the same time. This had given him plenty of time to aim his weapon and fire a shot into her chest. Her knees buckled, pitching her face first down the steps. Unlike the movies, she did not go rolling down to the bottom of the staircase. She landed face first and laid there, a pool of blood growing around her and creeping down the stairs like a bloody Slinky. She landed quite awkwardly and wasn’t moving. Probably hit in the heart.

As soon as Mark fired his second shot he began to move deeper into the house, not wanting to simply admire his craftsmanship and waste valuable time. He didn’t bother to check to see if either of the two was alive. When people get hit in the chest in a firefight, looking to make sure they were dead didn’t matter. Mark was pretty certain they were already dead or well on the their way to being dead. They were not going to be worth the time or the effort. He was on the clock and didn’t want to waste any time.

Mark made his way towards the ballroom of the mansion where the after party was being held. A guest came out of a side room as he was passing by. It was an elderly lady, probably in her late seventies, dressed in a beautiful green evening gown. Probably cost a bundle. Mark swung his left arm out and put the handle of gun into the side of her head. The old gal never saw it coming. She collapsed with a gasp onto her back as she fell back into the room she was trying to vacate. Mark walked over and stomped his foot onto her chest twice, doing it as hard as he could. The sound of breaking bones coursed throughout the room. Broken ribs and a collapsed sternum make it hard to breath, and, by proxy, hard to scream. The loud music from down the hall made any commotion unnoticeable. Mark quickly moved her out of view and closed the door behind him. The lady was not going to be an issue. He got to the doors of the after party without seeing anyone else.

The doors to the ballroom were wide open and Mark could see inside. There were people everywhere. Rumor had it that close to two hundred people were expected to be at the party. Mark had just met four of them before he got to the ballroom and gave them a professional greeting. Mark scanned the area as best he could, trying to find out where trouble might come from. He spotted a couple of likely targets, but even those were preoccupied with other matters. This was going to get interesting. Mark liked interesting.

Mark jerked his head from side to side to loosen up and rolled his shoulders. He then went into the ballroom like he owned the place, with both guns out in front of him. His first step into the room was quickly followed by the first shot. It was not until the third shot that all hell broke loose.

The first round caught one of the Torlinni muscle in the side of the head. It wasn’t because it was a spectacular shot. The fellow was right at the door. His brains, skull, and blood splashed at least four other guests surprising the hell out of them. The second bullet was directly ahead and right into the crowd. It caught one of those dancing in the back. His flopping from getting shot pretty much matched his dance routine. He eventually dropped to the floor screaming, his hand over the hole in his ass. The third shot was to another guest standing by the door. This one was a teenager, no older than sixteen. Mark popped him once in the gut. Give the kid a chance, he thought.

At this point the screams broke out and those closest to him started to run. They moved right into those that still didn’t have it figured out. The music kept playing ABBA’s “Dancing Queen”. A perverse sense of pleasure filled Mark. He hated that song, and this would at least give him a lasting memory of the tune.

At this point aiming was unnecessary. The mass of humanity before him was akin to the saying about shooting fish in a barrel. Mark leveled his guns and he unloaded both clips in a matter of seconds, wounding more than killing from what he could tell. Most of the bullets were probably missing, but it really didn’t matter. Once depleted, he dropped the guns and reached for two more. He angled his body to get a view of both the ballroom and the back hallway to check to make sure no one coming up from behind. A couple of more seconds of shooting and these two guns were empty and dropped.

Empty guns were useless and pointless. There was no sense of carrying them around, particularly when you had more. Not only that, it made logical sense. Once you were done with a job you sure as hell didn’t want to have one of the weapons on you. There is no reason to make a cop’s job any easier. You wear gloves when you load your piece and you wipe everything down, and you leave everything behind. Well, except you of course. If the best the police have is circumstantial evidence, then half a court case being built against you has already been won.

Mark’s pulled out guns five and six. He proceeded to move forward as most of the people were now doing one of three things. The smarter ones were running and hiding. The dumber ones had lost it and were huddled around the ballroom crying and making themselves small or were simply too scared to move any further. The third group was busy dying or dead. He didn’t worry about that group. He shot those around him as he walked through the ballroom, or simply fired towards various hallways and doors to keep anyone who wanted to play hero at arm’s length. Killing was secondary in this exercise, nothing more than a bonus. Fear was the motivation, a statement that says that you are not safe anywhere. Guns five and six emptied and dropped, he removed numbers seven and eight.

Mark turned and hurried back the way he came, carefully checking around corners. He got back into the foyer and stopped. He heard rustling and shushed voices. Mark needed to get out of the house but the opportunity for more fun and games was present. When you do a hit, the idea of sticking around got you in trouble. He couldn’t resist. Call it a character flaw. And this bit of fun was going to be just pure evil.

“Guys! He left! He’s running! We need some help!” Mark yelled as loud as he could. “They’re dying in here! Please help!”

Never underestimate the power of stupidity, especially to large groups of scared people. A couple of guys came running in to the room with him. One was carrying a large kitchen knife. To his right he heard a noise behind a side door as the door handle jiggled slowly and started to creak open. Within seconds he poured a clip into the two coming from the kitchen and a guest who walked back through the front door.

“Who the hell would do that?” Mark said to himself.

He then fired into the door that had opened. He was greeted with screams and the door flew open and an older gentleman was floundering backward after being popped with three bullets. Mark saw two women screaming and he silenced them with the rest of the other clip.

Mark dropped the spent guns and stepped over the bodies in the foyer to get outside. He was pulling guns nine and ten when a gunshot startled him and part of the door jam exploded all over him. Mark turned as a second and third shot whizzed by. He fired before he even saw where he was shooting. He had twenty-four bullets ready to go. He could spare a couple. One of the reaction shots hit a shooter in the leg dropping him. The man screamed in agony. Another guy with a small handgun was actually trying to line up a shot this time. Mark got off five more rounds hitting the guy twice, both in the stomach. The shooter fell to the floor screaming and clutching his midsection. Mark fired another shot at the screaming leg shot guy. That one hit the wounded man in the ass.

He fired several more shots into various parts of the house once again to discourage people. Mark smiled as he dropped the guns, grabbed his overcoat and scarf off the rack and through them over his shoulder, and pulled out the last two guns that he had. At this point he was in a full sprint to get the hell out of there.

Mark was just about to his car when a police cruiser came screaming up. The car lurched forward as the officer hit the brakes. Mark saw the cop was alone. He started moving to his right to get a better angle at the driver’s side of the squad car. The cop opened his door and Mark saw that he was pulling his piece as he was coming out. Mark cut loose with both barrels at the bottom of the car. The bullets sprayed the front tire, the side of the quarter paneling, the car door, and the feet and ankles of the officer. The cop fell screaming, his gun clattering away from him, well out of his reach. The cop probably had other things to worry about anyway.

Mark dropped the guns and started back for his car. He decided that he wasn’t getting paid to off a pig so there was no point in making bacon. He quickly opened the cracked door, got in, fastened his belt, cranked the car, and tore out of the neighborhood. He passed in front of the house as others came spilling out. Several came at him as he drove by yelling for help. His car matched the others. They thought he was one of them.

“Stupid bastards,” said Mark, more to himself than anyone else. He shook his head. He slowed down once he was out of the neighborhood. A minute after he was out he saw flashing lights coming his way. Mark didn’t flinch or look to get off the road. Thirty seconds later the cops were almost on him coming from the opposite direction. Mark slowed down as they passed. They didn’t even hit their brakes as they went by. Mark kept the speed limit the whole way into Chicago. Speeding got to many criminals in trouble. If you’re doing illegal things, don’t break the simple laws. Cops depended too much on criminals doing stupid things. Mark wasn’t stupid.

After a twenty-minute ride Mark was in one of the industrial districts of Chicago. He pulled into an abandoned parking lot. The lot was huge and snaked around behind an old, dilapidated warehouse. He pulled into the furthest area that also provided the most cover, which was next to a wall on the far side of the lot. Another car was parked nearby, four spots over. It wasn’t nearly as nice as the one he was currently in.

Mark parked the car and got out, leaving the door open. He looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. He went around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. Inside there was a box full of lighter fluid containers, a container of gasoline, and a suitcase. He grabbed the suitcase and pulled it closer. Inside was a change of clothes wrapped in tight plastic to prevent them from smelling like the rest of the contents that were currently in the trunk. A non-descript shirt and jeans with socks and running shoes, and also included was a one-way ticket out of town via airplane. The ticket meant a trip to O’Hare. He quickly changed and threw the tux, the gloves, and the modified gun sling into the suitcase.

Mark grabbed the can of gas and took it and started to pour it into the floorboards of the car and then onto the seats. Once empty he chucked it into the passenger seat. He then went and grabbed the lighter fluid and poured on the dash and the console and then went to the trunk and gave that the similar treatment. He stepped back from the trunk, lit a match that he had in his pocket and threw it in. The trunk went up quickly. He closed the lid and walked back to the side of the car. He cracked the window slightly, lit a match, and threw it inside. The car interior went up even faster. He closed the door and walked to the other car, the one that wasn’t as nice and wasn’t on fire.

Mark knew fingerprints could get him in trouble. The fire would take care of those problems. His pulled up gloves kept powder burns off of him if he got picked up, which would be unlikely. His clothing may have powder burns as well and it definitely had blood on them. Always make sure you ditch the clothes. He had a tailored alibi if that would happen. His Family would make sure of that.

You know, if they made a phone or something that you could carry around with you would make life a lot easier, Mark thought to himself, just like they do in *Star Trek*. He needed to make a call to report in, but it would have to wait until he got to the airport. He got into the other car, pulled the visor down, and caught the keys as they fell. He checked the center console of the car and saw a couple rolls of quarters. He would need those later. He pulled out of the lot and left. In his rearview, the really nice car was now a ball of flames. Mark didn’t care. He was on his way to O’Hare Airport. Now there was almost nothing linking him to what had happened except his reputation and that he was a known quantity to local law enforcement.

Once at O’Hare, Mark parked in the long-term parking lot of the airport, emptied the car, and walked to the terminal. He left the keys out in plain site inside of the car with all of the windows rolled down. It wasn’t his ride. He didn’t care. Since it was the beginning of winter, the walk was not that bad, particularly on this clear night. It was still chilly and it made him cold, but his blood was still flowing from the job. He walked through the front doors of the airport terminal and looked and found a nearby pay phone. He put in a couple dollars worth of quarters and he dialed the number he had memorized. Someone answered on the first ring. Whenever he had called this number the phone was always answered on the first ring. Very professional that way.

“What’s the weather like?” said the disembodied voice on the other end of the line. It was always like this after a job for the Coronella Family. It was the all-purpose phrase that you had to respond to so that they would know it was you. There were different responses depending on the situation. One said it was clear. Another said you had company with you and that the conversation was not safe. There were others. Mark only had ever used one and this call was no different.

“Real nasty out here,” Mark responded.

“Good, good. Give me a minute to get Antony on the phone.” The voice said. The voice was that of Dan Garver, one of the help for the Family. He was a good man. He was the phone man. Dan was the only one who answered that line. He was waiting for Antony Coronella to pick up. Antony was the Boss, the big guy in charge of the Family and practically a father figure to Mark.

He waited and scanned the airport terminal. No one was looking back, no one eye balling him or giving him the business, no airport cops around. Mark knew better than to get cocky right after a job. Particularly a job like the one he just did. Mark counted and got to thirty-five when Antony got on. Antony was usually never in a hurry to do anything unless it involved food.

“Mark,” he wheezed. Antony was a big man and suffered from asthma. He was also seventy-three years old and not a modicum of good health. “Word has already gotten around. Jesus Christ you made a mess.” Damn, bad news spreads quick, or good news if it’s bad news for the other guy.

Mark chuckled. “I just crashed the wedding Antony. One last score. Went for the Hail Mary and got lucky.” Why is it men use sports analogies so much to describe things? Mark silently pondered this to himself.

“Lucky my big ol’ butt kid. You got them good you did. The cops are there now. No telling how many you buried. Did hear a cop went down? They say he’s gonna make it.” Antony seemed happy. Mark liked it when Antony was happy.

“Cop got in the way. I wasn’t being paid for a job like that so I took him down easy.”

Antony laughed. “How many did you think you tickled kid?”

Tickled. Like it was playtime. Antony was a real life pervert and saying something like that showed it. “If I had to hazard a guess? A lot.” Mark didn’t keep count. This wasn’t his first rodeo, but he knew it was his last.

“Yeah kid, yeah. Them bastards are gonna be out for a while. You got the old man and his boys. One has to have surgery to have his intestines realigned. That I heard for sure. That family is gonna be killing each other trying to see who takes over.”

“Look Mark, you know you don’t have to leave. After a score like this you can write your own ticket.” It was obvious Antony didn’t want to lose him, as Mark gave him services that were generally difficult to obtain on the open market. And Mark had more than proven how good he was.

Mark was only twenty-three years old. He was a killer plain and simple. He killed his first person when he was thirteen. It wasn’t as if he planned it. He was out with his dad, Earl Long. Earl worked for the Family. He was part of the protection group that went to local businesses to get protection money. Mark was learning the trade from his dad on that fateful summer day and was also with the car man, a guy they called Fish. One day while collecting money a rival group, the Torlinni Family, was sending people around to acquire new territory. This part of town bumped up into theirs. The two families had already traded some blows, but none that got anyone killed. That ended that day. Two men approached his dad when he was getting out of the car. They both pulled guns on him and demanded his money. His dad reached back to where his wallet was and instead pulled out his piece, a little snub nosed revolver. This wasn’t his dad’s first time. They both shot him before he could get a shot off. Mark jumped out of the car and fell to his dad’s side as his father bled out onto the sidewalk.

Fish managed to get his gun out and fire through the window killing one of them, hitting him three times in the chest. The other one emptied his clip into Fish. Mark reached down and picked up his dad’s gun and shot that guy three times. No hesitation. He then stood up and fired the rest of the bullets into both the guys despite the fact they were both dead. The police cleared him of any wrongdoing. The kid had just seen his dad get blown away. The Family took him in as one of their own. After the funeral, Mark confided in the old man, that being Antony, that killing the guy didn’t affect him at all. He asked if there was something wrong with him for not feeling anything about taking another person’s life. Antony told him he might have a moral flexibility that could be useful. Mark killed his second guy six months later on his fourteenth birthday. His very first job as a professional killer, as a hired hitman. Ah the memories.

“Thanks Antony, but the only ticket I need is the one in my hand. All these years have been good but I want something different.” Mark did want something different. He knew his job might get him killed eventually. While he was good at what he did, the job was wearisome and dangerous.

“I understand. Look, you’ll find a key in the tile above the last stall at your gates nearest bathroom. Backtrack and go to the locker number on the key. You’ve been good kid. There’s a little something extra in there for you.” Antony loved him in his own way. Mark was going to really miss the old man.

“Thanks boss. You took care of me after what happened to my pop and then after my mom passed,” Mark said. He meant it to.

While it may seem somewhat perverse that he was basically thanking the guy for turning him into a killer, at least Mark had found a calling in life and had done it. Mark was simply looking long term now, looking for something better. Something that may not end up with him getting killed.

“I know kid. Look. Please understand that there are rules to getting out.” Antony always told the guys who left the Family this. Mark was pretty sure that whichever of his three sons took over after him would do the same. “Once you leave, you’re out kid. There’s no going back. You’ll have a new life, a new name, and a new town. No coming back.”

“I know.” Mark felt a lump in his throat as the sadness hit him. “Antony, I want you know something. I love you. Really. What you did for me was amazing. No one else stepped up and you did. I’m sorry for this.”

“It’s OK kid. It ain’t any life to have. You make something of yourself. Now get out of here. You got a plane to catch. As soon as you land to wherever it is you’re going, settle down, get laid, and get happy.” Antony hung up the phone.

Mark put the phone into the cradle and walked towards his gate. He quickly located the restroom and went into the appropriate stall. He waited a couple of minutes for the restroom to clear and stood on the rim of the toilet. He reached his arms up lifted the tile with one hand while feeling around with the other. He located the key, replaced the tile, got down, and left the bathroom. One step closer he thought.

The key was to a locker located inside the airport. He looked at the number and went to find his payoff. After a couple of minutes of walking around he asked for help and eventually found the locker. Mark inserted the key and opened it.

Inside was a nice leather bag. The bag was in the locker with one side on the bottom of the locker and the other pointing to the top. The bag looked brand new. It was brown and made from real leather, not one of those cheap imitation knock offs. Mark pulled the bag out and situated it so that it was wedged partially in the locker and part against him to keep other people from catching a glimpse at the contents of the bag. He unzipped it and looked inside. There were several stacks of money, all of which were hundred-dollar bills. Mark had been told there would be money and a lot of it should he handle the job well. Mark had no clue how much was in there, but he knew it was more than he had ever had before. Mark zipped the bag up and saw that it had a side pocket that was bulging out. He got into that compartment and found a large manila folder inside. He took that out and spilled the contents onto the top of the bag.

There, Mark found a New York driver’s license with his photo and stats and a passport, but all in a different name. There was also a new social security card with his new identification on it. A birth certificate that looked authentic. There was also a high school diploma, which was shocking, considering that Mark had never actually finished high school. There was a message wrote on stationary paper as well. He picked it up and read the note:

*“Here is to your new life. The bag has 100K. You also have your papers. Best of luck to you.” Signed, the Family.*

“Jesus Christ,” Mark muttered to himself as he eyeballed the money. He knew the rules to handling money. Be careful, spend a little at a time, and act like you don’t have it or someone will take it from you.

Mark put the message and papers back in the folder and pocketed the license and the passport. After putting the folder back in the bag he set off to the airport gate without shutting the locker.

He sat down in the mostly empty airport terminal waiting for his flight. He had about two hours. Two hours until he could kiss this place good-bye. Mark knew things were going to be hard, going to be different. A life with normal everyday stresses like paying bills and getting to work on time were in store for him. That didn’t sound like a lot of fun. On the other hand, a life of looking over your shoulder because of the stunt that he pulled and fearing a bullet to the back was not an improvement. It was going to be a change, but one he needed. One he at least wanted to try. Mark settled in and closed his eyes, resting his bag in his lap.

The two hours passed by quickly, and shortly thereafter the gate attendant announced that they could board. Mark went in with his bag and found his seat. It didn’t take long for the rest of the passengers to get to their seats. This plane ride was going to be quiet and less than a plane full of people taking the latest flight out of town. Mark even had his row to himself. Within a couple of minutes the plane was taxiing away from the airport and beginning to accelerate out.

A minute into the flight Mark looked out the window at the skyline, which was slowly moving away. Somewhere down there were a bunch of cops trying to figure out how so much evil could be done in such a short span of time. He heard a couple of passengers on the plane talking about what had happened. Supposedly there was between nine and thirteen dead and at least thirty wounded, including the cop. A lot of the injured were suffering from gunshot wounds or had gotten hurt trying to get away, with some still in serious condition and having emergency surgery. He really had done well.

“Do they have any idea who did it?” Mark asked the two men who were discussing what they had heard on the news.

One of them answered. “No idea. News said it was a mob hit or something. People saying that at least two or three guys, maybe more busted up a wedding and just killed as many as they could and then took off. Real tragic.”

“Yeah well, it was the mob. Served them right.” The other guy said, putting his two cents worth in.

“Well, I’m glad to be getting the hell out of this town,” Mark said. He then turned his attention away from the two guys, who went back to talking about it.

Mark felt a sense of ease pass over him. It was going to be OK. His thoughts turned over to what his future might look like. A wife. Kids. Maybe even go to college. He had never even thought about college before. What’s the worse that could possibly happen living a life like that?

**Chapter 2: The Old Man and the Rookie**

Back on the other side of town, a murder investigation was under way. Police officers were all over a ritzy mansion that had been having a wedding reception until someone or a small group of people came in and shot the place to hell. A grizzled old detective was in the front yard collecting bullet casings and scouring the yard for other evidence with a younger cop. Little flags were all over the place indicating the spot of shell casings or footprint impressions. Crime scene tape went all the way around the house. There were K-9 units walking around trying to pick up the scent of the shooter. Other cops were getting details from the many witnesses that were still at the house that didn’t need to be transported to the hospital, but most were being uncooperative, as they were also known mob associates or their families. There was also people there handling the dead, collecting the bodies for analysis at the morgue, once the chalk outlines were done.

A crime scene investigation for all intents and purposes is a science in and of itself, especially when the crime scene was as large as this one. There was potential evidence everywhere, so every inch of the place had to be scoured. The biggest piece of evidence being found was the shell casings that were expelled when a gun is fired. There was also the butler, who still had a knife in him, which had the potential to yield good fingerprints, if any were to be found. The bodies of the victims could be of use if the perpetrator had touched any of them or made contact with any part of his body, as fibers could be picked up. There was a now deceased older woman in the home that had been stomped on and had died from two collapsed lungs, so maybe they could get an idea of the footwear that was being used. There were also footprints in the soft damp ground that could give an indication of shoe size. There were witnesses that had to be processed, as what they saw and what they heard that could be used to give the details of how it all went down and at least give a generally description of what the perpetrator or perpetrators looked like. Later, a unit will come and try to recreate the crime based on the eyewitness accounts and the physical evidence that was available.

Officer David Bankhead looked across the front lawn. There were a couple of bodies on the ground, a white morgue sheet draped over them. A cop car sporting several bullet holes was a few feet in front of him on the road in front of the house and the long, circular driveway. The car was still dripping various fluids onto the road in front of the house where bullets had ruptured a fuel line and part of the radiator system. The cop that had gotten hit had been transported to the local hospital with non-life threatening injuries. He wasn’t going to be walking again for quite a while, and would probably have a limp for the rest of his life. The detective that Bankhead was with, an old hand on the force named Jules LaFell, was writing notes into his memo book. Bankhead walked over to the old gumshoe and to see what he was doing. Bankhead, being new to the force, was curious. It was his first big crime scene. It was kind of exciting along with being morbid.

Bankhead was a rookie, only out of the academy seven weeks and still extremely wet behind the ears. He was eager and always asking questions, which generally got on the nerves of those he badgered for answers. He didn’t notice the eye roll of LaFell as he approached him. He was too caught up in everything that was happening.

“So, whatcha thinking?” Bankhead always had a way with words.

LaFell looked at the rookie cop. “I think this place got hit with so much lead that they may need to turn it into the world’s largest pencil. What the hell do you think I’m thinking kid?” LaFell was not the patient type. The young cop was taken aback and looked hurt. When you ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer.

LaFell looked back at Bankhead and mentally kicked himself in the ass for being a jerk. He had been a detective for close to three decades, and a cop for forty-three years. He had little to no patience for bullshit or stupidity, and rookie cops were full of bullshit and bravado and dumb questions. On the other hand, the Bankhead kid was looking like he was going to be a good cop one day and might even make a good detective if someone would work with him. LaFell took a deep breath before he spoke again.

“Look kid, don’t ask stupid questions. It’s early in the investigation. We’ve only been here an hour and there is a lot we don’t know. As for what I think, there is a lot going on since I am trying to wrap my head around what the hell happened.” LaFell saw the young cop ease up and nod his head.

“Sorry. I just wanted to know what was going through your mind. I mean, what conclusions have you come to or whatever. Looks like a small army came in here and tore the place up.” Bankhead looked over the outside of the mansion to give emphasis to what he was trying to say.

The old detective nodded back.

“Well, I have a lot of dead bodies and a lot of people hurt and in shock. We found fourteen guns and no shooters. At least one of the guns seems to have belonged to some guy that won’t be sitting down comfortably for a while and another one to a guy that is in surgery right now to fix his guts. That leaves twelve, and all of them are the same make and model. Coincidence? Not a chance. What few people that have talked about what they saw can only seem to come up with there being one shooter.”

Bankhead looked at LaFell in disbelief.

“One shooter? How the hell is that possible? Is it possible?”

“That’s the question kid. It is possible? This entire house had their minds on a wedding, on getting drunk, and more than few on getting some action tonight. Yeah, it may be just one gunman.” While it seemed farfetched, there was a good chance that there was just one shooter he thought. It made since to do it that way. One person arriving was not as noticeable, would look far less suspicious, and there would be fewer people to worry about getting away or keeping their mouths shut.

It even sounded absurd on one level to LaFell, but it also looked like one gunner, going in a straight line in and then a straight line out, no more than five minutes, and most likely three. This was the job of a real pro if he had ever seen one, and he had seen a few of those types. If it was a professional, then this was one bad ass he never wanted to meet unless hand cuffs and a lot of backup was involved.

Bankhead shook his head slowly and whistled. “Must have been a real hitman, like from the movies. Think he worked for a crime family? Maybe former military or something?”

“Yeah, most likely a hitman type. There are four big crime groups out here, and right now one of them is barely hanging on.”

“Wait, the Torlinni’s are a crime family?” whispered Bankhead, leaning closer to the detective, like he was trying to whisper a secret. “I mean, you hear things growing up but sometimes it’s just a rumor. I’m not from around here originally.”

“They are one. We’ve busted a number of them over the years. They had a turf war a few years back with the Coronella Family. Lots of people got killed. From the look, it may have ended tonight. Or it may be getting worse here soon.”

“Anything like this though? I mean a hitman instead of face to face?”

LaFell straightened his back out to give it some relief and looked into the sky, trying to remember. There had been a lot of murders, but ones that had the makings of the work of a hitman tend to stick out, especially when dealing with a murder of mob types.

Chicago had already gone through its share of mob wars and deaths. They had Al Capone, the Crime Syndicate, and Murder Inc. And those were just some of the big names from the Prohibition era and after the 18st Amendment were passed, prohibited the sale and distribution of alcohol. Time had spawned many others, most of who had come and went. This was just the newest incarnation of crime in Chicago. Others will take the place of these in time, and morph into other activities. One thing all of them had in common was the use of hitmen, people that would kill for money or loyalty. And this looked like one of those jobs a hitman would do. Hitmen were difficult to catch for a variety of reasons, especially if they were seasoned hitmen.

Most of the murders committed are done so by someone who knows the victim personally. Most of the time, murders are also committed by a person of one race against a person of that some race. Usually your killer was male, and usually late teens to middle age. Knowing these nuggets of wisdom really helped in a murder investigation.

However, in the case of a hitman, all bets were off. The hitman, generally speaking, did not know the victims, except maybe in passing. A number of times they were not from the same community or even city or state as the victim. Most hitmen were male, but that is about all that can be known. Time was another matter. The longer time passed, the least likely the police were going to be able to track who the killer is. The money trail is the only other option. If you hire a hitman, then you pay for those services. But you have to know or have an idea of who hired the hitman. In this case, if it were a mob hit, then there would probably be no money trail to follow or bank accounts that could be scoured. Only having an inside man or someone talking or finding something sifting through the crime scene would reveal who the killer or killers are, unless someone talked. Which is why the crime scene is an experiment in science and deductive reasoning, along with talking to snitches and confidential informants. Which was why LaFell had to jar his brain to remember some of the cases that were hits he had looked at over the years.

“You know, some of those killings were hits. You know, guy or two sitting there and then a lone gunman comes up and kills them. Matters of fact, several of those hits were like this one. No shooter found, weapon left behind, real ugly and not personal. I’d bet a dollar to a doughnut we’re gonna find the getaway car somewhere in flames or it’ll be at the bottom of one of the Great Lakes.”

“So you’re saying that some professional killer is here in Chicago whacking people in a turf war? And that you think this may be same guy from other murders? Here in Chicago?” Bankhead’s eyes were wide in amazement and awe. Rookies.

LaFell looked at the young cop and frowned. He did not want to admit it, but yes, this job and at least a dozen in the past decade had a lot in common, but were spread over a couple of counties here in Illinois and nearby Indiana. Quite possibly more than the dozen he was thinking of. So much in common that he would probably be able to make a connection in each of those cases if he put his mind to it, which he was going to have to do. LaFell also knew that this hit was special. This was big. This was life altering big. Life altering like ‘get the hell out of town because you are going to have a target on your back for the rest of your life’ big. Whoever did this was going to get paid really well or be killed and his body disposed of so no one would be able to talk about it. Hell, the big mouthed union leader Jimmy Hoffa was still missing, and that had been what, over a year ago? Maybe even longer? He couldn’t remember. And if this guy got done in so no one would talk, then he would become a lesser-known Jimmy Hoffa.

“Kid, I think this was a professional hit, but I also think that whoever did this sure as hell isn’t in Chicago anymore or won’t be for long.” LaFell could feel that in his bones. He wasn’t going to be able to find this guy anytime soon, if ever. He had been in the business for a long time, and he had a pretty good intuition about these things.

“Holy shit, a real hitman. Got any idea who it might be? I mean there has to be names that come up. You said that there are four families, so the department has got to know the people that work for them.” Bankhead seemed like a kid at Christmas. His eyes were all lit up over the prospect of a real life paid killer out there somewhere.

“Damn kid, if I knew who it was or had an idea of who it was I would be on my way to being the richest man in Chicago. We got a long list of possible suspects from each of the families that we can try out. I seriously doubt anyone is going to talk though.” LaFell looked at the young cop who had gotten a puzzled look on his face.

“Rich? How? You’re a cop. Cops don’t get rich. You know that going into the job,” Bankhead said matter-of-factly. “Is there something I’m missing?”

LaFell shook his head at the kid again. Damn, some people are just dumb. And this kid had been beat with the stupid stick. Everyone knew cops didn’t get rich. So why would anyone become a cop?

There were only a handful of reasons why. One, it was in the family. LaFell’s dad, granddad and great-granddad were cops. LaFell also had two uncles, and a brother that were cops. The second reason was a kid growing up and always wanting to be a cop, which happens to most young males, especially the ones that have parent’s cops or other relatives that were cops. That was Bankhead. Head in the clouds about the whole ‘to serve and protect’ lifestyle. They also tended to make good cops should they be able to get over the disillusionment of what the job was really like. The third group were the guys that got bullied in high school and naturally felt like being a cop would make up for the masculinity they had lost. These guys didn’t last long. They tended to go way too far on the job and got their assess fired for excessive force violations or for pissing off everyone around them. The fourth group came from the bullies in school because to a certain extent, it fit being a cop. You have to be able to hold your own and give the illusion of superiority over people both physically and mentally. These guys thrived in the realm of the policeman. The fifth group was the guys that just needed a job and this came up. They didn’t last long and moved on when they chance came up. The final group was the women, which were getting into law enforcement more and more. He didn’t know or understand that area yet, but he was pretty sure a number of women could be classified with the above reasons as well. Chicago got its first female officer in 1891, and hired the first African-American female officer in 1910. Despite that, there still weren’t a lot of them on the force. LaFell didn’t care about women wearing the badge, but he was rather old school in life and thinking and preferred not to work with them. They could do the job and they could do it well, but we was worried about it being distracting. At his age, any woman looked good, and that would end up being a problem in the long run. They could handle the work, but they just needed to do it without him as a partner.

“Kid, cops don’t get rich but smart cops know that information like that getting to the right people might mean you get a little something extra in your bank account for a long time to come. And in this case, a cop would get rich if he could pin the killer down and turn him over to the right people.” LaFell studied the face of Bankhead. He wondered to himself if the kid would get what he was saying.

Bankhead looked at LaFell for a good ten seconds before the realization dawned on him. LaFell smiled at the look. The light bulb going off. It was the look of comprehension, understanding, and dawning realization. The kid was a little slow coming to it, but understood immediately once he figured it out.

“But that’s illegal detective. You could lose your job or go to jail. That doesn’t seem real smart. I understand that it helps financially, but still. That’s not what being a cop is about.” Bankhead was whispering so no one could hear him. LaFell had to strain to make out what the young officer was saying.

“Kid, it’s only wrong if you let the bad guy go. Letting someone else get to the bad guy first is not a crime. Plus, it saves the taxpayer’s money. Think of it like investing in your retirement and saving the city a long trial and the need for countless appeals in the court system.” LaFell had invested in his retirement on more than one occasion giving information to those who could benefit the most from the information that he had. He didn’t pick sides, just the bank account or the pocket that needed the money. Justice was being served one way or the other.

Bankhead stood in same spot for a good minute letting it all sink in before he finally spoke. The conflict in his head looked like it might be too much for him. Finally, he straightened up and looked at the detective.

“Damn, they didn’t teach about this at the academy. What else do I need to know about being a cop?”

**Chapter 3: The Present**

The alarm sounded at 5:20 AM, just like Matt had programmed it to do. It was the signal for him to get up and begin his day and get to work, to the same job that he had had for the past thirty-two years. Matt Short was about to turn sixty-one. Despite the number of years of age for Matt himself, the actual identity of Mr. Short was only thirty-eight years old. Before that, Mr. Matt Short didn’t exist. Of course, the technology of then is not the technology of now. Unless someone did some serious digging, no one but Matt would know that this was the truth. The mysterious case of how a Long became a Short had thus far stood the test of time.

Matt pulled himself out from underneath the covers. He was only wearing a pair of workout shorts that had never seen a day of workout since they had been bought the previous Christmas. Matt stretched out his five-foot seven-inch frame that now carried about two hundred pounds of weight compared to the one hundred and thirty pounds of his former life. He pulled the covers up and walked to the other side of the bed and looked down at his wife.

Elizabeth Short was seven years younger than him and still an attractive woman by any standards. Him? Not so much. They had been married now for twenty-six years. While the marriage had its ups and downs, he very much loved his wife and loved being her husband. He was fond of telling people that she was what saved his life when he was younger. It was an exaggeration of course, but a lie he told nonetheless. Some lies were worth saying, and he loved the way she rolled her eyes when he told that to other people. In a way though, it was probably very much a true saying, as he had come to feel something for her that he had really missed in his previous life. He was fond of her at first, but the idea of love came much later in their marriage. It shocked the hell out of him. But he liked this love thing. It had taken some getting used to, but now it was something he did not want to ever let go. The bond that could be made between two people was one of the most powerful things in the universe he thought. This was one of those bonds.

Matt leaned down and gave her three kisses on her forehead while she still lay in bed. It was a ritual he performed every morning. Three kisses whenever they kissed. It was stupid and even juvenile, but it was a fun ritual that they did when they first started dating that had now turned into a habit they each couldn’t let go of. After that he went to the bathroom and readied his shower and got in.

For Matt, routine was everything. He quickly wet his body and hair and scrubbed himself down. Afterwards, he shampooed and rinsed, and then got out of the shower. If someone were to time him each morning, he would consistently be done every single time somewhere between seven to nine minutes. The difference in time would depend on the situation. If it had been a while since he had last had a haircut, it took longer. Or if he enjoyed a bit too many frosty beverages the night before, which was something that happened rarely. After the shower, he dried off and then went to work on the grooming. A quick shave with the electric razor, a comb through his hair, deodorant, and then brush his teeth. After that, throw on his clothes and out to the living room. By this time it was usually 5:40. No muss, no fuss, no waste of time to begin another day that the good Lord had given him. He was all about some carpe diem. Seize the day.

Matt powered up his laptop computer and went to all of his favorite websites to get the latest news. Be it local, world, or sports, he wanted to know what was going on. A man with knowledge was a man prepared. By 6 AM, as per the usual, he heard his wife’s alarm go off. It was his cue to start on breakfast. Him and his wife usually talked about what they would have the night before. What else do married couples talk about? Today he fried up some bacon and sausage and put some biscuits into the oven. Elizabeth came out of the bedroom when the aroma of breakfast reached her nostrils a few minutes later.

“Good morning, sleepy-head,” Matt said to his wife. He was opening the biscuits and putting grape jelly on them, just how she liked them.

She gave him a look of contempt.

“No one likes morning people, especially happy morning people,” she responded. She was joking of course. Well, some anyway. She was not a happy person in the morning. She usually took an extra ten minutes to finally crawl out of bed.

“Aw… Someone needs to turn that frown upside down. Look, I got up before you did and you don’t hear me complaining.”

“Shove it. You also get off work before four and your home by five. Plus you get two weeks at Christmas and summers off. I don’t want to hear it.” This was her usual refrain for pretty much anything dealing with trying to cope with getting up early.

Matt shook his head.

“Jealous much baby? I can’t help that my job wants me to have so much time off. You could have gone to school and been a teacher if you wanted to. Heck, it’s never to late to go back and get your certification.”

“And be around teenagers? The teenagers of today? Pfft.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes and got her plate of breakfast and sat at the table. She also grabbed the laptop to check on her social media sites. She was very much connected at the hip with electronics and whatever aps that was available and of use. He used technology for practical matters; she used it for connecting to those around here.

Matt shook his head at his wife and took his food to the table. He was a teacher and had been since he graduated from college with a degree in history and education. He went back to school later and got a Master’s for no other reason than he could. And he got a really nice pay raise for doing it. Teaching was relatively easy. Lot easier than killing people, but it tended to be much more stressful. In his old life he could kill someone and that would be OK. In his life now, it would probably not go over well, killing an asshole teenager. Beyond losing that particular perk, it was an OK gig to have. He got paid to talk and that was awesome.

The two of them ate their meals in silence as they continued to read, occasionally stopping to show the other a particularly interesting article. Elizabeth was very much a reader of local and national news when she got around to looking at them once she had checked on her friends that were flung far and wide across the U.S. Matt was a Sports section and Comics guy. Elizabeth commented that he was a typical male. He made the same comments about her being a typical woman when it came to gossip sites.

Elizabeth eventually got up from the table and took the dishes to the sink and washed them up real quick. Matt got up and cleaned the rest of the kitchen. Every once in a while he would take one of the kitchen towels and pop his wife on the bottom. She would chastise him about it, but she would never really put up a defense.

“Look asshole, stop it with the towel. I’m going to go hop into the shower and get ready for work.” Elizabeth loved referring to him by various pet names. Asshole was her most affectionate.

“Need some help getting undressed?” Matt cracked a wicked smile at his wife as she walked off. He hated to see her go, but to see her walk off was also pretty nice in his opinion. Yeah, he had done well picking women.

“Uh, no,” she said as she stopped at the bedroom door. “Remember to take the refund check we got in the mail to the bank after school today.” She blew him three kisses, which he returned to her. She disappeared into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Matt finished straightening up the house and gathered his schoolwork for the day. He always had his stuff ready to go, so this didn’t take to much time. The school year was a couple of weeks from ending so his workload was light as he was trying to get his kids ready for exams and graduation. He didn’t know how much longer he was going to continue to teach since he already had his years in. On the other hand, Elizabeth still had several years left because of their age difference. He didn’t really want to be the guy that retired and sat around the house by his lonesome. He really needed a hobby, and the only thing he really did without her was read. That could get boring very quickly. Maybe he could give video games a chance. Nah.

Matt walked out the door and went to his car. It was a good car. Foreign job, but pretty much built here in the states. Got good gas mileage though. Matt Short, the typical middle-aged, middle income American. There were moments when Matt would walk outside and think back to the one time he had a nice car. It wasn’t his though. Just borrowed. And just for a couple of hours. Then he set it on fire. Those were the days.

Matt was about to get his car out of the driveway when he noticed his neighbor, Paul Driver, waving him down. Matt stopped and rolled the windows down. Electric windows were just too fancy.

“What’s up Paul?” Paul was a good guy, but a bit of a nosy neighbor. Then again, he was a cop. It was kinda his job to be nosy.

“Don’t take the main road in. Go the back way. There's been a bad accident on the freeway. You’d be stuck in it for hours.”

“Thanks for the warning!” Matt rolled his window up and got out of the drive. While cops in his experience were not the kind of people he associated with, having one for his next-door neighbor did have its perks. Matt laughed to himself. If Paul only knew what lived right beside him.

Matt lived outside of the city and took roughly thirty-five minutes to get to work on a good day. He lived in a good neighborhood, one that was upper middle-class. For a teacher Matt had done well. He married a strong willed woman who wanted to work for a living and took little time off when they had their only child. She had a good paying job. Matt had a decent enough paying job, and the pay had gotten a lot better over the years as the state had funneled more and more money into teachers pay. Combine that with Matt having a really healthy investment portfolio that he used from a monetary windfall from early in his life, he and his wife were doing very good. The house was paid off and they paid cash for their cars. He was simply staying on at work because of the insurance and not wanting to simply wait for his wife to retire. Retirement was going to be one of relaxation and enjoyment. His was close, and his wife would retire early, but it would still at least be a couple of years after he did.

Matt got to the school and parked in his usual spot. He liked to park right next to the lamppost in the teacher’s parking lot. He was a creature of habit these days and over the course of the years, the parking space had become his spot. Literally. Several years back one of the senior classes painted his name on the space, pretty much making the whole thing official. It wasn’t exactly the official Senior Prank, but it was something the class had pulled off and in the following the years the other teachers had graciously accepted. He grabbed the book bag he used for his day-to-day work and went into the school.

He worked in an older school in this part of New York State, just outside of what is considered New York City. It is a good school, with a higher than average parental income and averaged about twenty-two students per core class, which is a very good number for learning purposes. Matt taught in the social studies department, teaching three classes a day in the block scheduling that the school had. He taught two classes of American History and a class of Psychology. Since he had so many years, he had his choice of classes that he wanted to teach, but he stuck with these every year. He was fascinated with history and learning to understand how people in the past dealt with life and teaching Psychology helped him understand himself as he led his life. He had the seniority to be a department head, but he shunned the spotlight and leadership responsibilities. It also meant he had fewer meetings and even fewer headaches. Up until a few years ago he also used to coach football and lacrosse. He liked showing kids how to compete and most importantly how to take out your opponent, both physically and mentally. He had always been an assistant, not wanting to have any attention on himself.

For almost forty years Matt had stayed out of the view of cameras, trying to work and live in the shadows that middle class America could provide someone. While so much time had passed and his appearance had changed with it, the advances in social media and the internet made him wary of getting his face out there. He left coaching because of it and had many times turned down the chance to be the teacher of the year for the school. Everyone wanted to be recognized for all of his or her hard work and sacrifice. Except for Matt. Everyone thought of him as both humble and noble. If only they knew the real reason. Noble may not be a word they would use to describe him.

“Hey Matt!” came a voice from one of the inside offices as he walked into the faculty entrance of the school.

Matt headed to the sound of the voice, which belonged to Principal Al James. He was a good man, a little older than most of his staff but still able to be seen as mostly cool by the students.

“How are you doing Mr. James? “ asked Matt.

“Fine, fine. Just wanted to see if you had mulled over my question I asked you yesterday?”

Matt had stepped away from coaching three years ago and both the teams had had a serious drop-off in performance, in both the win/loss column and with the play on the field. Mr. James had asked Matt to come back to coaching.

“Well, I have. I still haven’t decided though. If I do come back though, I would want to do JV and simply help varsity in practices.”

Mr. James smiled like a little kid. He loved his high school, and he loved his high school football. Mr. James had been at the school for thirty-eight years as a teacher, assistant principal, and now principal. The football team had done nothing before Matt had gotten to the school, making it to state once. The lacrosse team didn’t even exist when he got hired. In the years since, the football team had made state eight times, winning five titles, and the lacrosse team had been to state nineteen times, winning eleven, including seven in a row at one point. And Matt had been an assistant for all of those years, turning down several offers to take over the lacrosse program and a few chances to be a coordinator for the football team, and head coach the one time it came open. He had been an integral part of sixteen high school championship teams and the programs wanted him back to help get them back to glory.

“Now come on Matt, you know the team could use you! Hell, since you left we haven’t been the same. Nothing against the other coaches, but its like the team lost that ability to just take it to other teams. They lost that ability to go in for the kill. You got a special gift for gutting a team and tearing them apart just to build them back up.”

Matt smiled on the outside to show his appreciation for his work with the team. Matt smiled on the inside to show his own appreciation that he still had the ability to dissect a situation correctly and get a desired outcome. It was called having a killer instinct. He had that in spades.

“We’ll have to see, sir. But thank you for the compliment either way.” With that he nodded at his head and began his walk to class.

His day went quickly. He had first period planning and then his classes proceeded from there, with his psychology class sandwiched between his two history classes. He rarely had any problems with his classes as he was known as a strict but fair teacher. Few kids ever failed his classes and most of the student body held him in high regards.

At the end of the day he pulled his computer up and listened to the news, which had an update on the serial bank robberies that had been infesting the local banking community. There had been a string of them recently that had the local area in a panic.

“As a part of our update on the continuing story about the brazen bank robberies in our area, we take you live to our on-scene reporter Cynthia Valdez. Cynthia, what is the latest on the group being called the “60 Seconds Bandits”?” The news anchor was a good-looking Asian kid that had recently gotten behind the desk at the station. Matt liked him. He looked personable. He also had a great delivery, probably from watching old commentary from the likes of Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather. The scene shifted to the on-scene reporter, who Matt also liked. She was middle-aged and had been around the news business for as long as Matt had tuned into the station. She was never one of those bombshell blondes that a lot of stations tried to hire, but she was a snazzy dresser and had a no-nonsense air about her that Matt appreciated.

“Thanks Thomas. I am standing outside the bank that was the latest target of the “60 Second Bandits” here in New York. Police have linked this robbery with at least ten others in less than a year, and the police believe they may have hit as many as fifteen. They still have little to go on as to the perpetrators of these crimes as no one has been able to give a good description. The FBI has gotten even more involved as well as the ATF, as the last four robberies have left two dead and two seriously wounded. Banks in New York City are on a heightened alert. The police are asking for the City’s help to bring these three criminals to justice. A task force is currently being put together. The banks and other local merchants have come together to try and end the crime spree have put up a reward of $100,000 for any information that leads to the conviction of these criminals. This is Cynthia Valdez reporting.” The scene shifted back to Thomas who made a comment about what was coming up after the commercial break.

Matt leaned back into his seat. Imagine that, bank robbers terrorizing people at banks. Two dead. Two wounded. Rank amateurs. Matt pulled his computer closer and looked up what people got for robbing banks. Seemed it wasn’t a lot. Not a lot of money and twenty-five years hanging over your head if you got caught. Matt figured if you were going to get twenty-five then the action has got to be worth it. Matt did his business and got paid really well for his services way back in the day. These punks were risking a lot for what amounted to chump change in his opinion. From what he could tell, it was usually less than ten thousand per hit, with mostly the sum being in the two to five thousand dollar ranges. This was a paltry amount for the penalty that you would have to serve.

Matt played around on his computer a little, reading up on sports articles and more local news, particularly his favorite pro football team. After a bit, he packed up and headed out to get his car. It was raining hard and he was going to get drenched on his way across the parking lot. And he didn’t have an umbrella.

“Damn rain. Twenty percent chance of showers my ass.” Matt said to himself as he ran into the deluge.

**Chapter Four: The Three Amigos**

Will Logan was not someone that would be described as the smartest guy in the world. It would be a stretch to say if he were ever the smartest guy in the room, regardless of who was there with him. The nineteen year old had his high school diploma, but that was mostly because school had made it easy not to fail, passing him along to move him through the system instead of trying to help him with his borderline dyslexia and ADHD. He had roughly a sixth grade reading level and his math skills did not much go beyond adding and subtracting. Science was something he found interesting but too complex. To him, history was boring and useless, which is probably why he had to go to summer school for any of the social studies disciplines. He had no real skills when he left high school. Any of the tech classes that were offered, like auto mechanic or electronics or even, God forbid, the agriculture classes, they all seemed like work to him. For Will, work was not something he wanted to do for a living. He still lived with his mom. Enter his recent friends Dan Austin and Robert Braxton.

Dan Austin was a good for nothing twenty-three year old with a criminal record that went several pages. Generally speaking, he went for the petty crimes, having been busted several times for simple assault, some battery including domestic violence, a couple of possession charges for marijuana, and several convictions for larceny and theft. Dan was a career criminal, just not a very good one. He was a high school drop out that had been kicked out of school on more than one occasion for fighting and for carrying a weapon to school, and even punching a school official. He was that classical guy, the foul-mouthed jerk and a follows the leader type, doesn’t question the why but just the reward at the end. Everyone knows a guy from or gal from school like that. Maybe even more than one of them. He also had three kids by three different women, none of which he paid attention to or paid to keep up or generally didn’t care about. He had been to jail a couple of times for non-payment of child support. He was doing a life sentence ninety days at a time at the local jail. None of this was a bother to him. He was a guy who lived his life minute-to-minute, bouncing from thing to another, be it odd jobs, bars, or women. It was all just a part of his everyday life.

Then there was twenty-seven year old Robert ‘Big City’ Braxton. Braxton was loud and brash and generally felt as though people wanted to hear what he had to say. He talked a good game and was the type of person that people would not stand up to, not because he was big, but rather because of a reputation he had built up. The rep was built not on actual events, just word of mouth that no one could ever really verify. He had managed to never get caught doing anything wrong but he was all over the police radar, as he seemed to be all around trouble. And the police had reason for concern as Braxton had recently gotten a knack for bigger criminal acts. Catching him was the problem. Braxton was intelligent, just not overly educated. Lots of street smarts. He also was a high school dropout, but one that could do the work. He was just lazy. He wanted to move on to bigger and better things. He was the kind of guy that school was not made for. He was a hands-on kind of fellow. Tell him how to do a job; he would only have to be shown again later. Show him how to do it, and he would be all over it in no time.

The three met over the course of a couple of months working for a local landscaping company in New York City and found they had a common interest: making money without actually doing work. Now, none of the three were especially adept in anything ‘get rich quick’ that would be legal in any way, shape, or form. They decided to go to the one place that had money, which were banks. While they may not be the smartest guys on the planet, they did do their homework when it came to robbing banks. They had a plan they knew could work. They also had a system.

Robbing a bank is actually easy and if done right, the reward, which may not be substantial, could still help pay the bills and provide a good quality of life for a week or two, maybe longer. They were good enough that since they made their first hit, they had yet to work another day on a real job since. On the other hand, they had to keep planning the next heist to stay that way. So, planning beforehand works out great. As a group, they look for the best banks possible. They must have several escape routes. For them, they wanted no getaway car. They wanted to be able to get out quick and disappear. This was New York City, and the traffic could be terrible. Their getaway vehicle would come courtesy of the city itself. They used the bus and subway systems as their escape vehicles. They picked older banks, ones that looked like they had not had serious upgrades to security such as teller screens. They also wanted banks that would have a lot of people on foot around. Blending into a crowd after a heist had its advantages. Once they left a hit, they didn’t go running out with their guns for everyone to see. They strolled out like nothing had happened. They also wanted to be quick. Dan Austin used the Internet and learned about the infamous Canadian bank robbers known as the Stopwatch Gang. Those guys used a stopwatch and were gone in two minutes or less so that they would never be caught inside the bank during a robbery. They decided to do the same, but making their target time ninety seconds. They also did their dirty work during the lunch hour or when the end of the day rush hour traffic hit, which meant there was a surplus of people filling the streets and sidewalks, making it that much more difficult for the police to get to them. They never worried about guards at the banks. Rent-a-cops and actually cops were trained to back down when a lot of innocent people were around that that would be in harm’s way.

Their weapon of choice is the sawed-off shotgun. A gun like that would be lightweight and would strike fear into the hearts of everyone they encountered. It was also easy to conceal. Guns made people tense up and freeze and once out, people usually do not put up a fight. Fear is a powerful motivator. Shotguns brought out that fear out in greater amounts because of all the movies that showed them as having this devastating effect on things on people when they got it. Thank God for movies and how they depict things.

Once inside the bank, the three hit fast and have the same routine. Will stays near the door to make sure no one leaves out and that anyone coming in stays inside. Dan and Robert get behind the counter to demand the money. The recon they do on the banks allows them time to prepare for getting to the other side of the counter quickly and without incident. Once on the other side, they take the money themselves from the cash drawers, which eliminates the problem of exploding dye packs. Will keeps track of the time, calling out in ten-second intervals. Once he hits seventy seconds, Robert and Dan move to get over the counter and be out of the door at or before ninety seconds. The actual work of getting the cash lasted only sixty seconds at most. For the most part, they aced like a well-oiled machine.

Over the course of the past seven months, they had hit thirteen banks, and all were successful. But one thing had changed. On robbery number ten, someone in the bank on business had pulled a gun on them. This was one of those conceal and carry guys that ignored the sign on the door not to bring guns inside of the bank. He got off two or three shots, all which were badly off target, before Braxton dropped him with a single blast from his shotgun. Since the guy waited until after they were moving back over the counter, this didn’t alter their escape at all. They found out later that the guy died on the operating table. This raised the stakes for them permanently, as now they were on the hook for murder, though they all reasoned that it was self-defense as he shot at them. Job number eleven started off the same until Braxton got to the other side of the counter. Once over, he shot one of the tellers and then got the money. Dan and Will were really not happy about him doing that, but it had an effect on the people that made them even more passive and compliant. This happened again on the other two jobs as well, with a person being shot each time. They were currently standing outside the next bank on their list getting psyched up for their next job and going over the finer details.

Robert looked around impatiently and hissed at his partners, “We need to do this and we need to do this now.” He pulled the hat he was wearing even more down on his head, to not just cover his facial features, but because it was also raining cats and dogs. The police may know his skin color and have a general description form witnesses, but he figured they did not know with certainty who he or his accomplices were because they were good at avoiding cameras. This rain would also make identification hard because people wouldn’t be paying attention while they were out in it.

Dan nodded in agreement doing the same with his hat. There were outdoor cameras on this street and in front of the bank. Their faces were mostly concealed, but they worried about someone watching the cameras and getting suspicious. That would be a serious damper to the day if someone alerted the police ahead of time. The thirteenth job had them most worried, due to it being the thirteenth and they were all a little superstitious.

“Yeah, standing here makes me nervous. People may notice or someone may remember.” Dan was also absentmindedly patting the shotgun he had on underneath his trench coat. As it was raining, they were blending in with a lot of other people that were on the street. “We got here too damn early.”

“We should have caught the later bus. I told you guys that”, said Robert. The irritation was almost oozing from him. He was tweaking on some cocaine he had snorted earlier. Not a lot, just a small hit to take off the edge. His hands were twitching in anticipation though. All of this waiting was killing him. He so wanted to hit another line to calm his nerves.

Will glanced around and looked at his watch. He was trying to do the math in his head to how much time they would have based on the subway schedule. If they went in too early, then they risked being out in the open and the police showing up. On the other hand, if they went in too late, then the subway train would pass them by and then they would be stuck improvising, which had happened only once before. None of these guys figured that would work out well for them a second time considering how lose it was the first time that it had happened. They needed the plan and they needed to follow that plan to perfection. They didn’t want to repeat a bad performance again.

“Look, if we go early, we will be standing around the sub platform a lot longer in the view of cameras and subway cops. Better to wait just a little longer unless you feel like doing a lot of waiting out in the open.” Will nodded at an older guy walking past him after he said it. Will wasn’t showing much of his face, but he still wanted to be careful. It was bothering him to be out here like this, like he was exposed. But the rain should be helping as most people simply ducked their heads and ran for the dry safety of the bank. For the most part, everyone simply ignored them, as they were too worried about getting indoors. All in all, it was OK except for the getting wet part.

“OK, OK. Let’s be cool. Danny boy, it’s your turn today. Just like we talked about. It can’t always be me fucking people up,” Robert said, giving Dan a hard look. Dan just stood there for a second and then slowly nodded.

Will really wasn’t happy about the whole let’s shoot people routine. He understood the first guy. He had it coming. It was a ‘me or them’ situation and it could have been them that were dead. But the ones since then bothered him a lot. It didn’t make any sense to do it. If they ever got caught, they were never going to see the outside of a prison again. He may not have been intelligent, but he was smart enough to know that they were going to get caught eventually. And then there was the drug use. The other two had been getting more and more into the habit of snorting cocaine or popping pills and it was affecting them and their thinking. Hell, he figured Robert was already coked up judging by the way he was acting. Everyday it seemed like this was getting worse and worse. He knew it would be a matter of time before he was going to have to light out of this little group and on to other things. He didn’t want to be like those two.

“How much longer we got to wait?” Dan asked. He looked nervous, jittery. Dan had a hit of coke with Bratton earlier as well, but he was not much of cokehead as he preferred popping pills, and right now his mind was going in fifteen directions at once, and it was really bothering him. He wanted to get this done so he go back and get rid of this buzz.

Will looked at this watch again. “Another minute.” His eyes never left the watch once he said it.

Robert tapped his shoe against the pavement, trying to count the time with his each toe tap. The minute seemed to drag out forever. Will then looked at them and smiled.

Showtime.