



Just Coincidence

*By Pat Nolan writing as
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—Act I, Scene 1—

The old neighborhood had changed for the worse. The high brick wall that had once been a part of his father’s factory was covered with ivy creepers, mottles of lichen, and faded graffiti. Sickly yellowing weeds grew between the cracks in the broken sidewalk. At the curb, obscured by plastic trash and piles of leaves, stood an old sycamore whose roots has caused the cement to buckle, a last remnant of when the area had been tree shaded, thriving, catering to the employees from the battery works.

He stood in front of the candy store he had frequented as a youngster. It hadn’t changed much, just become a little shabbier. The white paint on the double front doors had bubbled and peeled. The storefront windows near the entrance, repaired with duct tape and cardboard, looked as if a hole had been punched through it.

“That’s quite an antique.” A square shouldered black man on the step leading up into the store spoke the words. He was referring to the black sedan parked at the curb.

“It’s a 1960 Plymouth Fury. Fully restored.”

“I know that. I was about your age when I would have given my right arm for one of those.” He held up the stub of his right arm. “Instead I gave it for my country in Vietnam.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” The young man grimaced. He always felt uncomfortable saying it because it was such a cliché. “Thank you for your service.”

“Wasn’t your fault. I just got careless. Ripley’s the name, by the way. I didn’t catch yours.”

“Wayne, Wayne Bruce.” He felt a little awkward as he extended his hand, but the black man grasped it firmly with his left.

“And what brings you to this neighborhood, Mr. Bruce? Lost? Or looking to pick up some cheap real estate?”

Wayne Bruce shook his head and glanced around again, reorienting himself after so many years. Abandoned buildings and the apartment towers that used to teem with activity now appeared worn and past their use by date. The brick enclosure to the crumbling factory site he used to think of as towering had retained some of its respectability if not its height. The candy store abutting the wall emitting a faint single source amber light, the tavern on the corner across the street where Central teed into Battery, neon beer sign sputtering in the dark round window open for business.

Ripley kept his gaze fixed on the young man, a lithe six foot two, tangle of dark hair framing a square face and jaw, dark intense eyes under darker eyebrows, and with a deferential confidence to his manner. A tailored black gabardine three quarter length coat with attached cowl draped snugly across the broad shoulders. The crew collared dark gray jersey clung to the shape of the angular torso topping a pair of slim black slacks and casual half boots.

Bruce then smiled and indicated the candy shop. “I used to come here when I was a youngster. My favorite candy was a Chunky bar. Mr. Rick still the owner?”

Ripley showed a frown and squinted at the tall young man. “You know old Rick?”

“Sure, he made the best egg-cream around.”

Ripley’s frown intensified, taking a closer look at the white man who had just parked his antique Plymouth on one of the roughest streets on the east end of the city. “No, he don’t do that no more. Hasn’t done that in a real long time, make egg-creams. Kids today don’t know what egg-cream is. But you are right, he made the best.”

A stiff breeze rattled the branches of the sycamore and persuaded some of the last leaves to release their grip and float reluctantly to the concrete. Both men looked in the direction the wind had come, at the lead gray mass hovering over the tall spires and square silhouettes of the downtown district, the tawny streak of late afternoon sky crushed by darker clouds at the horizon.

“You say Bruce? That your name? Like this place here?” Ripley pointed to the grim shadows hovering above the wall and the sign that had been creatively overwritten. “Bruce Battery Manufacturer? That you?”

Wayne nodded. “My father.”

“The Battery Man. I remember the billboards. *Nobody Beats A Bruce!* You that kid? I heard about you. Come on, come on in.” He pushed the door open and the hinge squeaked like a cry for help. “He’s in the back, come on.”

Bruce didn’t need urging to step up and in. The candy store was familiar though smaller than he remembered it. The counter with the white scale, now a nicotine yellow, atop the display case of penny candy, jaw breakers, licorice whips, and candy bars. A diagonal crack mended with yellowing translucent tape ran across the display glass. On the back wall by the cash register the slotted black shelves of tobacco products mostly empty. There were plastic toys and odds and ends household items, clothespins, wooden matches, boxes of plastic forks and knives on shelves along the opposite wall. A rack next to the shelves displayed an assortment of flimsy plastic Halloween costumes and masks from the holiday a few weeks past. Boxes, some unopened, some empty, were stacked on the floor toward the rear of the small space where a doorway was covered with a threadbare flowered green curtain stirred by the sound of shuffling behind it.

“Yo! Rick! Hey! Old man! Somebody here to see you!” Ripley’s grin was mirthful, glee ringing his eyes.

A grave low voice answered, “If it’s Kerr, I already gave him my answer. What don’t he get about ‘shove it’? The curtain parted to a frown under a head of close cropped silver wool and a mean squint distorting the dark brown face. Pale framed thick lensed glasses held together at the bridge by a bulge of masking tape sat on a crooked nose, the tip of which appeared lighter than the rest of the ebony exterior.

The old man came to a stop, a walking cane in each hand, and craned his tall torso forward. “Who are you? You don’t look one of Kerr’s. . . ?” He gave a sidelong glance at Ripley who was trying to maintain his composure and not burst out laughing, and then turned to face the tall young man in black. A smile slowly cracked the harsh demeanor exposing red gums and missing teeth. “It’s you, ain’t it? I’d know that canary eating grin anywhere.” To Ripley, he snapped, “What you laughing at? I don’t see nothing funny!”

Easing himself behind the candy counter, Richard Richards, Mr. Rick to most of his customers, took up his iconic position in the eyes of the young man. “Lemme guess. A Chunky bar.” At the

young man's nod, he slide open the rear door to the display case and reached in. "You remember how much you used to pay for one of these?" he asked as he set the foil wrapped candy on the top of the counter.

Wayne paused to recall. "A quarter." And then, "But I remember when they went up to fifty cents because I came in one day and all I had was twenty five cents, two dimes and a nickel, and you told me that the price had gone up. But you sold it to me anyway, that I could pay the rest next time."

The old man chuckled. "That's right. And you shoulda seen the look on your face when you realized you didn't have the right amount. You mighta cried."

"Did I ever pay you back? I don't remember. I hope I did."

"I don't recall either. Not that it matters after all this time." He held up the silver square. "Nowadays one of these will set you back five dollars! Think anyone can afford that?"

Ripley nodded in assent, "Not around here they can't, that's for damn sure!"

"This young man here used to keep track of my inventory. He knew every candy I carried and how much of it I had. He'd come in here with his daddy and name off everything I had in the case. I carried newspapers back then, and Mr. Bruce would come in for his morning and his afternoon edition. He always had this one in tow. Go straight to the glass and put his nose up against it." He shook his head in recollection. "Times are gone." And addressing young Bruce, "I'm sorry to hear of his passing."

The tips of Wayne's ear's reddened, darkening them, and he twisted a grin in agreement and acceptance of the condolences. And as if to offset the tension of the emotion, he pointed to the soda vending machine's garish edifice over to one side in the corner, the only thing that seemed out of place. "I remember the big red cooler you used to have there. It rattled whenever the compressor came on. The first time I heard it I nearly jumped out of my shorts. That and the treasure hoard of candy were my first impression of this place. And you used to have a comic book rack over there too. I spent a lot of time sitting on the floor reading them. Those are good memories, Mr. Rick."

"Aw, you were a pest, always asking questions, you were curious about everything. And then you went away to school, somewhere, some place foreign I heard. Your mother sent you off

to get a proper education. And you'd come by every once in a while when you were home visiting, and I seen you were developing into a fine young man, taking more after your ma than your husky pop, though. She only come in here with you a couple times I can remember but I could tell she was high toned." He lowered his eyes at the memory, "She doing well, is she?"

Wayne gazed out at the failing light of the darkening street. He nodded, "Yes," as if to himself. "Mother is doing well as can be expected. Dad's brother, Harold, is taking care of the details, managing the Bruce business empire." A hint of bitterness in his attitude. "Life goes on even if not for Wallace W. Bruce." He erased the frown with a bright smile as if it had never been there. "I thought that while I was in town for the funeral I'd see if I could still get a Chunky at the only place I know that sells them."

Rick gave an appreciative guffaw. "Well, you are in luck, this is the last one! I stopped carrying them half a dozen years ago when the price went up to two dollars. I didn't think anyone would ever want a square of chocolate, nuts, and raisins that bad. I kept this one as a souvenir of when candy was cheaper than crack." He pointed to the shelves behind the display glass. "You see anything in here that reminds you of a Zagnut or Good & Plenty or a Clark Bar, Abba Zaba, Big Hunk, JuJuBes, Milk Duds, or Pay Day?"

"You had those little wax bottles with fruit syrup in them. . . ."

"Yeah, Nickle-A-Nips, go for over a dollar now. I can't get a lot of those old candies anymore. It's my distributor, he carries all these off brands. You ever hear of a Ball Park? it's shaped like a frankfurter, made mostly of sawdust as near as I can tell, and held together with a chocolate tasting glue. Bigga Jigga? I don't even want to think what it's made of, but I heard somebody lost a tooth biting into one, pulled it clean out of his gums. And Plenty Good? Just a box of hard candy pieces swept up off the candy factory floor. O'Hara's? Some kind of high fructose soybean glop, and Dummies, just little pills of color flavored chalk. This Wacky Wax? It's just artificially sweetened wax. That can't be good for your gut."

Ripley nodded vigorously, "Eat enough of that, stick a wick up your butt and call you a candle."

"You might need a new distributor." Wayne offered with an understated chuckle.

Rick shook his head. “No, can’t, Kerr controls the East Central District. He has a say in just about everything that gets bought and sold in this neighborhood. His guy makes me carry these knockoffs and threatens me when they don’t sell! He made me install that drink vender. It’s expensive, besides. Has to stay plugged in all the time, uses more electricity than the rest of the shop! Usta carry his girly magazines but it just attracted the kids, and they’d want to shoplift something, sometimes because they thought they needed it, other times just because they thought they could. Sell ‘em under the counter now, you gotta ask to see ‘em, and if you’re asking, you buying one.”

“Kerr? Where have I seen that name, from around here?”

“Joeseph Kerr. That’s his warehouse down the block, in the old garment factory, you mighta seen the sign painted on the side of the building when you turned down Central coming into the neighborhood.”

“I did. *Kerr Novelty, Inc.* Big letters.”

“Big crook, if you ask me. Came from out east about ten years ago. He’s got his fingers in other pots, too, buying up real estate. He owns Quinn’s, the tavern across the street, and the old folks apartment building next door. I heard he was partnering with some developers for a project down at the other end of Battery. Bound to be a boondoggle like most projects in this town.”

“And he’s been looking at the old factory site, your pop’s place.” Ripley spoke up. “Heard he wants to move his operation to over there.”

Rick threw him a quick glance. “B, you know that’s just a rumor. Ain’t no truth to that.”

“Yeah, that’s what I overheard at Q’s. And you know why that’s bad news for you.”

“Yes I know, but no need to talk about something ain’t gonna happen until after I’m dead.”

“You see, man, this building, old Rick’s crib in back, the candy store, they all on the factory property. Somebody buy that factory, they get the candy store in the deal.”

Wayne cocked his head to one side, “Is that true? I’d have to look up the property deed in the company archives.”

“No, no, Bion is right. This is part of the factory property. It had been the foundry foreman’s residence before the site was converted to Bruce Battery Works. I was one of your old man’s

original employees back when he started out. Then after the accident, well, he helped me. . . .”

“Here, here,” Ripley was pointing out the window as the streetlights sparked to life at the encroaching gray, “The Up To No Good gang, I’Van and J’Van. I haven’t seen them in a while. Somebody musta bailed them out.”

Rick concurred. “They on the prowl early, looking for a stray bird. They must be desperate.”

“You know them?”

Ripley nodded solemnly, “We had occasion to get close.”

Rick chuckled, “Bion ripped open a case of whupass on those boys. They know not to mess with him.”

Bion pointed with his stub. “The redhead? That’s I’Van. He’s a nasty piece of work. The other one, the kid, J’Van, he’s dangerous because he doesn’t know how strong he is. But he’s a follower, not a leader. They do muscle for the local numbers guy, and strong arm the unwary for their nickels and dimes. They try to intimidate everyone else. Those that cross them usually end up in the hospital.”

“The bookie is in Kerr’s pocket. He couldn’t operate without his say so. His boys are the neighborhood pit bulls.” Rick added.

“And they’re taking a close look at your Plymouth at the curb. Might not be too wise to leave it parked there for long. I can go stand by it. They’ll know enough to steer wide.”

Wayne held up his hand. “No, please, I don’t think that will be necessary. Thanks for the offer, Bion, is it? An unusual name if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Naw, man, that’s cool, everybody trips over it. I got it in Nam. It’s because of my last name, Ripley. The guys in the platoon used to call me Believe It Or Not, and it got shortened to BION, and then just B, what most folks knows me calls me.”

“I don’t believe it!” Rick was leaning forward on his canes glaring out the window. “Just this minute, coming down the steps, it’s old lady Winslow, I’m sure of it.”

“Her daughter musta forgot to lock the apartment door again,” Ripley said, a trace of concern in his voice.

“She thinks she’s going shopping, got her purse and her shopping bag. . . .”

“Wait till she gets around the corner to find that the market been closed for two years now.”

“If she gets that far. I didn’t think they’d do that. They are lower than scum. Knocked her down, one of them has got her purse, laughing.”

“Call the cops!” Wayne had started toward the door.

“Calling the cops ain’t gonna do no good. They take forever to get to this end of town. Kerr’s probably paying off somebody at the precinct to lay off in his turf.”

“She might be hurt!” Ripley raced through the door, “Call for an ambulance!”

Rick replied to Wayne’s questioning look, “He was a medic in Nam. He’ll see to her till the meat wagon arrives.”

“The men, they’re gone, where. . . ?”

The old man looked up from dialing the phone, “Can’t have gone far, mighta ducked into Q’s to divvy up the loot.”

Wayne became very quiet, overcome by an ominous calm. He glanced at the Halloween display, the black domino mask with peacock feather eyebrows in its cellophane bag. He unclipped it from the rack and held it up. “How much?”

Rick shook his head. “Try it on first. See if it fits.”

Wayne ripped open the bag and plucked off the feathered decorations and slipping the mask over his eyes. “Better call for a second ambulance.”

He strode down the steps, skirted the rear fins of the Plymouth Fury and stepped quickly across the darkening street pulling the cowl up over his head as the first of the rain began to fall.

Wet occupied the air and chilled it. In the yellow-brown light of the doorway to Quinn’s Tavern, the rain striking the concrete jumped like sparks off a hot griddle. The door opened quietly, disturbing neither the wide shouldered man with the bar towel over his shoulder, gaze intent on the square of color TV mounted above the bar, who laughed along with the track, a rheumy asthmatic rasp, or the other two hunched over in the shadows of a back booth, laughing, giggling, but not at the TV, a sitcom about people who frequent a bar similar to this one although certainly less sinister.

The young one looked up, questioning at first and then frowning his face into a growl at the perceived threat. The redhead jerk his eyes up from the emptied contents of the purse like a dog guarding a bone. He was about to raise his head and bark when two rigid fingers jabbed the larynx causing a choking spasm gasp for breath at the same time the base of a palm slammed into the apex of

his nose with enough force to render him unconscious. As the dark haired man boy rose to defend his partner, a well-placed kick to the sternum knocked him back into the sitting position with his head bouncing against the tall booth, an open target for the elbow that struck him full face and broke his nose. The man behind the bar had just brought up the shotgun as the round glass ashtray that had been between the two unconscious thugs struck him on the bridge of the nose knocking him down.

A black gloved hand gathered the pile of belongings in the middle of the table and returned them to the purse. There wasn't much to the loot: a change purse, a wallet stuffed with grocery coupons but no legal tender or credit cards, a lipstick tube, hair pins, an empty pack of spearmint gum, a sheaf of letters held together by a ribbon, the scent of lilac.

No one paid attention to him as he set the purse on the stoop to the apartment house where a few neighbors had gathered with umbrellas to shield the old woman who was sitting up now, looking around bewildered, rubbing the elbow she had hit after being pushed down by the hoodlums. A siren sounded close.

Ripley glanced up once to see the tall cowed figure, eyes shadowed by the black mask before the ambulance's flashing red and ambers saturated the rain dark street. After the medics had taken over, he stood in the soaking downpour and stared at the empty curb in front of the candy store. He sensed that it was just the beginning, a perfect storm of coincidences gathering at the horizon that would rain down justice and injustice alike, and transform the lives of those who lived in the decaying industrial fringe of the city, a city whose name had always resonated as a cesspit of crime and corruption.

—Act I, Scene 2—

The funeral was huge and, not surprisingly, resembled a business convention. The social occasion of old Bruce's death itself required accommodations for those who had come to pay their respects. Politicians, local dignitaries from various denominations, prominent financiers and corporate honchos crowded the large assembly hall. Harold Bruce had made the arrangements with the exclusive Green Cove Country Club for the post interment reception which was beginning to have the air of a celebration on the verge of a cocktail party. Moderate words of tribute were spoken, tearfully, by Trish, his mother, huskily, by Harold, his uncle. Respectful, ardent words by others who had known and worked for and with him, a saint, a devoted father. When it came his turn, as the younger generation should have the final word, he had been as gracious as a psychopath, echoing their praise with a chorus of his own to the gathering of family, friends, and business associates, yet all the while considering that among them was his father's murderer.

He had stepped away from the reception hall to a wide windowed alcove overlooking the golf course, uncomfortable with the glad handing and the humorous reminiscences of the old and well off, the condolence ballet that seemed so artificial and rehearsed. In the reflection of the glass he imagined the old man in his beige polo shirt standing beside his red roofed golf cart taking a practice swing before teeing off.

God, how he hated that game, a ludicrous spectacle of status played by amateur athletes that doubled as a de facto boardroom for corporate deal makers and politicians. What did the golfers have to gain from Wally Bruce's death?

Old Dad was a centerpiece in the local business community. They could point to him as their good guy, the peak of integrity even though most of them were out and out crooks and fraudsters. The Bruce name on committees and charitable organizations gave them a shiny legitimacy that signaled trust. Although most of that was Trish's doing, the non-profits, and political committees to free or stop things. And then there was Trish. And Harold, six years younger and same age as mother. Old Dad's opinion of his brother, "He's a real fun guy, he'll grow on you." And he did, like a cancerous tumor. As vice president of Bruce Enterprises, he steps

into the old man's shoes before they're even cold. And into the widow's bed? Is it not what it seems? Now in hindsight, had there always been something between Trish and Harold, signs of undue affection, of favoritism, She was not known as the "Queen" for nothing. Her wish, her whimsy, was her command. She accepted the deference she thought she deserved, watchful for any indication of disaffection or reticence from her liege. He was her husband, father of her only son, although she seemed to treat that almost as an afterthought, and perhaps that was why the Bruce offices, the old Battery Works, held such nostalgic fascination. It had been his nursery. The difficulty of his birth had ruined her, caused her no end of physical ailment, and was an oft repeated litany that mercifully diminished after being installed in various boarding schools in the States and abroad. Now she shamelessly paraded with her brother-in-law, pretender to the throne, the head of the Bruce empire. He, unlike old Dad, would indulge her every whim.

He watched them appear behind him as reflections in the panoramic window

"There you are!" It was always like to Trish to state the obvious.

Harold maintained a grim bulldog visage, his ledge of eyebrow in a frown. The square cut glass in his right fist like an appendage, he leaned a shoulder in. "That was a very eloquent tribute to Wall."

His father disliked being called Wall but since it was only his brother who dared called him that, he bore it with long suffering tolerance.

Trish put a ring spangled hand on his arm. "It was a powerful eulogy. Your father would be proud."

He felt himself blush at the insincerity of it all. Maybe even on the verge of tears for the falsehoods he endured. He felt anger with himself first of all. And then everyone else. He wanted to confront them. Accuse them.

"Thank you. There was so much more I could have said. There is so much left unsaid. And to pass away like that. In his prime, some would say. There is so much we, I, don't know about his last day, his last hours. It just doesn't make sense."

"Wayne, he was not a well man, but he hid it from all of us. He had his pride, but as his wife I can say it was pride. He thought

he was some kind of super human. Unfortunately he had the heart of a mere mortal. The negotiations were taking their toll on him.”

“But the circumstances. . . .”

“I know, I know, we’ve been through all this before.” Trish put on her practiced long-suffering face and sighed. “The doorman at the Legacy Tower saw him at around 11 that evening. He saw your father get into the penthouse elevator. Alone. He was the only one with a key. The trouble alarm sounded because the door to the elevator wouldn’t close after it arrived at the penthouse.”

“I think he panicked,” Harold offered.

“Father?”

“No, the doorman. He wasn’t the regular on that shift, but Ronald, who normally manned those hours had called in sick earlier that evening and so this other man who was actually a trainee didn’t know the procedure.”

“Which was?” Wayne had heard the official oft repeated version and they were all remarkably the same which should have allayed suspicion, but still he doubted and his doubt required reassurances.

“Why are we replaying the morbid details? We’ve been over them a thousand times,” Trish exaggerated.

Harold continued as if recounting someone else’s mistakes would give him satisfaction. “So he called the fire department.”

“Shouldn’t he have?” Wayne knew that here was where the details became rather vague.

“He should have called the night manager who has the key to the service elevator that would open to the penthouse. That was the protocol.”

“But wasn’t it an emergency?”

Harold offered a placating gesture. “He didn’t know that. It could have been merely a mechanical problem. He did call up to the penthouse. And when no one answered he called the fire department.”

“So the police tagged along as well. And that only complicated matters,” Trish added with a tone of disgust.

“The commotion roused the night manager and they were able to get to the penthouse where they found. . . .”

“Oh, I don’t want to hear this. It is so undignified. Why couldn’t he have died in bed, alone or not, befitting a man of his

stature!” Trish was on the verge of real tears not so much at the death of her husband but at the indignity of it all.

Harold shrugged and set his jaw with resolve to finish the story. “Wall had fallen, must have happened just as the door to the elevator opened, and wedged in the doorframe, triggered the alarm. The police should never had been called, Trish is right, it was a medical emergency. But because he was who he was, the cops at the scene called downtown, and downtown sent a detective, and because they sent a detective, they had to alert the medical examiner. . . .”

“They were going to take him to the morgue! Fortunately our lawyer, Dr. Linus Pall, and your father’s physician, put a stop to that.” Trish became clearly agitated.

“But the cause of death, it seems rather vague.”

“Death is vague, darling boy. It was his heart, your father had a bad heart. You’ll have to accept that.”

“He had a good heart, Mother. That I can guarantee. And I am my father’s son.”

“I hope you’re not going to make trouble now, are you, Wayne? Do something silly like call for an autopsy?” Harold squared his shoulders and became very grim along the jaw line where pink tinged the skin under his five o’clock shadow.

Wayne waited out the silence before giving a smile and a shrug. “No, of course not. Life goes on, open for business. I have my life, he had his. I have a new project I’m pursuing.”

“Oh mountain climbing again, Mount Everest, was it?”

“K2, Mother.”

“That as well. Black belting in some tournament or other? Sky diving? Jumping off bridges on a rubber band. I can never keep track.”

“No, actually, it’s something I’m quite excited about. It is local. I had been thinking about doing it before Dad died. We had talked about it briefly several times and he seemed in agreement.” Wayne inclined his head to each of them. “I will be renovating the old battery works and restoring it as a local landmark named in memory of Dad and at the same time preserving some of the history of that area.”

Harold arched his eyebrows in a show of interest. “You’re suggesting a gentrification project?”

“That’s a horribly depressed side of the city, dear. I heard the city council wants to bulldoze the entire area. That old foundry is in

a high crime district. I read in the paper just this morning that yesterday or maybe the day before, three citizens were assaulted by a crazy masked man! There are daylight robberies!”

“My project would address the poverty in that area by hiring local labor and artisans to do the restoration work and maintenance thereby giving them a stake in their community.”

“Oh, dear, you’re starting to sound like a communist.”

Harold cleared his throat. “A good idea, my boy, but I’m afraid that will be impossible. We are in the middle of negotiating with a toxic cleanup fund contractor to comply with the federal. . . .”

“I’ve read the suit, and our inhouse analysis. I’m having my lab at Bruce Advanced Technical Systems review the soil samples from the Environmental Impact Report. I can bring the cost in lower than the big contractors by hiring locally. . . .”

“It’s a losing proposition,” Harold insisted, shaking his head and glaring fiercely, a family trait. “You’re crazy if you think you’ll get any decent returns, even after the entire issue of liability. . . .”

“Yes, listen to Harold, dear boy, how will you ever recoup your returns on your investment. What bank. . . ?”

“Once the toxic issue is settled, the old factory site will be turned into a historical park in memory of Dad’s civic contributions to the culture of the city.”

“A park? Those old brick relics? And for free. Harold is right, you are mad.”

“There’ll be a museum.”

“Of old batteries?”

“There would an historical display, of course, but primarily it will house my world renowned collection of classic cars.”

“Of course,” Harold nodded appreciatively, “they were part of the big auto show in Vagas a few years back.”

“Another one of your hobbies. When are you going to settle down, get married. Lotte has been asking after you.”

Wayne ignored his mother addressing Harold instead “Collectors and car enthusiasts the world over will flock to the museum just to be photographed alongside a favorite classic by a professional staff. For a fee, of course.”

Harold had shifted his eyes to the side making a calculation. “That’s a rather large parcel of land for a museum. What are you going to do with the rest of it? Parking lot?”

“For some of it I’m sure. We’ll have to accommodate visitors. And much of it can be landscaped as a park. The old brick sheds will house the museum with certain alterations and additions. Perhaps an art gallery and a community center. I’m having one of our architects prepare a feasibility study and I’ll be taking over the old administration building as a satellite office of Bruce Advanced Technical Systems. That way I can keep an eye on the reconstruction of the old battery works while managing the research firm.”

Harold cleared his throat. “The funding for the new Defense Department contract is in the pipeline and everything is on track?”

“Red Ball.”

Trish sighed. “He would always say that when a plan of his was top priority. That, ‘going great guns’ whatever that supposed to mean.” She smiled at her son. “Spoken like a true captain of industry!” She was turning away as she made the proclamation. The conversation had become boring and not a little impertinent.

Harold followed, a muttered “We have to talk” as he strode away.

Wayne returned his gaze to the wide window panorama and the fading day rendering the glass all the more opaque. Another shadow loomed behind him and was reflected in the glass. He turned, smiling, extending his hand.

“Ray Tso! It has been a long while! How many years?”

Ray returned the smile and the handshake. “I had to come and pay my respects. Your old man was one of those unique adults you knew you could trust.”

“Thanks, Ray, that’s good of you to say. And how about you? More kids? Still working for the District Attorney?”

“No and yes.”

“I’m glad you came. I have a favor to ask of you. I have to see the medical report of when they brought my father in.”

“I don’t think I can do that, Wayne. Why? Is something suspicious about his death? I would have heard.”

“No, no, just curiosity, and grief, I suppose. It feels so unresolved. I had talked to him on the phone not more than a week ago.”

“You’re not going to ask for an autopsy are you?”

Wayne gave a wan smile. “No, but you are the second person who’s mentioned it.”

Ray nodded in understanding. “Let me put you in touch with the detective who handled the case. His name is Gordon James. He might be able to help you.”

“Ok, put in a good word for me.”

“No problem,” Ray answered scribbling on the back of his business card and handing it to Wayne. “You know, when I walked up behind you I could see your reflection in the window and you looked just like your old dad.”

“Crazy,” Wayne smiled, tucking the card into his inside jacket pocket, and glanced back at the tee box now in darkness and imagined the red canvas roof of the golf cart dropping down behind the mound and heading for the fairway. A silent vow welled up and tightened his jaw. Justice. Justice for old Dad. If it’s the last thing.

He accompanied Ray Tso back to the reception hall and stopped to view the thinning crowd of attendees from the top of the steps leading down. The black clad and somber gathered in clusters exchanging reminiscences and business cards, nodding gravely over their cocktails.

Off to one side where a shrouded grand piano sat unattended by the large floor to ceiling doors leading out to the terrace, Charlotte and her brother, Lawrence Taste, heirs to the vast Taste fortune, and Doctor Linus Pall appeared to be having a purposeful conversation. Charlotte, tall, willowy, blonde, a perfect example of privilege and beauty that even her subdued yet stylish mourning outfit could not suppress. Her long blond hair piled atop her head beneath a black lace doily, she was listening intently to something Linus Pall was saying. She must have sensed his gaze as she turned her head toward him and gave a weak smile. She lay a slender hand on Pall’s arm and said something to her brother before leaving them and walking his way. Larry Taste frowned at her departure and followed it with a scowl directed at Wayne. There was no love lost between them. Like Charlotte, her brother was a carefully sculpted specimen of the handsome aristocrat with a full crop of disheveled sun bleached hair breaching the collar of his casually tailored dark suit, fashionable sideburns and a moustache over a mouth of perfect teeth.

Charlotte had the same perfect teeth as she greeted him with a slight smile and a sad downturn to her beautiful blue eyes.

“Wayne, I’m so sorry,” she started but he shook his head. It was an emotional moment for both of them, her eyes welling up with

tears and he trying to tamp down the sorrow and anger rising in his chest.

She instead threw her arms around him and sobbed into his lapel. As she caught her breath she pulled her head back and stared into his eyes. “I, I think I understand,” she said as if the words were strangling her, “You’re right, of course, to postpone the engagement. It’s not a good time. You have so much to deal with now.”

She was repeating back the message he had left on her answering machine almost word for word. It made him doubt the sincerity of her words.

“I thought the occasion should be put on hold considering the circumstances. Business has imposed impossible demands with Dad’s passing and I have to step in more actively now. The company is vulnerable to corporate raiders and ripe for a hostile takeover. Bruce Enterprises has to be prepared for that. I knew you’d understand.”

Larry Taste had followed his sister and wasn’t as contrite. “I ought to punch you in the face, Bruce! What kind of ill-mannered asshole calls off an engagement on the telephone? She’s lucky to be rid of you!” Taste had aggressively placed his face directly in Wayne’s line of sight to make his point.

A great calmness overcame him and deflected the rage with disarming acquiescence. “You’re right, she is lucky to be rid of me. I am cursed by an insane constancy that demands a balance be restored, wrongs righted, justice meted. It will not allow me to rest and it would not be reasonable to inflict my dark obsession on someone I love ”

Charlotte tugged on her brother’s arm, eyes agog at Wayne’s admission. “Larry, no!”

“You’re a psycho!” Larry spat.

“I am mad.”

—Act I, Scene 3—

The late afternoon sky, losing some of its color, was hastening toward dark. A barricade of clouds hemmed in a sinking autumn sun, scattering its light as feeble rays. The hazmat team from the BATS Lab had packed up after a forensic sampling of the soils at various depths of the contaminated area and a thorough scanning of the site with sniffers. He could expect results overnight. He folded and stowed his protective gear in the utility box in back of his '79 Land Rover. It was a souvenir of his time in Mali. The thing he liked about the old rugged square cab Rovers, although they weren't built for speed, was that they came in any color you wanted as long as it was green. As well, the bed was long enough to hold his matte black BMW R12 motorcycle in its canvas sheath. If he wanted to go fast. The beeping pager brought him out of his reverie.

Wayne Bruce retrieved the device from the pocket of his leather jacket and scrolled through the display. Uncle Harold had called multiple times. Everything was Urgent and ASAP with him. And a number he remembered as belonging to Detective Gordon James with Metro Homicide. There was a third number that he didn't recognize. Very few people had his pager number and he was certain he knew all of them.

He could assume the reason for the panicky calls from his uncle. With Wallace Bruce's death, the Defense Department's Office of Acquisition and Development had called for a pause in the contract negotiations until the board of directors of Bruce Enterprises decided on the succession. No one doubted that it would be Wallace's brother, Harold. Trish held the deciding vote and there was little chance she would vote otherwise. But that's government for you, Old Dad had said more than once, cautious, inept, and wasteful, but what would you do without it. And then he'd go on about pirates, bandits, and spies. Harold was a worry wart. The negotiations would resume. That's what they had lawyers for. He had expected to hear from Detective James again. At their first meeting the day after the funeral, the homicide detective had explained that the medical examiner had turned over the body of the deceased to the family lawyer, Linus Pall, who, puzzling to him, was also the decedent's personal physician. There was no medical report except for Pall's signature on the death certificate. His own examination of the crime scene had been perfunctory, he'd made

clear, as the assumption of his superiors was that it was a heart attack and that he was there merely as window dressing, which he was not terribly happy about. His case load had doubled with a recent spate of killings in an uptick of turf wars among dealers and gangs. He'd also noted that there was no video from the security camera on the penthouse elevator, a fact that Wayne had confirmed with the Legacy Arms management. All the elevators have cameras but it was a specific request from the penthouse lease, Bruce Enterprises, that the feed be disconnected. For privacy reasons. One other thing. There'd been a little vomit on the carpet exiting the elevator next to where Bruce's head had hit. James had taken a sampling in case the death was deemed suspicious because he was a good detective and he was going to do his job even if he was just there as an official mannequin. But since the case was closed and out of his hands he was going to destroy the evidence. Unless, that is, young Bruce wanted to do it for him. It was pretty much a dead end Wayne realized, and he had thanked the detective for his time. And yes, he would take the carpet sampling off his hands.

Over the course of the week since the interment he'd turned his attention Old Dad's last days, reaching out to the old man's executive secretary, Rhona Samules, and obtained his father's appointments and meetings calendar. The previous weeks had been a scattering of routine meetings with upper level staff, and with his brother, the Vice President of Operations. They were breaking ground on a new factory upstate. Almost in equal amounts of time were golf outings, one even to a country club out of state for which the company jet had been reserved. At a glance, the schedule might have given the impression that the old boy's business was golfing.

Old Bruce had been staying at their country house in Bon Aire, chauffeured in regularly to the office on the top floor of Bruce Tower. For Trish, the country house, large and almost always empty was dull unless she was hosting a large charity event. She kept a town house in the city where she entertained. The week of his death, his father's personal secretary of twenty years had been instructed to clear his calendar and informed that he would not be conducting any meetings at the Tower. Rhona had remarked that she thought it unusual because he had been intently focused on the merger project, and finalization of the new government contract. If need be, her boss had told her, he could be found either at the Country Club or at the company penthouse at the Legacy Arms. Wayne would have to give

the schedule of appointments of the preceding weeks a more thorough going over when he returned to the penthouse where he was now staying.

The other number on the readout was unfamiliar yet something about the combination of numerals, maybe a locker combo when he had been in school, made him save it rather than delete. Other concerns nagged him as he scanned the deserted factory yard and tried to visualize how a classic car museum and community center could rise out of the crumbling brick structures. It would take a lot of money. But he had a lot of money. First step was converting the old brick office building into a temporary HQ for Bruce Advanced Tech.

Maybe it was just the late afternoon sun emerging from a break in the clouds, but he thought he caught a flash of movement in the shadow of a window looking out onto the parking lot. Curious, he stepped up the brick and cement steps bordered by wrought iron hand rails. The lock was broken and the door had been forced open. No surprise. How long had the company stepped away from the old Battery Works? Fac Ops had obviously placed the property low on its list of priorities.

He pushed the door open. The only resistance it met was layers of dust and loose floor tiles. Inside was deserted. The office furniture had either been hauled away or scavenged. Something else besides dust and mildew contributed to the closeness of the air. He noticed the fast food containers abandoned in a corner of the wide reception room. The gray dust of the floor showed obvious shoe and boot tracks, some appearing more recent than others. Someone had been living in the building or was still living there. Animal paw prints patterned the dust as well. He guessed cats. And rats. Most of the windows had been boarded up and his gaze led him down past the reception counter to the long hallway that connected to the offices and the staff kitchen at the rear. His father had had his offices at the far back with a sitting room where he often spent the night on the couch.

Everything in his head said it should have been so much more familiar yet now it was also strange and disorienting. He retrieved the mini flashlight in the utility pocket of his dark work pants and shined it ahead of him moving slowly down the corridor. Now the stench was overpowering the odor of dust and mildew. It was coming from ahead of him. He heard mewling and opened the

door to what he remembered was the accounting office. He stepped back, startled at the scattering scramble of tiny paws. The reek of cat urine drove him back into the hallway as the flashlight played across the frantic melee of felines seeking shelter, their eyes glowing, startled, in the directed beam. A hole in the board over one window was allowing a line of raised agitated tails to flee the intrusion.

He heard the noise of the side door off the kitchen area slam shut. He reached the outside yard he remembered once being referred to as the “smoke pit” in time to see a lithe figure in black lift itself over the back wall of the compound. That someone had used stacked boxes and old lumber as a ladder to reach the top. He scaled the wall using the same path taken by the intruder, the similarity of the exertion reminiscent of the times he had competed in parkour tournaments. By the time he’d reached the top, whoever it was had disappeared. He dropped to the alleyway below and followed it around to where it exited on Battery Street and adjacent the candy store.

The old neighborhood might have been rundown and trash strewn, garbage piled at the curbs, but the front of the candy store was immaculate and swept debris free daily by the proprietor. Old Rick saw him advancing and waved with the broom in his hand. When Wayne inquired if he’d seen anyone run past, Rick couldn’t say that he had. And at the mention of the intruder and the office full of cats, he nodded sagely.

“I might have figured as much. Do you remember Laverne Early or was that after you were sent away to school?” At Wayne’s shrug, he continued. “When the battery business started booming and your old man began diversifying, they expanded the accounts department. That’s where Laverne worked for a couple of years. There was a rumor that she might have been seeing the boss’s brother, your uncle Harold. He was in charge of sales back then. He was quite the ladies’ man in his younger days I heard tell.

“Laverne had grown up in the neighborhood, tough family, no daddy, and too many new uncles. She did well in school apparently, and one of her teachers recommended her for an office job at the battery factory. And old Bruce, he liked to hire from the local community I’ll say that for him. Then she just up and left town, quit her job. Folks talking thought she might have met someone. I know she’d sometime come into the shop to buy a pack of chewing gum or some such. She was a skinny high strung young thing to

begin with, all in a tizzy, scattered, excited, but in a happy way, you know. So I figured it was love or something close to it. About five years passed and she came back, kid in tow, girl, cute little thing.”

Rick shaded his eyes and gazed searchingly down the length of Battery with its weathered brick apartment blocks and empty lots where once had stood businesses that were only vague names barely remembered, now nothing but a dumping grounds for transient trash and broken appliances. “She tried to get her old job back but by then they were up to closing the old yard down and moving the manufacturing over there to Asia.” He shook his gray head at the folly. “The whole administration was moved to the new office building uptown. And Laverne, the new accounting office being staffed with uptown business school professionals, was always a downtown girl and wasn’t going to fit in. She worked odd jobs after that around here, waitressing when the Jewel Diner was still operating. And she did maid work at the Royal Hotel, cleaning up after hookers and junkies. Always pleasant when you run into her, but kept to herself. She had bad luck keeping a roof over her head, kept getting evicted from her apartments or rooming houses. It was tough on the kid too, and eventually she went into foster care I heard.

“And all because of her cats! She had to have her cats, and it just got harder and harder to find a place to rent with a dozen cats.” Rock gestured to the surrounding neighborhood. “She’s homeless now. You’re bound to see her if you’re going to set up shop in the old yard. I don’t know where she sleeps, maybe the shelter at St. Ursaline’s, but I’ll bet her cats ain’t welcome. Could be she’s bedding down in the old office building. But I can guarantee that wasn’t her leaping over the wall like you said.”

Locking up the gates to the Battery Works, Wayne reminded himself that he would have to order a more effective means of securing the property in light of the contaminated soil. He decided to cruise the neighborhood on the off chance that he might encounter the cat loving trespasser. He had just turned off Battery onto Jefferson when he heard the scream, the call for help. He put the Land Rover in reverse, scanning doorways beyond the cyclone fenced enclosures of a couple of derelict warehouses. In the gap between the two large flat roofed structures, he caught movement, signs of a struggle. Two figures each had an arm and a third was wrestling with the flailing legs and feet of a fourth and trying to

avoid getting kicked in the face. Now the screaming had become an incomprehensible howl.

Braking to a stop, he jumped from the cab shouting out his own warning while rummaging through the toolbox in the pickup bed. The crowbar would do. Without a pause he ran toward the figures, three men he could now tell from their broad shouldered postures. They were dragging the fourth toward the open rear cargo doors of a black van, hurriedly, looking over their shoulders at the man racing toward them.

As he cleared the pedestrian access to the abandoned loading bay, the van gave a rough start and jerked forward before accelerating in the opposite direction, the unsecured rear doors flying open to reveal two men holding down a third. The yelps and shouts convinced him it was a female or a very young boy. They glared at him as one of them pulled the doors closed with a sadistic grin.

He raced back to the Rover, grabbing his helmet from the cab, and yanked the covering off the BMW, stowing the crowbar in the saddlebag. Dropping the tailgate he powered the R12 off the bed with a squeal of tires, skidding the rear wheel once he landed and veering back through the narrow gap to the loading bay of the old warehouse. At the far side of the lot, the gate access to the back street sagged on its hinges. The van no longer in sight, he had to consider going left or right, gunning the engine impatiently. There, close to the pavement off to the right, faintly visible, a narrow band of haze slowly drifted back to the dried mud of the asphalt from which it had been raised. To the left nothing stirred except for a grey rag caught on the cyclone fencing flapping in the late afternoon wind. Right also led to Grant which led to an onramp for the Arnold Expressway. Once on Grant, the traffic was considerably heavier than in the old neighborhood it bordered. He weaved through traffic, stopping at the light before the freeway entrance. No sign of them. His choice was to continue down Grant or get on the freeway. But would they stick to surface streets considering that the raised four lane could take them further and faster? That was the question. He raced up the onramp at the change of the light and encountered the going home gridlock. No one was going to go anywhere fast. It was like a slow moving parking lot. There likely was an accident further down, but as far as he could see, it was a horizon of rooftops inching up the

overpass incline. And there in the middle of it, in the number two lane, was the black box he was looking for.

He gunned the BMW and rode the line between the cars, cautiously making his way forward, ignoring the hostile stares of the exasperated drivers behind the steering wheels of their turtle paced rides. He had flipped down the dark visor of his helmet so that only his mouth and jaw were visible. In almost no time he had come in range of the black van, keeping his distance in the number three lane, using the groaningly slow traffic between them as a cover.

There were two of them in the front cab, the one in the passenger seat straining to say something to someone in the cargo hold, his broad back and shoulders to the window. The battered van was an older model with side cargo doors as well. It was missing a sideview mirror if the stub near the wing was any indication. The traffic continued to move slowly forward accompanied by the honking horns of frustrated drivers in a stagnant river of sheet metal and glass on wheels. A police department helicopter flew overhead toward the head of the flow. Then the forward movement stopped altogether.

What were the risks going up against three men, possibly armed? They had abducted a girl, presumably against her will by the way she had fought them. He felt was compelled to act. And again a lethal calmness overtook him. So far his only advantage was surprise. He would need to change the odds. He had the crowbar in the saddlebag. That was one. In the saddlebag was also a tire repair kit that was original to the model. It came with a utility knife to cut and score the patches. That was two. And there was a packet of road flares that he had added to the emergency kit. That was three.

The traffic began rolling again, still at a snail's pace, and he steered his way along the line adjacent the dark van. As it crept forward, he located the valve stem on the rear wheel. Bringing himself even with the slowly rotating tire, he severed the valve head releasing a gush of foul heated air. Maneuvering the motorcycle up to the passenger door he beat on the window with the side of his gloved fist. A scowling face turned to glare at him.

Wayne mouthed the words "tire" and pointed to the rear of the van. The rear wheel had deflated to the point that the driver was having difficulty controlling the van. He heard the driver curse angrily. The man in the passenger seat opened the door and poked his head out to put eyes on the problem. As he did, Wayne kicked

the door, bouncing the man's head against the door frame. Pulling the man out of the cab, he scraped the end of the flare on the pavement and tossed the orange red sparkler into the front seats.

Wayne pushed the door closed as the passenger fell to his knees on the pavement. He was reaching for something under his shirt. Using the crowbar he hooked the man's wrist and sent the gun he was trying to grab from his waistband skittering into the number three lane. Just then the cargo doors exploded open with smoke as the third man threw himself out. The crook of the crowbar caught him behind the heel and with one swift uplifting motion flipped him onto his back.

Wayne dived into the van and found the young woman, mouth taped shut, hands bound. Her expression, if her eyes were any indication, was of pure terror. The flare was burning between the front seats and had already caught some oily rags and fast food debris on fire. He dragged her out of the van and over to his BMW, placing her on the seat and slicing through her bindings with the utility knife. He yanked off the tape covering her mouth.

He didn't see it coming and caught the blow from her fist on the side of his jaw. She kicked out with her feet, spitting and clawing, but he dodged them in time to catch the movement behind him. The driver had appeared around the front of the van with a lug wrench. Wayne felt the pain as it slammed into the arm he had put up to deflect the blow aimed at his head, the follow through glancing off the side of his dark visored helmet. He raised his booted foot and aimed a crushing blow at the driver's right knee. The man sagged to one side dropping the wench as the display of pain contorted his face.

Wayne hopped on his motorcycle just as the traffic surged forward like an unclogged drain. The girl was gone. He caught a glimpse of her heading for the side of the freeway, hopping hoods and dodging screeching brakes. He gunned his bike to follow her but now the traffic was relentless and unpredictable and he lost sight of her as she leapt over the guard rail. He managed to gain the narrow shoulder off the number four lane and looked down on a maze of backstreets, back yards, and back alleys. He spied her at an intersection racing towards the shadows along the fence of a wrecking yard and the long succession of apartment blocks beyond. The drop from the overpass was considerable, but as he surveyed the ledges and angles he knew someone agile enough could make

the descent without too much trouble. Like a cat, she had landed on her feet.

—Act I, Scene 4—

Wayne had been impulsive. He knew that. The whole idea, the lie to cover his suspicions. It was a pipe dream. Even Old Dad would have considered it foolish. Leave the past, look to the future. Well, his future had passed. And what was left of his beginning was the old Battery Works, and the nostalgia for what he remembered as a happier time. His formative years, before being packed off to a succession of elite boarding schools that were really just warehouses for the children of the idle rich where he learned that wealth equaled power and privilege, it was the Ur currency. And that no one was ever equal or happy in their constant and ruthless jockeying for status as an endless savage battle to be king of the hill. There was only room for one at the top in a world of corrupt patricians and to remain at the top required a brutal inhumanity. The kindness and equanimity he had observed in Old Dad in his younger days had been undermined by a spiteful meanness and blatant cruelty. And maybe he wanted to recapture

that innocence of those bygone days by turning the dilapidated battery factory into a monument to that memory.

He was occupying his father's penthouse apartment now, a perk on the company dime. He could survey the entire city from his perch at the wide window looking out onto the marble deck of the balcony. The landing lights of a passenger jet heading for the municipal airport that the city council was now slated to vote on naming the Wallace W. Bruce Airport crossed his field of vision. The parallel arrays of lighted city streets and the winking red tail lights and white bright head light beams that travelled them. The cacophony of neon marking nightclub entertainment and dining, the garish ostentation of major brand billboards, the imposing corporate skyscrapers with their lighted empty offices emblazoned with their two story logos. Bruce Enterprise being one of the pretentious eye-fuls with its cryptic minimalist brand of three horizontal lines followed by a full height vertical line and the three mirrored parallels again. BE, a minimalist icon if there ever was one. How many times had he stood at that window, taken in the night lit panorama and stopped his gaze at the office tower only to be nudged by that famous quote he often parodied: "To be or not to be is not the question."

Beyond the bright lights at the far east edge of the city center, the haze of the old industrial district sodium flare streetlights cast a stark shadowless orange on the abandoned buildings and neglected apartment blocks. Out there, in one of the pockets of dark, he was going to direct all eyes to his accomplishment, a memorial, a museum, a community center and park. The trick was to not draw attention to himself. Inevitably it would leak to the press that the scion of the Bruce fortune was applying to the planning commission for a variance on the property. One of the BATS staff would release a statement indicating that the Advanced Technical Systems division would be relocating its administrative offices to the old battery works pending an EIR and a clean bill from the EPA. Everything by the book.

Wayne wandered away from the window. The lab report on his desk. Something was not right. He looked at it again. They had done a thorough scan of the contaminated area, grid by grid. In only one section did they get a hit. It was an anomaly. And it hadn't penetrated very deep. Heavy metals associated with battery manufacture. The toxic sample was a match with the one listed on the Super Fund document. It claimed that the entire area was

contaminated. The millions of dollars the cleanup contractor was charging was preposterous. The cost of the actual cleanup was negligible, it was the paperwork and the lawyers and politician, the machinery of local government whose gears needed to be greased that bled the budget. Someone was going to make millions skimming off the top. He recognized it as a scam. The site was not toxic. A lot of Federal money was poised to be spent on the cleanup, and someone would be getting a hefty percentage. He remembered plaques and civic awards on Old Dad's office walls had been awarded for his conscientiousness, his concern for worker safety. Old Bruce had been diligent in securing and disposing of any waste, toxic or otherwise. The site had been seeded and the report falsified. And Harold was complicit in the plan. How much did he know? He could come to no other conclusion. But why? Was it possible that the old man had found out and confronted his brother? If it were ever to come to come out, the fraud would jeopardize Bruce Enterprise's government contracts. Old Dad would never allow that.

Ray Tso had returned Wayne's call with the answer to his inquiry. According to a friend of his who was in the US Attorney's office, there was an interest in policing instances of fraud associated with the Toxic Superfund. It was one of those government programs that attracted dishonesty, he'd added. There was something else that might interest him. A message had been left for him on his answering machine in the DA's office overnight. Nothing verbal, but the machine had identified the caller's number. Out of curiosity he had called the number only to be informed that it was no longer in service.

"So I called someone I know at the phone company and had them trace it. It took a while, but when I heard back, they confirmed that it was out of service and had been so for quite a few years. It was part of a bundle of numbers Bruce Enterprise had purchased years ago. Its physical location was the old Battery factory. It came from your old man's office."

"When was the called placed?"

"Not more than a week ago, I can get the exact date for you. I think it was the same day that there was that strange altercation on the Arnold Expressway, the van fire and something about a kidnapping, some guy on a motorcycle, if that's any help."

"I didn't hear about that."

“They think it’s the same guy, some kind of vigilante doing nobody any favors. The odd purse snatching, petty theft, vandalism are just a consequence of the larger crime by people who don’t get their hands dirty.”

“Remind me again, you work for the DA not the Public Defender, right.”

“Yeah, sometimes I think Tara wonders as well. I’m the token idealist. Anyway, I thought I’d run that by you. It was weird, and I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“What was the number?”

Wayne had reason to suspect that it was the unknown number he’d received the day he’d discovered an office full of cats and that someone had been living in the old office building. Scrolling through his pager he found it and the two most recent. He had called the number when it no longer seemed like a coincidence and had bumped into the same out of service dead end. His own search of the reverse directory had only confirmed that it was no longer functioning. He didn’t want to believe in ghosts, either, or coincidences.

The BATS lab report on the sample of vomit the homicide detective had provided had not found anything other than what had been ingested by Wallace Bruce the evening of his death. Absent an autopsy, there was no real evidence of foul play. Yet the absence of evidence seemed to confirm his suspicions.

Reconstructing the old man’s last day had not been difficult. He’d had his usual breakfast at the Empire Club, once the haunt of rail barons, now catering to the more well to do among the well to do. It retained its 19th century stuffiness like a badge of honor. The staff were only too pleased to be of assistance, and the manager inquired if he had given any thought to becoming a member, follow in his father’s footsteps. If so, they’d be delighted to have him.

The car service had picked him up and taken to the country club, his regular driver, Cornell, affirmed. That was just before ten. The country club listed his tee time for a foursome at ten. Linus Pall was one of the quartet, Aldo Ring, a city councilman, and also a name that was not familiar to him. One of the staff at the Pro Shop said she’d heard that there had been a loud argument in the locker room between Doctor Pall and another man who was not a club member but a guest. The restaurant staff served Mr. Bruce at his

usual table and he had had his usual French Dip and iceberg lettuce salad with tomato and mayonnaise. And of course iced tea.

The midday shift host was Emily and had probably been there since the restaurant's beginning. Wayne knew her and she knew Wayne. The only thing unusual was that his father had lingered longer than he usually did. Maybe he was waiting for someone or something. Another round of golf. It was not unheard of, but it was usually the younger guys who had the stamina to attempt it. Cornell had picked him up at three from the country club and took him back to the penthouse. The boss told him he wouldn't need him any longer and he could take the night off. On his dime. Cornell knew what that meant.

The lobby camera was focused on the main banks of elevator doors, the penthouse elevator appeared only as a peripheral image but enough to show the old man insert the key followed by the doors sliding open. The time date stamp read 3:30 and the concierge had noted his arrival in the register as well. Confirmed by the doorman who had been minding the door at least as long as Emily had been hosting tables, Rodrigo was his name.

Rodrigo flagged a cab for him at around 8 PM. A Red Dot cab. He didn't recognize the cabbie. The woman answering the phone at the Red Dot Cab Company was polite but firm, "If you ain't the cops, get a court order." He had consulted with Gordon James. The detective knew someone, one of the drivers owed him a favor, unofficially, of course. The driver remembered the old man because of where he dropped him off. In the warehouse district where they hold raves and fly by night clubs that are essentially transient drug shops trying to stay one step in front of the law. In the detective's opinion. The club he dropped him off at was called Joker's Wild.

When Wayne showed up at the club, it was closed but someone was inside cleaning up. It was a large open warehouse bay, painted black, catwalks skirting what was ostensibly a dance floor, cluttered with the debris of the previous night's activity. There was a bar near the front of the door. The man sitting at the bar stool with the push broom in his hand was the manager as well as one of the bartenders, the DJ, and sometimes the doorman. His name was Peter. He'd looked at the corporate photo of Wallace Bruce and shook his head.

“No, I’ve seen old guys come in here before but they never stay long. I know this guy, right? On TV?”

“My father, Wallace Bruce. And I agree, he would not normally come to this kind of night club. He was more of a Bach Brahms Big Band Swing kind of guy. Does anything strike you as unusual about that night? More old guys than usual? Bigger crowd, smaller crowd?”

“The only older guys that come here regular are the gorilla suits sent by Joe Kerr and they only stay long enough to pick up their cut. That night was like most nights, although it doesn’t get as crazy as the weekend, but it was hopping. One night blends into the next, as you can imagine. Yeah, sorry I can’t help you. . .except, wait, maybe that was the night the society dame was in here with a gaggle of spoiled brats. I don’t know what they were wasted on, but they were in the upper stratosphere. Teeny, one of the waitresses had to deal with them. They commandeered a booth by the stage and were capping on the dancers, you know ridiculing their moves, that kind of privileged it’s-all-about-me attention seeking. So Teeny says, ‘You know who that is, don’t you? That’s Charlotte Taste.’ That’s how I knew they weren’t just some uptown trade. And ok, you may be right, because, Teeny again, stepped out the side door to get some air. It can get pretty smokey and close in here, as you can imagine. And I put it out of my mind, but Teeny said she saw Charlotte Taste arguing with her sugar daddy out by the parking lot. And I thought that it was just Teeny talking because she does do that to make up for her size, you know, because she’s tiny. But she’s tough, don’t get me wrong. Anyway. I dismissed it because I thought, if she’s this high class society dame, what’s she need a sugar daddy for?”

The lobby camera at the Legacy had caught Old Bruce crossing to the penthouse elevator at around eleven that night. Wayne had replayed the ghostly low resolution footage numerous times as if it would reveal what had happened to his father in the three hours from the time he had been dropped off at Joker’s Wild and his return to the penthouse. With the exception a slight slowness and weave to the old man’s walk and his leaning a hand on the wall next to the elevator to steady himself while he searched for his keys, nothing seemed unusual or out of place.

What was unusual was his meeting with Charlotte at the night club, if it had been him the waitress had seen arguing with his fiancé, ex-fiancé, and that seemed so out of character. Old Dad was

always so circumspect when dealing with volatile issues, the calm in the midst of a storm, his management style firm but one of consensus and de-escalation. He would have to talk to Charlotte to get her side of the story. Another loose end he had yet to tie up. She hadn't returned any of his calls. He didn't blame her after the way he had broken off their engagement. His father's passing had dropped into his otherwise uneventful life like a landslide of huge boulders obstructing the path ahead, and until the roadway was cleared, he could not move forward and resume the life that had been mapped out for him as part of his father's business legacy and, of course, his mother's outsized social ambition.

Accompanying by his cogitations, Wayne's pacing in the book lined study had brought him in front of the gas fireplace and the large portrait oil of his father that hung above the marble mantel. The old man hated the painting Trish had made him sit for as a mark of his status as a captain of industry. Old Dad had made many disparaging comments about the painting, particularly at the pretentiousness of such a display, and had hidden the canvas at the back of the wardrobe in master bedroom of the penthouse. Wayne had found it and restored to its spot above the flickering flames of the fireplace.

He contemplated the painted figure with a bitter sadness that slowly transformed to a helpless rage that brought tears to his eyes. If the picture could talk it would insist on vengeance for the old man's murder, he was convinced. It bothered him that his suspicion centered on his uncle, Harold. Could the Superfund scam have gone ahead without his says so, without the old man knowing? Add to that Harold's now vehement opposition to the restoration of the old battery factory as a memorial to the old man's memory. He kept insisting that it was too late, the contracts had been signed, that they would be sued. He had yet to confront the new president of Bruce Enterprise with his evidence of fraud, details of which he was perhaps already familiar.

Turning, he lifted the contract from the folder and read again the name of the company, JKR Waste Management & Drayage, Inc., an address in the next State over. Near where the old man had gone on his golfing junket not long ago as a matter of fact. He picked up the phone and dialed a number, let it ring twice, and hung up. Shortly the phone on the desk rang and he put the receiver to his ear. There was silence. Then a voice said, "Speak."

“Robin, I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Night is the best time for what I do. I never get to bed before dawn.”

“Like a bat.”

“Yeah, except my name, Robin, is a bird. What can I do you for?”

“I require your off the books research skills. A deep dive into tax records, incorporation papers, who their lawyers are, a full work up. Can you fit that in you nocturnal schedule?”

“As they say, the early bird gets the worm. What they don’t say is that the early bird has been up all night waiting for that worm so that he can get it and go take a nap.”

“I’m sorry I asked.”

“I’m still tracking the source of that DARPA leak. I’ve been dialing in on a lot of conference calls and the talk is that rogue engineers are getting to be like rock bands, they’re working out of their garages. IBM is pissed. They want to go after the independents like they did Olivetti.”

“That must be interesting to eavesdrop on.”

“Unfortunately like any group discussion there are a few lucid moments, the rest of the time it’s like being in a ping pong ball free-for-all, everyone bouncing their crazy ideas off the wall.”

“This shouldn’t take up too much of your phone phreak time. JKR Waste Management & Drayage, address over the State line. The usual work up.”

“That figures, the tax break State. For the right people, at least. It goes to the top of the list.”

“Thanks, anything else in the wind?”

“No, nothing, the usual chitchat and scuttlebutt. Oh, but that there might be some kind of vigilante operating in the east end. Beating up people. It’s not very credible. Someone’s been reading too many comic books.”

“Maybe. One last thing. Is it possible that a phone number that has been out of service for almost a dozen years could be dialing up my pager?”

“Not likely. Unless someone has found a way to reactivate the number. It’s either that or a ghost.”

—Act I, Scene 5—

Wayne Bruce gingerly lifted himself out of the jacuzzi and reached for the large white bath towel emblazoned with the Bruce monogram. He glanced at the large purple bruise along the length of his thigh. He stood keeping the weight off that leg and wrapped the towel around his waist, cautiously taking a few steps toward the door of the penthouse bedroom before grasping the frame to keep his balance.

He lowered himself onto the unmade bed and as his head hit the pillow his eyes turned to glance at the cadenza under the wide mirror and confirm that the amber bottle was still there. He always kept a reserve of pain medication for the inevitable mishap on any one of his adventures, parasailing, base jumping, sky diving, even full contact martial arts, and he'd manage to keep from getting seriously hurt. So far. Everything had happened so fast.

It had been earlier the previous day and he had taken a break from overseeing the renovation of the office building at the old battery works, the job of tearing out had been completed and the rebuilding was just beginning. Bion had assembled a crew of local men to do the demolition and now some of them would be kept on to continue with the rough carpentry. They'd gone over to the candy store to get out of the cold and discuss scheduling the work in the coming days now that the permits had been approved. Old Rick was all smiles. Business had picked up since work at the battery yard had started. Workmen coming in for doughnuts the bakery delivered, smokes, coffee hot, sodas, even candy.

Bion had looked up from his cup and said, "What you call this, Rick, coffee or taffy? The cream just sits on top."

"Only sissies put cream in their coffee. This here put hair where you need it. I guarantee you'll be wide awake and rattling like a two stroke engine."

From the look on his face, Bion's appraisal hadn't changed. Through the front window still festooned with cutout pumpkins, black crepe, and now a large vintage cutout of a turkey, they turned to glance as the delivery truck, gears meshing into reverse to drop off another load of lumber and building supplies, backed in through the gate.

“You keeping those goods under lock and key I’m gonna assume,” Old Rick addressed Wayne, “I wouldn’t put it past some folks to be taking advantage and engage in a little pilfering. ‘Specially after what happened to that heavy equipment you brought in.”

He’d agreed with the old man and Bion had assured him that the supplies were securely locked up every night in the shell of the renovated office building and the storage containers. The vandalism to the dozer and the loader, aside from the gas being siphoned, was something they had to deal with, juveniles’ propensity for vandalism. Wayne had contacted the precinct and asked for additional patrols around the building site overnight. If it continued to be a problem they would hire private security, but so far Wayne was not too concerned.

“You gonna have to buy extra tickets to the Policeman’s Ball if you expecting them lazy cops to do anything. But I’m here, I’ll keep an eye out if I see anything suspicious.”

Wayne smiled to himself as he remembered Rick’s words. Later that day he had touched bases with the Corporation lawyers and learned that the pause in decision making occasioned by his father’s death may have given Bruce Enterprises the path to getting out from under suspicion of fraud as the Superfund application had not reached its final review and could be withdrawn without further scrutiny from the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Harold had insisted that he knew nothing about the consultant that had been hired to do the toxic site survey, that it had been his brother who had undertaken the plan, that he was merely following through. Although the contracts had been signed with the out of state toxic cleanup contractor, the agreement stipulated a kill fee would be paid should the deal go sideways.

Robin had done the deep dive background check on JKR Drayage which turned out to be a shell company for a hedge fund that was operating out of the Caymans, most likely a laundry operation in Robin’s opinion. The board of the company included two city council members, as well as Larry Taste and Linus Pall among its token directors. All of which seemed too coincidental for Wayne and drew his suspicions to the shadow workings of the attempt to defraud the government under the umbrella of Bruce Enterprise in such a blatant fashion. Something must have assured them of success for the scheme to get as far as it did. Bruce Enterprise had dodged a bullet.

He checked his pager readout again. Lotte had not returned his call. He had questions. Had she been with his father the evening of his death? Was it the same night she had been seen with friends at The Joker's Wild nightclub? If he didn't hear from her soon, he would have to drive to her estate in Longwood. He had asked some of their mutual friends for news about her, but either they had nothing to tell him or they took him to task for breaking off the engagement, over the phone, the same phone he was calling her on now. The world did not lack in irony. Some claimed that she had gone to the Taste Plantation in Hawaii or that she had fled to Spain where she kept a villa. She held the key to old Dad's final hours. What light could she shed on his mood, his well-being, his final demeanor?

And he saw that there was another call from the BATS lab that he would return once he got around to getting dressed. They might have been able to trace where the toxic material had originated by comparing chemical signatures from other known toxic cleanup sites. Judy, the lead chemist and lab manager, knew not to get too technical with him otherwise they'd never get any work done. Just being able to trace the sample that had been planted at the old battery works would give him something to go on and confirm his suspicion that the two were linked, his father's death and the Superfund scam.

He forced himself to don his sweats and stretch the aches out of his bruised muscles. He didn't want to overdo it, but he had to get blood flowing, working out the stiffness and swelling. He had a call in with the service and made an appointment for some body work in half an hour. By then he might be in good enough shape to face another board meeting. One of the things to be broached was the renovation of the old battery works in memory to his father and founder of Bruce Enterprise. And how that would be funded through a number of grants, federal and state, as well as the charitable foundation BE WELL, founded by Trish, his mother,. He had the votes and only Harold was against it. The consensus though was that it was a positive public relations move. They could feel good being civic minded without really having to do anything, aristo cake crumbs to the plebs in proclamation of their benevolence. If Harold made too much of a fuss, he would have to bring up the toxic site review and explain what the BATS lab has discovered. Harold was nervous over the government contracts being paused while the leadership issues were being worked out. He was heading to DC

after the meeting with a plane load of lawyers for a big pow-wow with Agency lawyers.

Favoring his leg, Wayne wandered into the den once occupied by the old man, a guy surrounded by stacks of papers, happy as a kid in a sandbox, and took another swig from the protein shake. His gaze stopped on the photos of his car collection gathered for the catalog for the opening of a show in Los Angeles in a few months. Rich men once kept horses, it seemed like a natural progression to the motor vehicle, and like horses, some were for show and some for speed. He had a handful in storage on the coast, a few others he would have to ship out by cargo jet. He just had to decide which ones. He had a couple of vintage motor carriages from the early beginnings of private motorized transport in storage outside of Carmel that he entered in the annual Concours D'Elegance in Pebble Beach. For this show he wanted to display the iconic post war models as well as a few rare restored finds.

He picked through the glossies. His favorite was on top, the Pacific blue 1948 Mercury Saturn Bob Hope Roadster Convertible, a look into the aerodynamic sleekness of the future and the beginning of marketing the automobile as a lifestyle accessory to the newly prosperous suburban middle class. He'd picked up the 58 Edsel Pacer Convertible for a song, red over white, white walls, spoked rims. Ten years later it signaled the demise of the fin, victim of its own popular excess. No one wanted it, but it was a place marker in the evolution of automotive styling. And the 1954 Packard Pacific two door white hardtop over deep purple, not much to distinguish it from the cheaper Ford models of that era, a brand that lost its pizzazz after the war. Staying with the blocky dreadnought design of the previous decade was its downfall. The 1958 Ford Ranchero was considered by some purists to be the only Ranchero worthy of the name. The three years that it was produced, from 1957 to 1959, marked a wily change in marketing strategy, gearing an essentially station wagon platform to men without the wife and kids cachet. On the other hand, his 1956 Dodge LaFemme hardtop convertible, mauve over white, white walls and chrome rims, was a finned confection marketed to the better half's suburban counterpart. The motor vehicle would have never prospered and taken on a life of its own if it hadn't been for the suburbs. The 1954 Cadillac Coupe De Ville hardtop, bronze, white walls, scooped fender skirts, he realized was an awkward blend of the old

dreadnaught style of the postwar years and an inkling of the windswept style with its vestigial fin. Or maybe he'd read it somewhere. The 1958 Chrysler Firesweep four door, black with red side trim was a match for his all black 1960 Plymouth Fury, essentially the last of the finned dynasty that ruled for less than ten years.

Taste is changeable and the marketers depend on that. What he was presenting at the show was a look at the transition from an industrialized post war economy still dependent on broad consumer consensus to the individual marketing that would ride the wave of post war affluence. Each of the classic cars depicted an economic trend and the move toward suburban two car families. Cars were no longer machines of utility but status objects, to be seen in, and with an annual style obsolescence that required the changing out of models yearly.

And then there was the nostalgia market that gave new value to well preserved auto relics of the past. His fire engine red 1954 Studebaker Commander Convertible, a restoration from a barn find, and from another company that did not make the postwar transition especially after its failed merger with Packard, taking down the venerable carriage company known for its elegance and reliability. It wasn't about quality anymore, especially if the consumer was buying a new car every year, it was about looks. Now everyone appreciated the durability of the older cars like his 1948 Chevrolet Fleetmaster Coupe, a pale green over forest green, it was built like a tank but totally uneconomical to manufacture. For personal use, the public wanted something light, fast, the kind of transportation that might appear in comic books or science fiction movies.

The concierge rang that the masseuse had arrived while he was shuffling through the stack of pictures, weeding out the foreign and prewar models. His name was Raymond and he'd used him once before, a tall well-built man with silver hair and a diffident professional manner. He set up his table in front of the wide windows in the large common room with a panoramic view of the city skyline.

Wayne stripped except for a towel and positioned his face in the well. He heard a low whistle as he felt the expert hands probing his shoulders.

"You're pretty bruised to your upper arms. Fall?"

Wayne grunted, his field of vision restricted. “It was a pretty intense full contact session at the dojo. I got a few bumps.’

“I’ll say. That bruise on your thigh looks serious. Are you going to have that looked at?”

Wayne grunted an assent knowing that he wouldn’t. Raymond asked him to flip and he did.

“Caught a couple of good shots to the ribs, too. Think you might have cracked one? Ok, and the forearm. I’d say you were tagged just about any place that could be. Except your face. You must have a good defense.”

He did, but against half a dozen thugs in a dark room, he needed a better game. He’d walked into a trap. The right shoulder the masseuse was working had taken the first hit when he went through the door. And he wouldn’t have been there if it hadn’t been for the phone number on his pager, old dad’s office number, the one that had been discontinued, the phantom account.

It had been late the previous night, after a full day of going over the details of relocating the BATS administrative office to the old battery works. The tech division’s schedule for testing of the new high powered portable battery backpacks for use by the military to power light mobile terrain equipment was proceeding and they were awaiting a technical overview from the Defense Department. He knew that the battery worked to specs so he was confident of that they could soon begin the funding phase through DARPA. In fact his lab crew had modified one of his off-road Spyders and fitted it with a compact battery pack that was lighter than the conventional engine with just as much torque. Other than that, it had been routine phone calls, mostly with lawyers.

The out of service number was telling him something he was convinced. Nor did he think of it as random. He knew he would obsess over it. So why not start at the source, his father’s old office in the very building he was currently renovating. He resolved to find out and suited up in his riding leathers, the most obvious conveyance to make a stealth approach to the battery works was the modified Spyder XR he kept in storage and easily accessible. The black balaclava under the lightweight off road helmet was for an especially cold longer night.

The streets in front of the battery works had been deserted. The neon in the round window of Penn Quinn’s bar fluttered in the dull cold gel of drizzle, the gaping entrance forbidding in amber

light. Otherwise no one was about. He'd steered the noiseless bike into the alley behind the battery works, a light from the back of the candy store where old Rick lived lessening the shadows on the overgrown gravel track, and parked it against the brick wall. Standing on the seat he was able to get a good grip on a row of damaged bricks to pull himself up high enough to reach the top of the wall. He had the key to the new installed reinforced gate but he didn't want to announce himself. He landed in the employee courtyard in a crouch. He loosened the compact utility flashlight from the zippered pocket of his jacket and set the filter to red, keeping it low. The door to the back office area was secure, the windows boarded up. He worked his way around to the front of building where the street light in front of Quinn's made long shadows near the front gate and illuminated the stretch of parking lot leading to the padlocked storage sheds.

He'd been about to step out into the open when he heard voices beyond the storage container and then movement as if someone were dragging something heavy. Then a few dark shapes come into view, men by their size and slope of shoulder, and the tenor of their hushed voices. One of them went over and pulled on the lock to the container and motioned to the others carrying something weighty between them, five men or boys altogether.

A light flashed over his shoulder illuminating the group. Wayne had ducked to the ground as he heard a voice demand, "What you boys doing over there? Get away, or I'm calling the police!" It was Rick. "Gowan, git!" He was perched on the scaffolding for the brick work repair on the other side of the wall.

"Go to hell old man!" the one fondling the lock shouted back, shading his eyes.

"I know that's you I'Van. You and J'Van and those young'uns have to leave otherwise I'll call the cops. I ain't lying."

The group carrying what looked like a piece of discarded machinery from the old factory had set it down and looked at each other before they started drifting away, the one called I'Van pointing a defiant fist at Rick had raged "I'm gonna kill you, old man!"

"Yeah try that and find out what happens," old Rick had retorted and trained his flashlight on them until they had run off into the shadows before he clambered back down to the candy store.

He had raced after the departing group knowing that the two homies he'd encountered before meant trouble. He could hear them

talking among themselves, spitting expletives, bravado building, swearing revenge. Eventually the walking and talking stopped when they'd reached the far end of the battery works property and a cluster of rusting machinery overgrown with weeds, grass and brush positioned against the crumbling brick wall. He'd watched from the shadows as one after the other climbed over the wall and dropped to the street of the neighborhood beyond, the last one he'd recognized by body size was J'Van who had scanned their retreat for anyone following before joining the rest of the group.

He'd waited a few beats before climbing in their path to the top of the wall. He spotted them trotting up D Street like a dog pack on the prowl in a stretch of neighborhood with an assortment of abandoned buildings and vacant lots on either side. He remembered it as a once thriving neighborhood of shops and apartments when the Bruce Battery Company was still in operation, before it had moved away to become Bruce Enterprise.

He'd followed them, keeping to the shadows cast by the partial moon playing peekaboo with trundling clouds ready to drop more of their cold wet. They'd disappeared around a brick corner on Central and when he'd given a quick glance in the direction they had headed, they were no longer in sight. A few doors down was the entrance to the apartment space above an abandoned vacuum cleaner store. The door was open to the stairs leading up. A bare bulb flickered at the top of the landing. Unless they'd raced down to the next block where a street light illuminated the frozen air with a brilliant halo, they would have had to veer off. The stairwell was the only likely and immediate option.

He'd taken to the steps on the balls of his feet, putting his weight closer to the side of the tread to avoid the exhausted groan from the center of the plank. A strong scent of fresh body odor gave him confidence in his choice. At the top, the hallway stretched to a grated window at the far end. The first two doorways lacked doors and by the shadows of rubble appeared to have been trashed. The next one had a door but the reek that seeped from under it said that it was used as garbage pit and latrine. That left the last doorway, open a crack to reveal a faint light and sounds of movement. He'd pulled back just as the door swung open revealing I'Van's cruel grin. He felt the rush of air behind him and the blow shoving him forward and off balance.

He'd blocked the blow from the man in front of him and catapulted himself into the room into the midst of the others, catching a few misplaced shots to an arm and a rib. The feeble light was coming from a battered lamp on the floor next to the socket. A kick sent it across the room plunged into darkness as he parried a charge from his left with a dropkick to the center of the body mass. He heard the effect, a violent exhalation from the solar plexus. The dark added to the sudden confusion. The trap had not been well planned. The next attack came from in front, a fist looking to make contact whose wrist he caught and cracked while using the inertia of his grip to swing the man by the arm like a cudgel into the bulk of the approaching J'Van and delaying him enough that he could deal with someone who had obviously watched too many martial arts movies. And the one with the pipe raised over his head.

He'd activated the strobe function on his flashlight and flipped it into the melee. The pulsing light illuminated the small space with an intensity that upset the equilibrium. He had practiced with a strobing light in combat sessions before. It was unnerving at first until you fell into the rhythm. It had given him the advantage. The faux martial artist froze long enough that he easily foot swept him, landing him on his back, the breath knocked out of him.

He'd tried to sidestep the pipe and elbow the face behind it. He felt the blow on his ribs. I'Van had got past his guard. His leathers absorbed most of the blow but he still felt it and it had thrown him off balance and into the clutches of J'Van who reached around to get him in a bear hug and pin his arms. He'd first disabled the ankle with a kick and with the grip loosed, he dislocated the large man's knee with a twisting flat footed kick. J'Van fell to the floor with a howl. Someone was trying grab him by the leg and bring him down. He untangled himself and crushed a hand with his heavy boots. His focus was on I'Van who had tossed the pipe away and was backing away toward a boarded window, reaching into his jacket pocket for something that looked like a pistol.

He'd taken a running jump across the room and tackled I'Van just as he pulled the gun out. The pistol fired with an ear splitting flash of bright orange as the momentum of the tackle sent them both flying, crashing through the weak boards and broken window.

He'd felt suspended at first and then they dropped, I'Van screeching in his ear, the two stories to the partially covered dumpster in the alley below. I'Van had broken his fall and possibly broken his back. He wouldn't be killing or threatening to kill anyone any time soon. But his leg had hit the edge of the dumpster and that had practically put him out of commission. He'd hobbled back to the battery works to retrieve his electric Spyder, pausing in the shadows to let a squad car creep by. Old Rick had likely called the precinct.

"Whoa, you're tensing up on me, Mr. Bruce," the masseuse said leaning down to catch his ear. "Just relax, we'll work these knots out."

After the session, he took a cold shower and then stepped into his closet to choose his clothes for the meeting, corporate casual which meant a top end sports coat, tieless silk shirt, dark slacks, and tasseled oxblood loafers. He returned the BATS lab director's call once he was dressed and seated at his desk. He'd expected more on the source of the toxic material. It was instead about the vomit sample that the detective had pulled from the scene of his father's death.

"We've detected a higher than normal amount of contaminants, especially in acetates that are used in manufacturing carpets. It's an anomaly but we'll run additional spectrometry to see if we can't detect telling signatures."

"Thanks, Judy, and why the focus on this particular compound?"

"It can be used as a poison, Mr. Bruce. The question then becomes why is there such a high concentration in the vomit sample. It can't be solely contamination from the carpeting."

Wayne rang off after instructing Judy to call him back as soon as she had additional information. Poisoning. Was that why there was a such a hurry to bury the old man? Would an autopsy have revealed traces of the poison? Was that why Linus Pall had rushed the death certificate? Red flags were signaling a conspiracy. Harold? Harold and Trish? How deep did it go? And how would a disinterment look? It would smudge BE's brand with scandal. None of that mattered, his father demanded that his death be avenged.

The phone rang again and Wayne picked up expecting it to be Judy from the lab. It was Bion. His message was direct. "Rick's

Just Coincidence, Act I

been shot. Hold-up attempt. I'm on my way to the hospital. It doesn't look good. He might not make it."