

RANDY ALCORN

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF DEADLINE, DOMINION, AND SAFELY HOME



DECEPTION

A NOVEL

MORE THAN 500,000 OF THE SERIES IN PRINT

*“Those who seek my life set their traps,
those who would harm me talk of my ruin;
all day long they plot deception.”*

PSALM 38:12

“Messin’ with me’s like wearin’ cheese underwear down rat alley.”

OLLIE CHANDLER



*"I fear that if the matter is beyond humanity
it is certainly beyond me."*

SHERLOCK HOLMES,
THE ADVENTURES OF THE DEVIL'S FOOT

IN A DARK ROOM punctured by a bare hundred-watt bulb, two newspaper clippings on the card table appeared whitish gray, four others dim and yellow. Agile fingers arranged them chronologically so the handiwork could be better displayed.

Should they be placed in a scrapbook? What if they were found? Of all places, surely no one would try to break into this one. The world's full of stupid people, but not that stupid.

Most of the people in the clippings had been stupid. But over the years, one by one, they'd been abruptly liberated of their stupidity. And the world had been liberated of them.

A penciled list of names dropped to the table, by the playing cards, next to the clippings.

It was time for another stupid person to go away.

But which one?

The liberator brooded thirty minutes, forearm bulging, squeezing hard a small object.

Finally, one name rose to the top.

The mastermind wrote the name down, then covered it with the ace of spades.



“My eyes have been trained to examine faces and not their trimmings. It is the first quality of a criminal investigator that he should see through a disguise.”

SHERLOCK HOLMES, *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES*

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6

MY CHEST POUNDING like a dryer load of army boots, I knocked the noisemaker off its cradle, then groped for it in the darkness. Three enormous red digits—2:59—assaulted my eyes.

“Hello?” The voice on the phone was deep and croaky. “Detective Ollie Chandler?”

I nodded my head, admitting it.

“Chandler?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t answer your cell.” His voice was a hacksaw cutting a rain gutter. “You awake?”

“No. But...you may as well finish the job.”

“In bed?”

“Mowin’ the lawn. Who died?”

I’ve been waiting all my life for good news from a 3:00 a.m. phone call. It’s been a wait of Chicago Cubs proportions.

Many imagine that middle-of-the-night phone calls mean someone’s been killed. I don’t imagine it. It’s true.

Jake Woods tells me there’s a God in charge of the universe. I’m not convinced. But if there is, I’d appreciate it if He’d schedule murders during day shift.

“Victim’s Jimmy Ross,” Sergeant Jim Seymour said. I pictured him sitting home in his underwear. Not a pretty picture.

“Drug dealer.”

I didn’t shed a tear. They say cops are cynical. To me drug dealers are a waste of protoplasm. They should be shot, injected, then put on the electric chair at a low setting.

“Officer Sayson’s the patrol,” Sergeant Seymour said. “1760 Southeast Clinton, apartment 34.” I scratched it down in the dark, postponing those first daggers of light.

As I hung up, I sensed a presence in the dark room and reached toward the

nightstand for my Smith and Wesson 340 revolver. I saw the whites of two eyes three feet away. My hand clenched the revolver. Suddenly I recognized the sympathetic eyes of Mike Hammer, my bullmastiff, who spends his nights getting in and out of my bed, licking my toes to reassure me he's back.

Slowly I withdrew my hand from the gun, not wanting to send the wrong message to my bullie.

What was wrong with me? How could I forget Mike Hammer, my roommate and best friend? I shuddered, remembering five years ago, when I drew the gun on Sharon when she came back to bed after taking Advil.

The problem with morning is that it comes before my first cup of coffee. I stumbled toward the kitchen, fingertips on the hallway wall, stubbing my toe on the exercise bike Sharon bought me. I've used it twice in four years. I keep it around to maintain the illusion that it's making me healthy. Since this helps me justify the next cheeseburger, it's worth every penny she paid.

I keep water in my top-of-the-line Mr. Coffee, poured to the ten-cup mark, with Starbucks French roast always waiting. In my quest for maximum darkness, I load the filter to the top. Whether it's 7:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m., I can throw the switch and, even though the world's going to hell in a handbasket, coffee's brewing...so there's hope.

I leaned against the fridge and pulled the pot off the burner every few ounces to get what was there. I'd mainline it if I could. Sharon told me maybe I should drink less coffee now that Juan Valdez named his donkey after me.

Trying to remember whether I'd had three hours of sleep or two, I put Mike Hammer—I call him Mulch for short—out the back door to do his business. Every morning he acts like it's his first time, a privilege he's been waiting for all his life. After two minutes outside for him and six more ounces of coffee for me, Mulch blew open the door to get his biscuit.

I abandoned Mr. Coffee and headed for the bathroom. I put my face two inches from the showerhead and let the water pummel me.

Presumably I dressed, poured the last of the coffee into my thirty-ounce mug, and said good-bye to two of my favorite people—Mulch and Mr. Coffee. Mulch licked my face. I wiped off Mulch-slobber and tossed the paper towel at the sink, coming up short. I slowly shut the front door, watching Mulch shred the paper towel—his reward whenever I miss.

“You're in charge while I'm gone.”

Mulch loves it when I say that.

It was early November but felt like late December. Like a polar bear on ice, I negotiated the slick walk to my white Ford Taurus. I dropped into the driver's seat and kicked aside a Big Gulp cup and a Burger King bag, which expelled the scent

of French fries like a perfume spray bottle. I must have been on a stakeout the night before. Maybe two nights before. Eventually I'd remember.

You shouldn't assume I was conscious during all this. A detective establishes his routine so he can do it in his sleep. You wake up on the way, more at each stop-light. By the time you really need consciousness, it's usually there. You just hope it doesn't arrive at the scene after you do.

It was dripping cold. I drew the window half down to double-team with the coffee. Every few blocks I stuck my face out—I learned this from Mulch—and gulped a quick fix of wet oxygen. Then I pulled in my frozen face and warmed it with the coffee. It's a ritual, like those Scandahoovean men who go back and forth from ice baths to saunas.

The Portland night, nearly uninhabited, smelled of frosty rain on asphalt. It reminded me of working the beat, night shift. One year I saw no daylight between November and February. From what I heard, I didn't miss much.

When you're on the "up team"—on call for the next murder—getting yanked from the netherworld in the middle of the night comes with the territory. It's the only thing easier now since Sharon died: I don't have to worry about her worrying about me.

I turned onto Burnside, next to Max, the light-rail tracks, where there's only one lane. Occasionally people don't understand that what I'm doing is more important than what they're doing. The moron in front of me—only the fourth car I'd seen—just sat there in his lowrider Acura Integra, figuring that since it's 3:23 a.m., he can chat with someone on the curb, even after the light's turned green.

My Taurus is a slicktop—unmarked. Cop on the inside, civilian on the outside. Usually that's handy. Not this time. I honked. Nothing.

I honked again. Then I reached to my right and typed in the license number on my mobile data computer. I honked a third time.

The bozo charged out of his car, yelling and swearing. When he was two feet from my window, I pulled my Glock 19 and pointed it at his face.

"Get out of my way. *Now.*"

He froze, with the fixated expression of a man wetting his pants. He scuttled back to his car sideways, like a crab, and hopped in, banging his head on the door frame. He turned his key with a garbage-disposal grind, forgetting he'd left the car running. He screeched through the now-red light.

I flipped on my flashing red and blue grill-mounted strobes. He edged to the right, and I passed with an inch clearance. My computer screen flashed. I lowered my passenger window and shouted, "Have a nice day, Nathan Roberts!"

Okay, maybe when he approached my car I should have identified myself as a

cop. But many people assume that if you're a cop you won't shoot them. I didn't want Nathan to labor under this assumption.

Having been a cop for thirty years, I find that you can get most of what you want with a kind word. But sometimes, as Al Capone put it, you can get more of what you want with a kind word and a gun.

"Sayson?" I spoke into the car phone. "Chandler. Homicide. On my way. 1760 Southeast Clinton? Apartments?"

"Greenbridge Arms. Third floor, four doors left off the elevator. Apartment 34's sealed. My partner's checking on neighbors. Dozen people heard the shots. One possible witness."

"Be there in five."

When I'm on the up team, anybody who kills somebody does it on my watch. That means they're messin' with me. And messin' with me's like wearin' cheese underwear down rat alley.

I pulled up to the Greenbridge Arms, studying the four-story brick building. I settled next to one of three patrol cars in a no parking zone, beside a van labeled KAGN.

Four criminals rushed me, armed with notepads, pens, electronic gadgets, and cameras. Crips and Bloods have a name. So do these—journalists.

"What can you tell us, Detective Chandler?" The *Oregon Tribune* reporter brandished her notepad, poison pen ready to scribble.

"Nothing. If you check your notes, you'll see I just arrived."

"They're denying us entrance to the apartments."

"Good for them." This was standard procedure, but reporters—thinking they're royalty—are outraged when they aren't allowed to trample a crime scene.

"Victim's name's Jimmy Ross, apartment 34. Right?"

Apparently someone on police radio had slipped up and said the victim's name. "There's a victim?"

"We called neighbors, and they confirmed it was Jimmy Ross. True?"

"Why would I tell you?"

"What's the harm? We heard it on the radio. We just want you to confirm it."

"Don't hold your breath."

"We're just doing our job."

"You're getting in the way of me doing *my* job. Monitor your own calls."

"Cops don't own the airwaves. The public deserves to know what's going on."

I turned away as her photographer took a photo. He grabbed the sleeve of my trench coat. I yanked it back. I turned toward him. His camera flash did that dagger thing in my eyes.

"Out of my face!"

I saw the red light of a television news camera right behind him. Images of my anger management class assaulted me. I'd sworn I'd never subject myself to that again.

I smiled and waved to the camera. "Just kidding! Actually, I want to thank you folks for coming. I wish I had time for tea and crumpets, but we have a crime to solve and people's lives to protect, so if it doesn't inconvenience you, I'll be going up to the crime scene now. Enjoy."

The *Tribune* and TV reporters and their cameramen followed me to the front door of the apartments, where Officer Brandon Gentry opened the door for me. He and I nodded at each other, two professionals trying to beat off the vultures. I wondered if he was an anger management alumnus. They should give us a secret hand signal. I signed his log sheet and wrote down the time: 3:39 a.m.

The TV cameraman pushed open the front door and did a quick sweep with his video. As I stepped in the elevator, I said, "Officer Gentry, there's a van illegally parked. I think it has the letters KAGN on it. Would you please write a parking citation?"

The door closed and I tried not to ponder how the media, especially the *Tribune*, had been my judge, jury, and nearly my executioner fifteen years before. I needed to switch gears to the job at hand. At least I was awake.

The elevator was old, with a bad case of asthma. As I got out on the third floor, I popped in a stick of Black Jack gum—my crime scene entrance ritual.

I headed up the hall to the left and saw a cop, midtwenties, poised like a jackal guarding pharaoh's tomb.

"Sayson?"

He nodded, too eagerly. Academy written all over him, Officer Sayson exuded a Secret Service alertness. If he lives long enough, eventually it'll give way to the fear of dying on duty and leaving behind kids and the wife he's promised not to forsake. Eagerness to jump into the middle of a dangerous situation is inversely proportionate to age. Twenty years ago I was chasing armed fugitives down back alleys, by myself. Now my first thought is to call for SWAT teams, armored cars, helicopters, guided missiles, or stealth bombers—whatever's available.

I'm a Vietnam vet. Someone watching my back means everything. Officer Sayson was protecting my crime scene; he was my new best friend.

Entering apartment 34, I stepped from hallway to crime scene. There, sprawled in a death pose, was Jimmy Ross, two shots to the head. Physical evidence all over the place, with a bonus: a sealed Ziploc bag of Ecstasy and a half-spilled sack of meth. No need for a lab report to tell me what was what.

Sayson introduced me to the apartment manager, who assured me Ross lived alone. No wife, live-in girlfriend, brother, cousin, friend, or roommate. Sayson

consulted two neighbors who'd noticed lots of coming and going. The manager appeared shocked, as if he'd never suspected one of his renters was a drug dealer. Go figure.

Since most murders are done by family members, that's where you look first. Domestic arguments normally begin in the living room, where weapons are limited. They migrate to the kitchen, where weapons abound, or the bedroom, where there's a gun, which has a way of ending fights. This argument had stayed in the living room. No sign the killer had been anywhere else—only between the door and body. Didn't fit the domestic murder profile.

Sayson told me the paramedic who'd come twenty minutes ago had pronounced Jimmy Ross dead. I looked at what used to be the man. He was dead all right.

The medical examiner, Carlton Hatch—I'd seen him at a dozen other homicides—showed up ten minutes after I did. Most MEs ask you to call them when you want the body removed, after the crime scene's clean and detailed. Unless time of death is unknown, the ME may not arrive until three or four hours later. Not Hatch. Every time I've worked with him, he's come immediately, like an autograph hound to an NFL team hotel.

Hatch is a number two pencil, head pink and bald like an eraser. He carries a man-purse and wears a nicely fitted suit beneath a poorly fitted face. His pointy chin isn't a good match for his pale, bloated cheeks. Too much chlorine in his gene pool.

I gazed down at my Wal-Mart jacket over my flannel shirt spotted with yesterday's bacon and cheese omelet. I considered my rumpled slacks, pockets holding Tuesday's Taco Bell receipt and a packet of hot sauce. Then I looked again at the ME's tailored suit.

"Tuxedo at the dry cleaners?" I asked him.

His smile came quick and left quicker. This guy should be home watching *Quincy* reruns. I wanted to be home sleeping it off or watching Jack Bauer interrogate a terrorist.

"Blood spattered here." Hatch pointed to the wall. "Isn't that interesting?"

I nodded, though it wasn't. I prefer the CSI techs, who quietly collect evidence, report to me, and let me interpret it. The ME's specialty is the state of the body: cause and time of death. I like it when people stick to their specialties.

"Probable cause of death gunshots to the head," he said slowly, as if he had drawn on years of training to come up with this. Any kindergartner could have told me the same.

"Another splatter here. Don't you find that interesting?"

"Isn't that what you'd expect with two head shots at close range?" I asked.

“Still, it’s interesting.”

“As interesting as last month’s cricket scores,” I said.

Two CSIs in forensic bunny suits arrived. One vacuumed; the other photographed. They collected blood samples, carpet fibers, and anything possibly containing DNA fragments. I sketched the scene on a yellow pad. I supplemented with dozens of photos on my Olympus digital camera. Nice change from the Polaroids we used to take.

“Chandler?” The loud voice startled everybody. Barging in the door was my partner, Manny Domast, wiry, short, and high-strung, like one of those yippy dogs who starts the day with five cappuccinos.

“You look terrible,” he said.

Manny’s grumpy at 10:00 a.m. At 3:48 a.m. the difference isn’t noticeable.

“What we got?” he asked.

“It’s interesting,” I said, eyeing the ME, who chose that moment to formally declare that Ross had died one to two hours ago. Good estimate, since the gunshots eighty minutes ago woke up all tenants except the hard rock fans.

After CSI went over Ross’s cell phone, I checked its directory, jotted down the numbers of the last five incoming and outgoing calls. Manny listened to messages. He contacted two of the callers, a middle-of-the-night fishing expedition. Meanwhile, I talked with the wide-eyed ponytailed witness in apartment 36.

She’d been walking up and down the hallway at 2:30 a.m.

“Why?” I asked.

“I had rats in my legs.” She gave a detailed description of a tall black guy with lots of hair and red sweatpants who’d been in the hallway five minutes before she heard the shots. He’d scared her. She pretended not to look at him.

Within twenty minutes, Manny and I determined it was a case of a drug dealer blown away by his competitor. A turf dispute. We found one bullet embedded in the floor, probably the second shot. Apparently the other bullet hadn’t exited. Fingerprints with slight blood traces were on the doorknob. But there was no indication that the killer had touched the victim, so it seemed likely the blood was the killer’s, though what made him bleed wasn’t obvious. Perhaps a small pre-existing wound that reopened without him knowing it? DNA tests wouldn’t be back for months, but I called headquarters to see if we could get the lab to do a rush on the three good fingerprints collected.

Murder is never convenient, but solving a murder can be routine. This one had routine written all over it. The only thing missing was the killer’s name, Social Security card, and a confession written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror.

While Manny canvassed the apartments, I went to the hallway’s end and stepped outside onto a rickety fire escape. I opened my mouth wide, gulping life.

It seemed so easy. A good description and fingerprints and DNA.

That's when I should have suspected something was wrong.

Napoleon said—I heard this on the History Channel while eating Cheetos with Mulch—that every campaign has ten minutes in which the battle's won or lost. Sometimes investigations are that way. Looking back, the ten minutes in which I botched that investigation were right when everything fell together perfectly.

I got a call from precinct saying an anonymous tipster had heard Lincoln Caldwell boast of offing another drug dealer. By 6:00 a.m., we found tall, big-haired Lincoln Caldwell, asleep in his room, red sweatpants hanging on his bedpost. His gun, in the top dresser drawer, had been recently fired. As I looked at the four rounds left in it, I didn't need ballistics to convince me that the gun would prove a perfect match for the rounds that killed Ross. His cell phone confirmed he'd called Ross six hours earlier.

He denied it all, naturally. They always do. We arrested him and hauled him in.

I felt like a crossword puzzle champion holding a puzzle any kid could solve. I'm a Sherlock Holmes fan. I like to follow bread crumbs, not six baguettes leading me to someone standing twelve feet away who hands me a business card saying "Lincoln Caldwell, Murderer."

Still, I couldn't argue with the bottom line. Two drug dealers for the price of one. One dead, the other off the streets for however long the court decides. Never long enough for me.

Sometimes the bad guys help out the good guys by doing what we can't—blowing each other away. Kill a killer and you may save a half dozen lives. Kill a drug dealer and you may save a couple dozen. That's what cops say to each other off the record. And cop-to-cop is always off the record.

I once cracked a case based on my discovery that one Monday morning a woman had broken her routine by ordering a grande white chocolate mocha. Remarkable for one reason: Every weekday for five years she'd gone to the same coffee shop and ordered a tall skinny latte. Something had to account for her celebratory mood. I checked on her because her husband had died of "natural causes" on Saturday. The white mocha tipped me off that she might have contributed to those natural causes.

It took me a whole baseball season to prove it, but by the time the Yankees took the field for the first game of the World Series, I'd got her. No prize. No bonus. No street named after me. No letters of gratitude from husbands whose wives were on the verge of ordering their first white chocolate mochas. But that's okay. I don't do it for the thanks. I do it because justice is my job, my one contribution to a world that is truly—and I mean big time—a mess.

I'm saying this because the devil's in the details. Jimmy Ross's murder didn't require turning over rocks. Everything that mattered fell into place. Even if we never identified the tipster, when they processed the fingerprints and the weapon and the blood DNA, it would be a trifecta, a perfect triangle of independent evidence. Together they were irrefutable. The case was open and shut. Lincoln Caldwell was our man.

I spent more time on the paperwork than investigating. When two and two make four, you don't try to refigure it six different ways to see if it comes out three or five. You tie a bow around it, give it to the district attorney, and move on. You hoist a beer or two and watch a football game and tell yourself that even though you're no Mother Teresa, you've done something that mattered. Case closed.

Of my 204 murder cases, I've solved 177. That's 87 percent. The rest, cold cases, still burn deep in my gut. Every year or two, sometimes on vacation, I solve one of those oldies in my quest to raise my batting average to .900. Of course, if I ever make that, I'll want more.

I sent a man to jail for a double murder he didn't commit. Bradford Downs. I know his face well. Two credible witnesses offered convincing testimony to back up compelling physical evidence. He claimed innocence, but his record made that hard to believe. After ten years of appeals, he was executed by lethal injection.

Turns out the witnesses were the real killers. We'd never have known if the one dying hadn't confessed and offered proof...three years after an innocent man was put to death.

Maybe there is something as bad as murder and getting away with it—being murdered for a murder you didn't commit. Since I put him away, that makes me an accessory to murder.

Bradford Downs's face wouldn't be my first choice to fill the back of my eyelids when the lights go out, but some nights there he is.

So why am I telling you this? Because I didn't realize that morning at Jimmy Ross's apartment that nothing was as it appeared. That case was open and shut all right...open and shut on a dead-wrong conclusion. And I fell for the setup. That makes me mad. It makes me even madder that it was only fate or circumstances or luck or providence—whichever you believe in doesn't matter to me—that made me realize it.

Portland homicide has five teams, so Manny and I get every fifth murder. It was our next murder, the one fourteen days later, that pulled the rug out from under me. Eventually it woke me to a shocking truth that forever revised the story of Jimmy Ross and Lincoln Caldwell.

That second murder turned me, my job, and my friendships upside down. It shook all the change out of my pockets. It threatened to bring down a police

department, end my career, and place me inside a white chalk outline, with some other homicide detective trying to figure out who murdered me.

Not one of those 204 cases prepared me for that next murder, where sinister eyes, hidden in the shadows of a violated house, gazed out at me through a broken window. It was the most unconventional and baffling case I've ever worked.

If that's not enough, my investigation threatened to end the lives of people I cared about.

And, ultimately, that's exactly what it did.



*“Watson here will tell you that I never can resist
a touch of the dramatic.”*

SHERLOCK HOLMES, *THE NAVAL TREATY*

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18

IN THE MORNINGS I go fishing.

By the side of my bed.

For clean clothes.

I seldom catch much.

This morning, though, I made a great find. Buried under Tuesday’s blue shirt was my favorite flannel, also blue. It was a good omen.

On mornings when I don’t have to rush, I flip on the coffee, grab two oat-nut English muffins, and follow Mulch onto the back porch, where my toaster is. I toast those suckers until they’re carbon-based life forms. Then I smother them with butter and a thin slice of Limburger cheese. Years ago Sharon banned the toaster to the back porch, far from smoke detectors.

My next ritual, on lazy mornings, is to quick-fry a couple of eggs and three bacons for Mulch. If I don’t have time to stop at Lou’s Diner, I join Mulch with three eggs and four bacons of my own, splitting the fourth with him. The high-light for Mulch and me is when we get a double yolk.

I stabbed an egg covered with Tabasco sauce. If there’s a God, thinking up food was one of His best moves. So were dogs. Some of the best friends I’ve ever had were dogs. If I manage not to die soon, I may be good for a couple more. I’m considering Nero, for Nero Wolfe, my favorite detective. Or Archie, for Archie Goodwin, Nero Wolfe’s legman.

The more people I’ve met, the more I’ve come to appreciate my dog. After Sharon died, Mulch was developing male pattern baldness. I was afraid he’d contracted some fatal dog disease, so I stopped giving him beer and bacon for a couple of weeks. That just made him grouchy. Then one day, running my hand over his head, I noticed a wad of fur between my fingers. I realized I’d been petting him within an inch of his life.

And you know what? He would gladly have become a bald bullie for me. That’s more love than I’ve known from anybody. Beside Jake Woods, my best human friend. And Sharon, of course. Without Sharon I don’t hang out or play

cards or see movies with couples anymore. When I'm with them, I can't stop thinking about her. It's like the hole your tongue keeps going to when you've lost a tooth.

One fall day four years ago I was walking Mulch at Laurelhurst Park, where you can let your dog off-leash in a designated area. I unhooked him early. He went after a squirrel. I chased him. Rounding a big fir, I saw Mulch, who'd forgotten the squirrel, beeline to a park bench. He trotted right up to a guy in a business suit, whose back was to me, and hiked his leg on him. For a moment the guy didn't notice, then he looked down and swore at my dog, kicking his rear.

Then I saw the man's face. It was Edward Lennox, the brand new chief of police, talking with Portland's mayor, the distinguished Garrison Branch. I stayed behind the tree and whistled. Mulch ran around it, passing me. I chased him through some rhodies, and we both slipped down into a thick grassy area piled with old leaves, where he licked my face mercilessly. That's when I nicknamed him Mulch.

We walked back to our car the long way. I took Mulch to Burgerville and bought him a Tillamook cheeseburger. Got one for myself to keep him company and gave him the last gulp of my blackberry shake.

In the years since, as Chief Lennox has led our police force, I've come to realize that Mulch, from the beginning, was an extraordinary judge of character. Lennox has been chief of police five years. In dog years, that's thirty-five, but it feels like more. For most Portland cops, his reign has been a long, cold winter.

By the time I read the paper and took Mulch for a walk and changed the oil in my Taurus, it was lunchtime. Mulch's stomach growled. I checked the cupboard. Hiding behind the Ovaltine were the cans of Dinty Moore beef stew and SpaghettiOs. Sharon was wine, shrimp salad, Perrier, and asparagus. I'm beer, pizza, cream soda, and SpaghettiOs.

Not a day goes by when I don't wish she were here to give me a hard time about SpaghettiOs.

An hour later I crossed the Hawthorne Bridge, turned left on First, and pulled into the parking garage on my right, opening the gate with my precinct key card. I parked, then walked to the northwest corner, crossed Madison to the north, then Second Street to the west and entered the Justice Center, home of the Portland Police Bureau. I veered to the elevators. The uniformed officer nodded. Since most of this building is a jail, with a 676-inmate capacity, his job's more important than it appears.

The elevator gives only five options for the sixteen floors. Floors 2 and 3 are courtrooms, 4 to 11 jail floors, accessible only by authorized personnel.

Twelfth floor's intelligence, identification, juvenile, and narcotics. Thirteenth

floor's the DA's office and Internal Affairs, where for six months I spent more time than I care to remember. They'd gotten bad information from the *Tribune* and went after my scalp.

I pushed fourteen for detective division. It has only one place the general public can go—the reception desk, with a thick bulletproof window and no door that opens from the outside. All the detectives hang their hats here, everyone from robbery and pawnshop details to homicide.

I hadn't even made it through security before Mitzie called, "Chief needs to see you."

"Let me get settled first."

"His assistant said it's urgent."

"Does that mean I'll have to wait one hour instead of two?"

I went to my workstation and looked out the huge windows, soaking in the panoramic view of Portland. It all seemed so tranquil from up there. So ordered and peaceful. Years ago it was just a bunch of buildings to me. Now it's more than that. Feels like nothing should escape your sight up here. Ironical that such a grand view is from homicide. My job takes me lower to the ground, where things aren't so lofty and inspiring.

I retraced my steps to the elevator and pushed floor 15, home of the chief of police's office and the media room. If any chief ever wanted to be near media, it was Lennox.

After passing through security, I was escorted into the waiting area outside the chief's office. It brought back memories of when a cop could walk right through the chief's open door. Now who'd want to?

I saw on the walls three paintings, two of which were classical, with people centuries old wearing funny hats and looking serene. The other was vague and surreal, the type I saw in a gallery that Sharon made me go to in retaliation for pretending I had the flu so I could watch a play-off game and miss her family gathering. They were paintings you had to develop a taste for. I was still at the gag reflex stage.

The chief's assistant, Mona, fifty-five trying to look thirty-five, marched toward me. Her perfume arrived three seconds before she did. Her aide, twenty-five trying to look thirty-five, walked eighteen inches behind her, leaning forward to hear every word.

"Sit," Mona said. "Chief Lennox will be with you soon. He's on an important phone call."

I started to sit in a chair facing away from the chief's office.

"No," Mona said, waving her hand, propelling the perfume toward me like nerve gas. "There, on the couch. Chief Lennox prefers people to sit on the couch. But you *must* take off that raincoat."

“It’s a trench coat. Columbo wore a raincoat. Sam Spade wore a trench coat...and a fedora.” I waved my hat at her.

Her assistant looked curious, but Mona Estée Lauder, lip curled, looked at me like I was an idiot.

“Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*? Raincoats are to trench coats what a minivan is to a sports car.” I posed dramatically, like a fashion model on the runway. “Notice the ten buttons, epaulets, shoulder straps, and D rings. In the inside pocket we have—”

“It’s wet and it stinks. Keep it off the couch.” Mona marched off, her assistant smiling back at me. The younger woman was too new to realize she didn’t need to be cordial with working stiff who put away bad guys. She could save her smiles for journalists and the public.

I sat down, still wearing the coat. I gazed across the corridor into the inner sanctum—throne room of the King of Police.

A long man with a big jaw threw his voice at the speaker phone on his desk, leaning toward it, bawling it out. He was gangly and mechanical. Yet his voice was smooth and commanding, a radio voice, the kind that comes in handy for banana republic dictators and Eastern European tyrants.

“That’s not going to cut it,” Lennox said. “Those dogs won’t bark.” A few minutes later I heard, “He’s dumb as a post.”

The chief’s king of clichés. *What next*, I wondered? *Soft as a baby’s bottom*?

His office, I knew from prior visits, was the size of a tennis court, his private bathroom big enough for Ping-Pong.

On the coffee table in front of me were a number of magazines, including the *New Yorker*, with its stupid highbrow comics, and *Architectural Digest*. No cop, gun, or sports magazines. Four news and two home decor periodicals.

Next to me was a lamp stand with an eight-by-ten photo of the chief, his wife, and presumably his teenage daughter. What it was doing out here I didn’t know, but maybe it was a statement: “All this is my turf.”

I studied the photo of the Lennox family. The chief looked noble, refined, confident—right down to the perfect triangle of the handkerchief folded in his suit coat pocket. He looked far better in the picture than in real life. Maybe somebody had altered his face in Photoshop. Or maybe it was his makeup.

His wife, prim as her husband, had the smile of a woman who’s looked at more cameras than books. The teenager had too many rings in her face. Beneath the hardware she was pretty but looked miserable. Her face screamed, “Let me out of this picture!” If I had that much metal in my skin, I’d feel lousy too.

If this is the picture they chose, I’d hate to see the rejects.

It made me think of Kendra, my younger daughter. When she was a little girl,

she couldn't get enough of me. That all stopped as a teenager. She's thirty now and lives in Beaverton, on Portland's west side. Fourteen miles away. Might as well be Neptune, which as far as I know is still a planet.

When she turned fourteen, Kendra became an explosive compound of hormones and acne, replete with habitual eye-rolling and a terminal case of protruding lip. At fifteen, she was a walking melodrama. She lived in two modes: despondency and rampage. Whichever she was currently in, I always longed for the other. I lost her at sixteen. I was told it was just a phase, that she'd come back. She never did.

This couch had known a thousand posteriors, and so far it had spent forty minutes getting to know mine. This was Lennox World, and I was but a bit player in it. He strutted around his office, in front of the framed awards, trophies, and VIP photographs visible from the hall. One with Clinton, one with Bush. He had his bases covered.

Why the open door? He had to have an audience. People kept passing by, glancing into the inner sanctum. They could remark at the dinner table, "I saw the chief of police today. He smiled at me."

I crossed and uncrossed my legs, trying to invent a new way of doing it. Why was I here? Students get called to the principal for two reasons. One I've seen in a Hallmark commercial but never experienced: The boss wants to congratulate you. The second reason: You're in trouble. That one I know. I felt like a fly called to meet with the spider.

Ten feet away, Lennox's voice rose, dripping with disdain. Apparently some minion was daring to question him. "There's no way that's going to happen. Learn to live with it. No pain, no gain. Am I clear on that point?"

He had little hair but plenty of jaw, which is more important in police work. I'm talking Jay Leno jaw. And teeth that had more man-hours invested in them than the Hoover Dam. Why not? Teeth are a politician's greatest asset, and the chief was a PR man. He'd grinned his way to the top.

Our police department doesn't exist merely as an arm of law and justice. We exist to further the chief's reputation, make him look good, and allow Portland to be a stepping-stone toward his lifelong dream of being Chicago chief of police.

At that moment, two cameramen and a television reporter walked by. They slowed outside the chief's office. He smiled broadly and waved to them. One of the cameramen gave him an "okay if I shoot?" look. The chief nodded and smiled warmly, oblivious to the poor sap on the other end of the phone.

"He's really a fun guy," the reporter said.

There isn't a cop I know who'd call him a fun guy.

While peering in at Lennox, I caught sight of his full-length mirror. A cop with

a full-length mirror? I wondered how many hours he'd watched himself, practicing looking natural.

I saw my face in the lower corner of the mirror. I stuck out my tongue. Then I held up my hand, moving thumb and fingers together in a yakety-yak. The chief turned and looked at me. I went seamlessly into a wave, smiling at him.

Anyway I hoped it was seamless.

The chief emphatically hung up and walked toward his door.

I looked at my watch. I'd been sitting fifty-three minutes.

"Sorry for the wait," he said, not sounding sorry. "It was important."

"So I was told."

He didn't offer his hand, which was fine with me since shaking it would have required touching him.

"Time gets away from you in a job like this."

"No problem. I'm just working a murder investigation. No need to hurry on my account."

The chief looked me over like you do a bad piece of fruit. "I'm the chief of police. I have many important responsibilities."

We stared at each other to see who would blink. I stared at his mostly bald head. Despite his Mexico vacations and tanning booth visits, it had a gray pall. The slight sheen reminded me of a steelhead fresh out of the river. I saw slight streaks of makeup, a big joke among the cops. The chief lived for his photo ops.

I looked at his eyes, the color of last week's barbecue coals. Like a propane stove, they could be turned off and on. Right now they were off. "You're still wearing that raincoat."

"Trench coat."

"You wear it to defy me, don't you?"

"I wear it because the classic detectives wore it. It helps create the mood, the mindset."

"You look like an oddball."

"Maybe Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe looked like oddballs, but they did their job. I do mine."

"This isn't a novel. This is the real world."

"We're all inspired by different things." I gestured at his artwork, none of which inspired me.

"All right, Chandler...I know we have some history. We need to get on the same team, lock arms." He invited me into his office with a sweeping gesture, like I was entering the home of the pope, Vince Lombardi, or Chuck Norris.

"Sit down," he said, shutting the door. "I'm going to tell you the unvarnished

truth. These are challenging times. We need to set aside our differences for the greater good.”

I knew whose greater good he meant. Still, I sensed a conciliatory tone. *What's up with that?*

“I have an idea I want to bounce off you.”

Lennox didn't bounce ideas off you; he dumped them on you. Something was up.

“I told you to sit down,” he said.

“I've got a back spasm. Been sitting too long.”

“Sit down.”

I'm three inches taller than the chief, and he doesn't like looking up at me. I stretched myself on tiptoes for about five seconds, then sat.

“What's that smell?” He leaned down, two feet from my face.

I ran through the options: coffee, beer, smoke from Rosie O'Grady's pub, Limburger cheese on my morning muffin, Jade East, English Leather Lime. Since I hadn't worn the last two since I was a junior higher, I finally said, “My gum? Black Jack?”

“It smells terrible. And it leaves a black film on your teeth.”

“That's licorice.”

“I've been looking through your file,” he said. “Before I took over, you were cited for ‘inappropriate levity.’ Do you recall why?”

“It would be hard to pinpoint.”

“During Christmas season you answered your phone, ‘Ho, ho, ho...homicide.’”

“Oh yeah.”

“And what is the public supposed to think? We take our work seriously here, Detective.”

“I thought it was an internal line. Another cop.”

“That doesn't make it right. We need to set examples for each other. And don't you agree we need to give the public a good impression?”

“I agree that we need to do our jobs.”

“And you don't consider leaving a good impression part of your job?”

The sweat on his forehead was building.

“Sometimes we're pulling double shifts, haven't slept for a day and a half. What we do is serious. A little humor helps.”

“Appropriate humor.”

“Yes, sir.” I don't know if my voice conveyed respect. If it did, it was lying.

“You're a rule bender, Chandler,” he said, saying the word like Jack Bauer would say *terrorist*.

"I'm a risk taker. I do what it takes to get my job done."

"Policies govern how you can do your job."

"Some policies keep me from doing my job."

"So you ignore them?"

"I try to figure out how I can fulfill them and still catch the bad guys."

"That has to change."

"If it does, fewer bad guys will get caught."

His face turned cherry. I knew he was about to explode into a lecture I'd heard before. But he didn't. That unnerved me.

"Why are you telling me this now, sir? What's going on?"

He took a file folder and scanned neatly typed notes. He took a deep breath. "The *Oregon Tribune* and the police department have a long history of tense relations."

"You mean we hate each other's guts?"

"You'll be glad to know, Detective Chandler, that you have the opportunity to help mend fences."

"I do?"

"You know Raylon Berkley?"

"The *Tribune* publisher? Sure. He's an idiot."

"He's brilliant. And a potential ally to our cause."

"What cause would that be?"

"The cause of...this police department. What we stand for. Justice."

"What did I miss? What happened to make an enemy an ally?"

"Raylon has never been our enemy. The media's job is to press hard, ask the difficult questions, hold us accountable."

"And lie about us?"

"You're talking about your situation fifteen years ago?"

"Berkley was there then. He never struck me as an ally."

"He doesn't write the stories."

"No, but he pays to have them written, then makes the bucks when they're sold."

"Actually, the *Tribune* has lost money the last two years."

"That's what I hear. You have no idea how many sleepless nights it's caused me."

He lifted still another file folder that showed rubber band marks. "You feel the *Tribune* accused you of police brutality."

"It's more than a feeling."

"The investigation cleared you."

"Sure. But our neighbors, my wife's coworkers, and my kids' friends will always think I beat up that guy unnecessarily, and I did it because of his skin color. I used

force against him because he was acting violently and putting people at risk.”

“So you said.”

“So I said because it’s true.”

“You’re going to have to get beyond your stereotype of Raylon Berkley.”

“Why? Is he a new homicide sergeant?”

“Look, Chandler, the last two years haven’t just been bad for the *Tribune*. They’ve been bad for the Portland Police.”

I agreed, though I would have taken it back five years, to the day he became chief, not long before Mulch introduced himself to his pant leg.

He picked up a clipboard that held what looked like a dozen pages of handwritten notes. “We’ve had a series of shootings, two where officers were found liable for the deaths of innocent citizens.”

“The *Tribune* found them liable.”

“In one case they were right.”

“Okay. Blalock was a jerk and deserved to be busted. I’m all for that. I hate dirty cops. But what about Collins? Sure, he’s back on the streets, but nobody trusts him. You can’t do your job when everybody thinks you strong-armed a store owner and destroyed his shop.”

“It looked bad.”

“And who made it look bad, before all the facts came in, before the two witnesses came forward who saw the store owner pull his gun on the cop? The *Tribune* and the news stations. Collins’s life will never be the same. Trust me. People still think I’m a racist and brutalized some helpless guy.”

“My point is, our problems with police behavior and the fund-raiser and the embezzlement...it’s hurt our image.”

“So? Where are we going here?” I squirmed, feeling like I was wearing a wool sweater with no undershirt.

“Raylon Berkley and I have had lunch a half dozen times the last two months. We’ve come up with a plan we believe can be good for both of us. Something that will bolster the public’s understanding of our department and at the same time increase sales of the *Tribune*. Raylon has taken it to their directors, and I’ve taken it to our advisory council. Everybody’s on board.”

“What board are they on?”

“You have to remember that PR is everything.”

“Everything? What about justice?”

“Well, yes, justice, naturally. But you can’t have justice without good public relations. Anyway, in order to be on the same team with the *Tribune*, in order for them to see us as we are, we need to spend time together, see each other at work, get to know each other.”

“Like...dating?”

“A crude analogy,” he said. “But there’s truth in it.”

“Look, I’ve got murders to solve. Are you going to tell me what’s going on here?”

He shook like a volcano about to erupt.

Instead, he calmly said, “We have a plan. A *Tribune* reporter will cover a murder case, working alongside one of our homicide detective teams, start to finish. They’ll be there from crime scene to lab, interviews, every aspect of the investigation. The reporter will write it up for the public—” he raised his hand when he saw my face—“leaving out anything that could compromise the investigation. Two days a week an article will be written, allowing the readers of the *Trib* to follow the investigation.”

“Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Look at the success of *COPS*. It shows people what we really do. People love it. Just like they love *CSI*.”

“Right, and they expect cases to be solved like they are on *CSI*. And juries now demand *CSI*-type evidence to prove guilt when it normally doesn’t work that way. And people who watch *COPS* figure out ways to outsmart the system.”

“But people have gained a much greater understanding of our work. It’s helped our image. We need it here in Portland. I had a few conditions, of course, and so did Raylon. All but one of his conditions were reasonable.”

“I think it’s a big mistake. But you don’t need my permission.”

“I certainly don’t.”

“So again I ask, why am I here?”

The barbecue coals in his eye sockets flamed on. Lenox slammed down his clipboard on his desk, three inches from my fingers. “Because Raylon Berkley’s condition is that his reporter has to work with *you*.”



"I should prefer that you do not mention my name at all in connection with the case, as I choose to be only associated with those crimes which present some difficulty in their solution."

SHERLOCK HOLMES, *THE ADVENTURE OF THE CARDBOARD BOX*

"I'M NOT ASKING YOU," the chief said, wagging his finger at me. "This isn't a democracy."

"There's no way I can do my job with a journalist in my pocket. Ridiculous!"

"It's not your call, Detective."

"What about Jack Glissan or Brandon Phillips? They're perfect. Veterans. Punctual. Look good in suits. They're fit. Hair's nice, everything the public likes."

"For once we agree," Lennox said. "That's what I told Raylon. But no, he said, 'I want Ollie Chandler.'"

"Had he been drinking?"

"I couldn't believe it either," the chief said. "Why choose a velvet Elvis when you can have a Monet?"

"I have a velvet Elvis hanging in my garage. Who's Mohnay?"

He nodded, as if proving a point.

"So why does Berkley want me?"

"He said it's because you're colorful and interesting and you have a history."

"I'm good-looking and brilliant too, but Glissan or Phillips are still better choices."

He stood, face red, waving his hands like a conductor. "I think the real reason was stated—the exact words were, 'Chandler can act like a moron.' I think he hopes you will."

"I'll bet you stuck up for me when he said that."

"He didn't say it. *I* did. You're a fish out of water. And your career direction...you're up a creek without a paddle."

"One day my ship will come in. You can't judge a book by its cover."

"Raylon thinks the handwriting's on the wall. When you mess up, readership increases. After all, idiots can be interesting."

You're an idiot and you're not interesting, I said.

Okay, I didn't *say* it, but I thought it. And that's why I'm putting it in italics. (I'm hoping eventually to turn this into a detective novel. I figure any idiot can write one of those.)

“Well, if *you* don’t want me to do it, and *I* don’t want to do it, why are we even talking about it?”

“Because...we’re that desperate.” He sighed and plopped into his chair.

“We?”

“Our future’s at stake.”

“Do you mean your future?” Chicago was on his mind.

“The future of the police department!”

“Are they considering dismantling the department and having the city run by gangs and vigilantes? Because I’m thinking that may not work too well. Didn’t work in Chicago.”

“It’s signed, sealed, and delivered. You’re going to do it. Unless you want to turn in your badge and find a job in mall security.”

With three hours’ sleep and eight cups of coffee, I had one nerve left and the chief was getting on it. I stood and walked to the door.

“Malls have their upsides. There’s a pet store. Caramel corn. Starbucks. Hot Dog on a Stick. Beats the lousy vending machines in detective division.”

I walked out the door, right past Mona and her cute little lapdog, who pretended they weren’t eavesdropping. The chief followed me. I turned and said, “Chicago winters are rough anyway. As we speak, it’s probably raining cats and dogs.”

I rarely leave the Justice Center until after rush hour. But I had to escape.

I went out of my way to gaze on the cornerstone inscribed with Martin Luther King’s words: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Ironic that he spoke those words while locked up in a place like this. It burned me that injustice still worms its way inside the building that bears those words.

I crossed the Morrison Bridge, got on I-84 east, then exited early and pulled into a 7-Eleven on Halsey. Bought a six-pack of Bud, then drove to a Minit Mart two miles down Stark Street and bought another six-pack. When you’re a cop, you have to be careful. Somebody might think you have a drinking problem.

My last stop was Taco Bell, where I ordered a bean burrito, two chicken chalupas, and a steak gordita. I turned on the car radio and in forty seconds heard about a kidnapping, arson, and an escaped child molester. I punched it off.

I walked in my front door, and Mulch did the doggy dance of joy. I let him out onto my splintery back deck, catching the faint smell of burnt English muffins, gazing at my measly yellowish lawn and its unspread pile of moldy bark dust, by the rotting elm tree.

I grabbed two beers and poured one into Mulch’s bowl. He lapped it up. Then

I popped in a 24 DVD and settled onto the couch. I handed Mulch a chalupa. He inhaled it in three seconds.

When Nero Wolfe, master detective, wants a beer, he presses a button and Fritz comes in with a tray. I don't have a Fritz. Or a Theodore to tend the orchids. Or an Archie to do my legwork. All I've got is Mulch. But I wouldn't trade him even for Fritz, Theodore, and Archie.

I love Nero Wolfe and Jack Bauer and Chuck Norris. They're my escape from a world that doesn't make sense, a world I find myself liking less every day.

I pressed the remote and watched Jack Bauer save the country despite the bureaucrats. Justice prevails. It's a nice thought. After the fifth beer it's almost believable.

If there is a God, I wonder if He gets as tired of this world as I do.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 6:30 A.M.

My shaky, headache-riddled memories of the night before included *Walker, Texas Ranger* roundhouse kicking a gang of thugs into tomorrow and Jack Bauer chopping a bad guy's hand off to save the city from a nuclear bomb. Or something.

They say that when the boogeyman goes to sleep, he checks his closet for Chuck Norris. Superman wears Chuck Norris pajamas. Chuck Norris doesn't sleep; he waits.

That's why I like Chuck Norris and Jack Bauer. They do what the rest of us can't. Hey, they can get McDonald's breakfast after ten thirty. They scare the crud out of bad guys, and they give us hope that maybe in the end good will beat out evil.

I also remembered my conversation with the chief, reason enough to drink myself into unconsciousness. At least I'd made it all the way to bed this time.

I sipped coffee to pull myself back into the world I'd checked out of twelve hours ago. Beer pulls me out; coffee pulls me back. A bungee cord effect.

I pulled three case files out of my briefcase. The Jimmy Ross murder was on top. It had been so easy, but a few things about it niggled at me, like a carpenter ant munching wood siding.

Let it go. Why was that case still bugging me?

I stood on Justice Center floor 14, the detective floor, at the watercooler, watching bubbles rise. The sun coming through the windows of Portland Homicide was suddenly eclipsed. I looked up. Hovering over me was a human planetoid.

"Clarence Abernathy," I said. I stepped back so as not to be sucked in by his gravity. "Big as life. Bigger."

“Hello, Detective.”

I suppose we both felt awkward, like guys who should be friends by now but aren't. We see each other once a week, at Lou's, for lunch with Jake. Never anywhere else. Clarence and I get along only if Jake's there. Without him, our chemistry goes bad.

He wore a meticulous black suit, maroon tie, and dress shoes, looking like a CEO or corporate attorney. His clothes appear permanently ironed. He's a columnist for the *Oregon Tribune*, where most of the reporters dress like war protesters. But Abernathy always looks like he's come from the tailor.

His back's half an acre. There's so much of the man you're tempted to stare. He's no more than thirty pounds overweight—not bad for a guy who maybe hit three hundred pounds at fifteen.

“I haven't been here since...since Dani...” He peered out the huge windows overlooking Portland, his voice sounding like distant thunder. I remembered that night we'd met, at his sister's house, forty minutes after she'd been murdered.

“You're wondering why I'm here.” His words were clean and precise, like a Shakespearean actor. He gave me a half smile.

“Being a detective, I think I just figured it out. Are you the chosen one?”

“When I heard Berkley cut a deal with your chief and wanted someone assigned to you, I volunteered. I figured I'd rescue you from my colleagues.”

“Am I supposed to feel relieved that I'm ending up with you rather than one of those arrogant journalists who thinks he knows everything?”

“It could be worse. I could be one of those arrogant cops who thinks he knows everything. Besides, I figured I was the only one who could get past your...idiosyncrasies.”

“Never underestimate a reporter's ability to overestimate his ability.”

“They call us journalists now.”

“Yeah, and they call drug addicts chemically dependent. Doesn't Berkley know we're friends? I mean, as much as a cop and a *journalist* can be friends.”

“Berkley knows your reputation. So he wanted to assign you a woman or a minority.”

“Are you the woman or the minority?”

“You're a pain, Chandler. What was I thinking?”

Clarence sounded like a disgruntled bull. I like that sound, so I make a point of pushing his buttons. Jake is our buffer, managing to keep us civil. It'd been years since I'd gone one-on-one with Clarence.

“C'mon, sit down,” I said. “Give the sun a chance to shine. So you think we're going to be partners?”

“Not partners. Two guys doing their jobs. I'll be happy if we don't kill each other.”

“Can we lower our sights to something more realistic? Like, we’ll kill each other, but quickly and with minimal suffering?”

“I assume your chief made the decision without you?”

“Quit calling him *my* chief. I’ve been sideswiped. Berkley and Lennox are a couple of big egos. And they’re using us.”

“Your chief isn’t keen on you either. Berkley said he called you King of the Idiots.”

“He actually said King of the Idiots?”

“Don’t take it personally.”

“Like his opinion matters to me. King’s not bad. Beats Queen. Or Jack. Actually, you’re lucky, Abernathy. Not many journalists get to see a mastermind at work. Watson wrote up Sherlock Holmes. Every Holmes needs a Watson.”

“I’m not your Watson. Anyway, here’s the deal. The moment you get notified of a murder, you’re to call me. Immediately. You give me the address, and you’re not supposed to do anything until I get there. I need to see everything as the case unfolds.”

“You’re already taking charge?”

“My job is to observe and communicate how you do your work, start to finish.”

“Just you, right, and just day-shift hours?”

“You haven’t seen the agreement? Check your e-mail. You know how to open an attachment, right? It says you must include me in any actions taken on the case. If it intrudes too much into my private life, I make that call, but most of the time I’ll join you. Nights too.”

“What if having a journalist around intrudes into my *professional* life?”

“That would be a problem...if your opinion mattered.”

“It’ll just be you? Not one of those nitwits like Kost or Button?”

“Kost’s no nitwit. No comment on Button. Anyway, when it comes to the murder, Carp will be on call too. You remember Lynn Carpenter?”

“The photographer who helped us on your sister’s case?”

“You liked her didn’t you?”

“She was okay. Considering she’s...one of you. But at the *crime scene*? We’ve got professionals taking pictures.”

“Carp’s a professional.”

“I meant a *real* professional. Police department. I can’t let a newspaper—”

“Read your e-mail. The agreement says pictures can be taken, but before anything’s published you’ll see it. You’ll be asked to approve. If we disagree, we say so and your chief makes the call.”

Clarence pulled out one of those miniature computer doohickeys and poked at it with a magic wand.

“So,” he said, “how long before we’ll be working a case?”

“We try not to put murders on the calendar anymore. It was nice for planning vacations, but it looked suspicious.”

“Approximately.”

“Do I appear to be all-knowing?”

“Not remotely.”

I sighed. “Manny and I get every fifth murder. There’ve been, let’s see, three murders since Jimmy Ross, you know, the dude Lincoln Caldwell blew away? Doyle and Suda are working on the guy who went over the bridge last night. Glissan and Barrows are next. Murder rate’s been unusual. We’re already on deck.”

“So what’s your best guess? Based on averages.”

“Block out everything from now until next month, and you should have it covered. Or if you want things to move quicker, kill somebody yourself.”

“I’m considering it,” he said.

I didn’t like the way he looked at me. He scribbled something and handed me a business card. It was neat and professional. “That’s my cell number.”

“Got it already.” I waved my phone at him.

“Now you have it in your wallet. If your cell dies, you can still find a phone and call me. Don’t forget. I need to be there from the beginning.”

Apparently I told my face I was unhappy.

“It could be worse,” Clarence said. “We could be television. Cameras and bright lights.”

“That’s next. After that, they’ll film the murders live.” I shook my head. “I’m telling you, Abernathy, the detectives are going to think this is a sellout. That *I’m* a sellout.”

“Berkley said your chief’s the one who suggested it.”

“You’re saying ‘*your* chief’ on purpose, aren’t you?”

I walked away. This is usually a good move when you feel like decking somebody.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21

There was a time in my life when I would have been sound asleep at 3:07 a.m. without assistance. That time passed when lightning struck two years ago, and somebody yanked Sharon from my life.

Since then I’ve had to use sleeping pills, or my preferred pharmaceutical, Budweiser. I’d been on a bender at Rosie O’Grady’s pub the night before, so when the phone rang at 3:07, I wasn’t sure if I’d gone to bed three hours or twenty minutes ago.

“Chandler?” the raspy voice said. “It’s me.”

Why do people say “It’s me”? What’s the alternative—demon possession?

“Who’s you?”

“Lieutenant Mike Petersen.”

I saw his image rising from the ashes of my torched mind: built like an oak, but with rougher bark, mosslike hair coming out his ears.

“Hang on a second.” He was whispering, which meant he was trying not to wake his wife. “Okay. There’s been an incident.” If you drive a bus, an incident is a fender bender or two passengers squabbling over a seat. If you’re a cop, incidents involve bombs, attacks, crashes, and mayhem. When you’re a homicide detective, incidents are murders.

“One body. 2230 Southeast Oak. House is green with—”

“Yellow tape and cop cars out front?” I said, legs heavy as sandbags. Wading through the darkness and feeling cold kitchen tile against my bare feet, I flipped Mr. Coffee. “Who’s patrol?”

“Officers Dorsey...and Guerino.”

“Do I know them?”

“If I were you, I could answer that.”

“Grumpy, Lieutenant?”

“You know what time it is?”

“3:11?”

“My grandkids are spending the night. I’m in the hallway.” He gave me Dorsey’s number.

“Got it. Go back to bed.”

“Don’t forget to call your shadow.”

“Huh?”

“The *Tribune* reporter. What’s his name? The big black guy who used to do sports.”

My gut squirmed like a fish tossed on the bank. “Abernathy.”

“Chief said to make sure you call Abernathy. I’ll call Manny. Longer trip for him. Wait for Abernathy before you go in. That’s what the chief said. You’re calling him?”

“Got it.”

I hung up and started to call Abernathy. I stopped. I emptied into my giant Seahawks mug the first eight ounces from the coffeepot. Nice and black. I go through bags of coffee like they’re paper towels.

What was that? Something in my driveway. Sounded like a car door latching. I reached for the nearest gun, the Ruger P-97 in the cupboard, behind two coffee mugs.

I went to the front window and looked at the driveway. Nothing. I snuck out into the garage, opened the door, and followed my Ruger. I studied my car. Okay. Came around to the front porch. Okay. I realized only then how cold it was, especially on my legs. I wasn't wearing pants.

In case someone was watching, I posed like Dirty Harry, lacking only a .357 Magnum, shoes, and pants. I backed into the garage and shut the door.

I replaced the P-97 in the cupboard, took the Browning in the Seahorse waterproof case out of the medicine cabinet, set it in the soap dish, and took my shower. I threw on the least offensive clothes lying by the bed and tucked a tie in my jacket pocket. I pulled on a dark blue stocking cap and put my black Sam Spade fedora over it. I grabbed my cell phone and headed to the car. As I pulled out, I punched numbers.

"Dorsey."

"Ollie Chandler, homicide. On my way. What we got?"

"Scene's pretty clean, but the vic's a mess. Something went sideways here, Detective. He—"

"All I need to know. Be there in ten. Keep everybody out, okay?"

I prefer not to hear crime scene descriptions over the phone. I like to rely on my own eyes. I want to see what I see, not what somebody else says I should see. I'd get patrol's report after my own wheels were turning.

As I drove, I noticed something in the passenger seat. A box. It said Wally's Donuts. In it was a single glazed donut, with telltale signs that it'd recently had five companions.

There were three reasons I didn't eat it. One, I didn't remember buying those donuts. Two, I didn't remember going to Wally's Donuts. Three, I didn't remember ever *hearing* of Wally's Donuts.

The last six months, when I come home late from Rosie O'Grady's, there's a lot I don't remember. But donuts from a place I'd never heard of? It wasn't like me to have eaten five donuts. If I'd bought these, I would've eaten all six. Or given the last one to Mulch. Could I have been drunk enough to leave a donut in the car?

What's going on? The donut wasn't my only issue. Why did they call me? Manny and I aren't the up team. We're on deck. *Aren't we?* But then, if I couldn't remember buying a box of donuts...

My plan was to call Abernathy once I arrived at the scene. I'd still be in the car, so I could tell him I hadn't entered yet. That would give me a head start. I'd be holding the cards when he got there.

At the scene were a dozen people, two in bathrobes covered by coats. Crime scenes are magnets. Fortunately, at 3:30 a.m. not as many gawkers are available,

and most journalists are sleeping in their crypts, or doing whatever vampires do when they're not sucking blood.

My biggest concern was the swarm of uniforms. It looked like the Policemen's Ball. That always makes me nervous. The greater the numbers, the greater the potential for contaminated evidence. Cops, firemen, paramedics, all kinds of trained and helpful people can trample a scene and destroy or bury evidence.

I saw two EMTs smoking cigarettes outside the ambulance across the street. That always means somebody's dead.

Two civilian cars in the driveway, patrol car at the curb. On the porch, two cops were having an animated exchange with somebody.

I reached into my trench coat's inner pocket for my Black Jack gum. Nothing. I patted it down. No Black Jack? Bad luck. I dialed Abernathy's cell number. One ring.

"Yeah?"

"It's Chandler. Sorry to get you up."

"I *am* up."

"Just got a call, Eeyore. There's been a murder."

"No kidding."

I stepped out of the car. "The address is—"

"2230 Southeast Oak."

On the porch, one officer was looking at me, the other was eyeing the big guy in suit and tie, who was pointing at the house numbers with his cell phone, glaring at me.

"Oh, boy."

I approached, identified myself to the uniforms, then looked up at the shall-we-say tense face of Clarence Abernathy.

"So you 'just' got a call?"

"It was at 3:07. Only twenty minutes ago."

He looked at his watch. "Twenty-six minutes ago. Twenty-two minutes ago I got a call."

"The lieutenant?"

"He said you'd call me, but just in case..."

Light shone on our faces from the video camera of a bozo named Jordan who comes to murder scenes and sells footage to two of the TV stations.

"Hey, Jordan, we're having a private conversation here. Mind turning that off?"

Jordan didn't say anything. He kept filming.

"Shaq here wanted us to let him in," Dorsey said. "Can you believe that?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's just like him."

It was a cold night. Abernathy had steam rising from his forehead, like it was

the fourth quarter in a long, icy drive up Lambeau Field.

“We had an agreement,” Clarence said.

“I kept it. I didn’t enter the crime scene before calling you. I still haven’t entered the crime scene.”

“That’s why people don’t trust cops. You’re liars.”

I saw Guerino’s hand lower a few millimeters toward his pistol. It was a flinch, but I notice things.

Jordan stepped over the yellow tape onto the lawn. I wanted to put a couple of Glock holes through his camera, but I figured that might win me a return trip to anger management.

Officer Guerino shouldered up by Dorsey and gave Abernathy a hard stare, which he apparently thought was intimidating. But staring a man in the Adam’s apple, or craning your neck so he’s looking down your nostrils, does not intimidate.

“You need coffee,” I said to Clarence. “Here’s my thermos. Leave some for me.”

He eyed the thermos like it harbored an Ebola culture.

“Look,” I said, “you want to stand here and fight while the body gets cold? We could sit on the lawn and play pinochle. You and Guerino can be partners.”

Abernathy stared at Guerino. Finally the cop blinked.

“Or how ’bout I go in the door and do my job?”

“Your job was to call me.”

“I called you. Want to watch me work? Fine. Otherwise, quit whining and go back to bed.”

“You crossed me and you lied,” Abernathy said. “I won’t forget it.”

“Does this mean,” I said, tapping my fingers on the yellow crime scene tape, “that the honeymoon’s over?”



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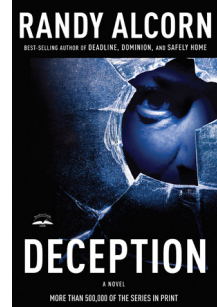
with author Randy Alcorn

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About Randy Alcorn

Randy is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries and the best-selling author of over 50 books (over nine million in print) including *Heaven*, *The Treasure Principle*, and the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home*.



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