

Rust Belt town police chief recruits friend at local university to help solve an apparently unrelated series of baffling murders.

Degrees of Murder

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Chapter One: Wednesday of Week 13

The room was comfortable by the most exacting standards. One wall, almost completely glass, overlooked a charmingly arranged patio beyond which a formal garden extended to the woods surrounding the estate. The woods, in turn, blended smoothly into the gently rolling hills that were the closest thing to mountains the tranquil dune land region had to offer.

The overall impression of the setting was one of peaceful isolation. No doubt, there was a world of haste and waste somewhere beyond the estate; but, to someone sitting in this room, it would require an effort of will to believe such things.

The remaining three walls of the room were covered with sturdy walnut shelves that sustained a variety of books, whose myriad textures and hues testified strikingly that this was no “show” library. The books bore signs of frequent use, and paperbacks were sprinkled liberally among the more straight-laced, hard-bound books.

A solitary figure sat in a large, comfortable chair in front of one wall of books. His back was turned to the gorgeous display of natural beauty beckoning beyond the glass wall. He leafed slowly, but steadily, through one of a series of related ledgers. Several more were grouped on the floor at his feet.

So involved was the reader that he failed to notice the figure stealthily moving along the glass wall toward the patio

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entrance to the library. The door was open, allowing fresh air into the library, for it was a pleasant day.

Engrossed as he was, the reader failed to notice the menacing figure enter the library and approach him, very stealthily. The figure drew nearer, step by careful step. Still the reader leafed on, oblivious to the sinister figure that had approached to within eight feet of his back, and was closing, so agonizingly slowly, upon him.

The intruder clutched a dagger in his right hand, not in the unrealistic grip of a movie assassin but, rather, in the point-up, underhand-swing manner of an experienced knife handler. His every muscle seemed tensed, like the coils of a spring compressed to its maximum limit. He appeared about to launch himself upon his victim, like a cat ready to pounce on an unsuspecting prey.

The assassin was no more than six feet away from the reader, easing forward inexorably, yet the reader remained unaware of his presence. He took another step and, suddenly, the floorboard beneath his foot creaked loudly, sounding like a small explosion in the stillness of the library!

At the sound, the reader let out a whoop and threw the ledger almost straight up in the air, as he sprawled out in the chair with the book landing first on his outstretched leg and then on the floor. The intruder crumpled slowly to the floor, his pent-up emotion, like his breath, suddenly escaping in a shaky-sounding, "Oh, God, it's impossible!" Then, both characters burst into tension-based laughter -- as the video screen slowly faded into a faintly-lit grayness from the glow of the idling receiver.

Without realizing it, the students in the course, "The Socio-Emotional Origins of Crime," had become as engrossed in the scene as the actors. The abrupt and totally unexpected ending, followed by the darkness of the classroom at the

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conclusion of the videotape, left them briefly disoriented. As the room lights came on, the students blinked, wincing at the sudden brightness. Some of the 19 students present began to talk among themselves, more about their reactions to the sudden surprise ending than about the scene itself.

A voice spoke from the rear of the group. "That was our third and final attempt to enact the Stokes murder in the way that it was supposed to have happened. The first two attempts ended in essentially the same way. The chair in which the victim's body had been found was located in a virtual island of creaking boards. He would have had ample warning."

The students turned in their chairs to face the speaker, Dr. Matthew Shea, one of the more popular instructors on the State Line University faculty. Nothing attested more to that popularity than the increased enrollment in this particular course, which had originally been known as one of the true dry-horrors of the S. L. U. curriculum.

Since Shea had begun teaching the course, the enrollment in it had increased dramatically, largely as the result of the influx of students from outside the behavioral and police sciences. So great had the demand become that a second section had to be added to the schedule to accommodate the overflow. This was an event not welcomed in all quarters of the university, since the increased enrollment in his course meant an equivalent decrease somewhere else.

The group that had just experienced the videotape was the first of the two course sections and, typically, consisted more of police science, psychology, and sociology majors than did the second section. One of the psychology majors, a blond young man with pleasant features, asked, "What about the victim, Ellis Stokes? He wasn't exactly a spring chicken -- how was his hearing?"

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Seated opposite that student, Shea nodded as he answered, "A good point, Lou. We checked with the Stokes family physician and learned that his hearing was good for his age -- which was 63, by the way -- he might not have been able to hear the grass grow, but he would have had no trouble hearing those boards creaking. No, deafness didn't explain it -- to the embarrassment of the local authorities, I might add. They had not taken note of the floorboard effect but, then, we wouldn't have detected it, either, under the normal conditions of investigation, what with people moving about all over the place, taking pictures, searching for fingerprints, etc. It was due to the re-enactment that it did become evident, and it was then very dramatic the way the creaking stood out under the circumstances in which the murder was supposed to have happened."

"So, what did you do then?" asked an attractive young education major who was concurrently taking her second and third courses with Shea.

"Well, the first thing that happened, Ellen, was that we found our roles drastically redefined, from educational filmmakers to investigators. We had gone to that town -- I won't name it now, but I'll identify it later if you wish -- we had gone there to tape a re-enactment at the actual scene of a crime. We did it for this course, as a matter of fact. Chief Weiss, of the Lackenby Police Department, had made it possible for us to do it, and he was acting as our liaison during the weekend that we were there shooting the scene. And, then, we blew the local police department's theory right out of the water, and quite by accident."

"I'll bet they loved that!" cracked another student, a bearded young man wearing a Mighty Mouse T-shirt.

"Surprisingly, they did, Sam. The Chief of Police in that town cared more about his town than he did about his image

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as a latter-day Dick Tracy. He saw it just as fast as we did when we tried to re-enact the crime." Shea paused, glancing at the clock above the doorway. Then, he continued, "I guess we'll have to put it on hold until next class session. Remember, we're looking at this case from the standpoint of hypothesis formulation and testing, two essential ingredients in the effort to solve crime, and in trying to uncover the underlying elements of the criminal act.

"For the next class, accept as fact that the victim, Ellis Stokes, was not deaf, nor was he unconscious, when the murderer struck. On that basis, I want you to see what hypotheses you can come up with to explain how he was murdered, with no signs of a struggle, by someone who stabbed him in the chest while he sat in that chair in the library of the Stokes Mansion, given the alarm potential of those creaking boards." Shea waited, while some of the students made notes on the homework assignment.

"Do you want us to write it out?" asked one of the students.

Smiling, Shea answered, "Yes, please." And, then, amid the rising chorus of groans from the class, he added, "I know, I know -- it's the first really decent day of Spring, and you all believe that you'd benefit more from conducting experimental research on the functional necessity of sex-roles." He grinned at the sudden outbreak of laughter in the room, and continued, "However, I want you to answer the questions first -- if I'm any judge, this group will take care of the other idea whether or not I assign it -- being good *social* scientists."

There was more chuckling among some of the members of the class, and Shea added, "On the other hand, I don't want you to write doctoral dissertations before the next class. I simply want you to think the problem through and jot down your ideas so that you won't forget anything potentially useful.

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So don't over-complicate the task!" This last admonition seemed to calm some of the more anxious students. Shea then asked, "Are there any more questions or concerns?" After a brief silence, during which most of the students closed notebooks, put away pens, etc., Shea said, "See you next session." The students finished their putting-away activities and began to file out of the classroom.

As the last of the students left, Shea began rewinding the videotape. He had just pressed the rewind button when a man in his late forties entered the classroom.

The man was husky, without any trace of fat, his dark hair streaked liberally with gray. He stood a fraction of an inch under six feet and walked with the sure grace of a person in excellent physical condition. The man was Shea's friend, Police Chief Joe Weiss, and there was a worried expression in the usually twinkling gray eyes that contrasted so markedly with his swarthy complexion.

Noting signs of stress, Shea commented, "I was going to say, 'Glad to see you,' but from the look of you, I'm not so sure."

Weiss smiled thinly, "Nothing like dedicated friends to sustain you in your hour of trial I always say -- got any hemlock, Professor?"

As the videotape clicked softly to a stop, Shea removed the cassette from the tape deck, commenting wryly as he did, "No, but the coffee in this place runs a close second. How's that sound to you?" He placed the cassette into its protective box, after which he turned off the TV monitor and the tape deck.

Grimacing, Weiss responded, "Story of my life -- ask for money and get taxes instead!" He wandered aimlessly around the classroom looking at, but not really seeing, the articles tacked on the bulletin boards.

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As he packed his materials into his attaché case and noted his friend's behavior, Shea felt concern. It was obvious that Weiss was upset -- pacing wasn't part of his usual behavior. After a moment of silent observation, Shea closed his case, fastened the catches, and asked, "What is it, Joe? What's wrong?"

Weiss stopped wandering about the room and turned to face Shea, "It's this damned murder thing again! We've just had a third one. Think of it, Matt -- we haven't had a true murder in this city since God-knows-when and, suddenly, we have three in less than two weeks! That's just not -- well, it's bizarre!"

"A third murder? When did this one happen?" As students began filing in for the next class, Shea added, "Let's get out of here and have that coffee we were talking about."

They left the Liberal Arts Building and started across the campus toward the Learning Resources Building, which also housed the faculty offices.

There was a coffee maker in the communal faculty reception area. Shea and Weiss paused long enough in the reception area to obtain cups of coffee. Then, they continued to the office Shea shared with Frank Stanley, a teacher in the Chemistry section of the Physical Sciences Department. Because of staff size and office availability, theirs was the only cross-disciplinary pairing in the office area, a factor that subjected each of them to friendly jibes from members of the opposite discipline.

The office was locked and the lights were off. Shea unlocked the door and ushered his friend inside, turning on the lights and sliding his attaché case under his desk.

Seeing this, Weiss smiled, "Out of sight, out of mind, huh? Must be grading time."

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Shea retorted, "Always looking for the motive -- once a cop, always a cop," as he removed the lid from the Styrofoam coffee cup. He then reached over his head and retrieved a heavy ceramic cup from the shelf above his desk. The cup was undecorated, except for the motto, "This time, this place -- that's all there ever is," that had been hand-lettered on its lower circumference. He carefully poured the contents of the Styrofoam cup into the ceramic cup, dryly observing, "It doesn't really help the flavor, but it seems as though it ought to taste better in this thing. Would you like to test the theory, Joe? Frank has a real cup here somewhere."

Weiss shook his head, "I'll rough it. Matt, this thing is really getting to me. It isn't normal for Lackenby to have a wave of *any* kind of serious crime, let alone murder! If I could see a pattern to the killings, I'd be less concerned, but this sudden outbreak of unrelated violence just worries the hell out of me..." Weiss trailed off into silence, sipping gloomily from his cup.

Shea picked up the thread of conversation, "Maybe there is a pattern and we just can't see it yet. You realize that I'm still in the dark about the third victim, although I find it easy to buy the no-pattern idea where the first two are concerned. Tell me about the latest one, Joe."

Weiss removed a small notebook from the inner pocket of his jacket and, speaking flatly, as if he were giving evidence in a courtroom, ran down the notes he had written there, "Michael Aquino, Latino, male, 36 years old. He was married, father of two young children. A delivery truck driver, he was beaten to death. He was struck several times on the skull. Death was almost instantaneous. It happened late last evening. He was apparently heading back to his company garage and had a blowout in his left front tire as he came off the Toll Road on the University Avenue ramp at the

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Indianapolis Boulevard exit. He had just crossed over to Illinois, where it appears that he pulled the truck over to the side and began changing the tire. While he was working at it, the killer seems to have crept up from behind and slugged him. His wallet was found nearby. There was no money in it, but his I.D. and credit cards were still in the wallet. The best estimates are that he should have had at least thirty dollars in cash on him at the time, so it looks like a simple robbery/murder..." Weiss ended the report at that point, closing the notebook and returning it to the pocket from which he had removed it. He sipped his coffee, silently.

After a moment of quiet, Shea prompted him, "Except what, Joe?"

Weiss responded glumly, "Well, damn it, Matt, it's just like the rest of the killings! It looks simple enough at first, but it just doesn't feel right. It raises too many questions and answers too few -- like, why did the killer leave the I.D. and the credit cards? Why kill the guy at all, for that matter? The evidence suggests that the killer hit Aquino once and Aquino fell, out like a light. Then, it looks like the killer stood over him and hit him 'til his skull was crushed. *Why?* If it was a robbery, why leave several undelivered packages, a couple of obvious value, in the truck? You see what I mean?"

Shea nodded, "Yes, but tell me this: if you're not convinced that it was just a robbery, what else are you considering?"

"We're checking into three possibilities. The first is a rival for his wife -- she's a good-looking woman, and it's always a possibility -- so a rival could have decided to ice him and make it look like a robbery. The second is that Aquino and some unknown associate were into something shady, had a falling out, and Aquino lost the argument. The third is that it was just the way it looks on the surface: he had the blowout,

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and stopped to fix it. Then, somebody just happened along and, on impulse, robbed and killed him. Frankly, though, I don't like any of the three theories. Still, they're the best we've been able to come up with so far, and we'll follow them as far as they'll take us. But I think it's a waste of effort."

After a brief silence, Shea asked, "Why, Joe?"

For a moment, it appeared as though Weiss had not heard the question. Then, he looked squarely at Shea and answered, "Why? I have a gut feeling is why -- and my feelings have more often been right than wrong in the past, when it comes to stuff like this. My feelings now are telling me this whole thing stinks! For one thing, the intersection of the Toll Road and Indianapolis at the 108th Street ramp, after 8:00 P.M. on a week night, is like the inside of an undiscovered Egyptian tomb! I checked a traffic survey we did out there about 2 months ago to be sure of that -- some nut wanted a traffic light installed near his home -- and the volume of traffic coming into Lackenby, or leaving by that route, is very light. The likelihood of any amount of foot traffic out there is even lower. You know statistics. Tell me how likely you think it is for a situation like that to happen, where a guy gets a blowout at a low-volume branch exit, late in the evening, and within fifteen minutes of the blowout the guy is robbed and murdered."

Shea thought for a moment, and then answered, "Not very, but -- "

Weiss interrupted, "I know -- that doesn't mean it couldn't have happened that way, just the same. That's why we're checking out those other possibilities. But my instincts tell me that's not going to lead us to a solution, and I've learned to trust my instincts, Matt."

Shea nodded, "I wish that your intuition also pointed the direction to explore -- God, this whole rash of killings is

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peculiar!" And then, as another thought occurred to him, Shea continued, "Talking about statistical probabilities, when have so many killings occurred so close together, and each with so little in the way of clues, in the entire history of Lackenby?"

Weiss shrugged, "Never in the years I've been here. Before that, I can't say, but I'm inclined to bet that it never happened before -- not like this. And that's what's bothering me, Matt. I think there must be some connection I'm not seeing. I think maybe I'm too close to it. We're all too close to it, because it's got my staff stumped, too, and I'm kind of hoping you may see something we haven't seen -- through fresh eyes, you know what I mean?"

Shea nodded, "If there is a connection among the killings, it sure doesn't jump out at you! There've been three people killed, two men and one woman, one white, one black and one Latino. One was in his sixties, one in her early twenties, and one was in his mid-thirties. One was killed in the decaying section of town, one in a snazzy new apartment complex, and one was killed at a Toll Road exit ramp near an old, modest residential section of town. The method of killing differed in each case. The occupational status of the victims varied from that of derelict, to truck driver, to executive secretary. The only thing that the victims and crimes seem to have in common is that they have nothing in common!"

"Except for one thing," Weiss commented, "the victims are all dead."

"Well, what about possible connections among the victims?" Shea asked, "Have you learned anything more about the first two?"

Weiss retrieved his notebook from his inner pocket, opened it, and again read from his notes, "A fingerprint check has identified our 'John Doe' derelict as one Leonard Darrow,

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aged 64. He was originally from Skaneateles, New York -- bet you never heard of that one before..."

"Bet I did," Shea responded, "I had a roommate in the Army who was from Skaneateles. I'm surprised that *you* were able to pronounce it correctly."

"New Yorkers have an instinct for such names," Weiss grinned, before returning to the information from his notes. "Well, anyway, Darrow enlisted in the Army during the war. He was captured by the enemy and repatriated after the armistice. He received a medical discharge that same year -- and that's all we've been able to come up with so far on victim number one."

"That's all? And you've had a whole week or so to identify the unknown victim? God, how inefficient can an investigation be?"

Weiss smiled amiably, adding, "Well, there is one other thing: we've located a brother. But, then, what can you expect from a low-budget, no-talent operation like ours?"

Shea started to make a caustic remark in response to Weiss, when the telephone rang, interrupting him. He picked up the handset and spoke to the unseen caller, "Hello -- yes, someone is here with me now -- Joe. Right -- yeah, that sounds good, but wait a minute and I'll ask him." Still holding the phone to his ear, Shea turned his attention back to Weiss, "It's Ann. She wants to have dinner at the Joyful Dragon, and she is inviting you to join us -- providing, of course, that you feel completely free to talk shop in her presence (who says women aren't naturally curious?)" Then, in response to something his unseen wife remarked to him, he said, "Never mind, unless you intend to do the treating -- yeah, that's what I thought. What about the little angels, by the way? -- Oh, yeah, I forgot about the rehearsal. Sounds good to me. Hang on for a second." He turned again to Weiss, "What about it, Joe?"

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After dinner, we can go back to the house, relax a bit, and try to get a handle on this thing."

Weiss responded hesitantly to the invitation, "I would like to work on the case. No offense -- I'd enjoy the company, too, but I don't want to intrude on your night out with Ann."

Shaking his head, Shea relayed Weiss's reluctance to his wife, whose response set him to chuckling. To Weiss, he explained, "I can't even give you an *almost* clean translation of that!" Then, to Ann, he responded, "Never mind about my skills as a translator!" To Weiss, he said, "I think that, in her own primitive way, she is trying to convey the idea that you're family and that we'd enjoy having you with us -- " Once more, to the unseen Ann, he said, "Be quiet. I'm doing fine. Besides, I'm about to hit him with the clincher, so just wait." Turning to Weiss once more, Shea continued, "Of course, if you prefer to reject us both and trample all over our feelings, then don't join us!"

Weiss laughed, "There's a law against blackmail! But, then, I've always been a pushover for intimidation myself -- I'd be delighted to join you."

Shea grinned, turning his attention again to the phone, "Ann? Yeah, kicking and screaming all the way, but we got him. See you at the Dragon in about an hour -- okay? Yes, me too -- bye."

After a pleasant meal and relaxed conversation, the Sheas and Joe Weiss drove to the Shea home in their separate cars, Shea riding with his wife this time.

A two-story bungalow of brick construction, their home was set back from the street on a deep lot twice as wide as the house. Trees and shrubbery contributed to an air of tranquility. It was an old residential area, at the southwest end

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of Lackenby, and the atmosphere was sustained by the other homes in the neighborhood.

Since they lived less than a mile from the campus, it was an easy matter for Shea to walk or cycle to work, except when the winter snow began to fall in earnest, at which point Shea would normally resort to driving his small economy car. At the moment, however, his car was sitting on jacks as it had been for nearly six months in the family garage. After 180,000 miles, and given the elastic state of the economy, he had decided that the little machine would have to last for many more miles. Thus, he was slowly and carefully rebuilding the car, trying to return it to near-new condition and performance. It was no easy task, as Shea was not a trained mechanic. However, with children in their early to late teens, do-it-yourself was all Shea felt he could afford.

Ann Shea's car was an intermediate-sized model only half the age of the compact and, consequently, was in better running condition. Thus, for the moment, it had become the family taxi.

Weiss parked his sedan behind Ann's car, in the driveway that ran along the south side of the house. Before shutting off the ignition, he picked a microphone from its bracket and called police headquarters, informing them of his location in the event that he was needed during the evening. Then, he shut off the power, got out, and walked toward the side entrance of the house, turning on his pager as he did so.

The last rays of the setting sun painted the underside of the cottony clouds a pinkish-orange, and a faint breeze stirred the leaves of the trees surrounding the house. Weiss paused momentarily at the bottom of the stairway, soaking up the beauty, the serenity, of the setting. It felt secure and stable -- it felt like home.

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Weiss had known Shea a bit more than five years, and the Shea family for slightly less than that. In those few short years they had become very much part of his life, the closest thing to family that he had known in a long time. In that sense, it was home, the home that he and Michelle had never been able to create together. "Peace and stability," he thought, "I wonder if we might have made it in a place like Lackenby..." When he realized the direction that his thoughts were taking, he shook his head briefly as if to throw out such musings, and continued on up the short flight of stairs to the first floor entrance.

Shea had been waiting in the entrance for Weiss. He opened the door, saying as he did, "It's a terrific view at sunset, isn't it?"

Weiss nodded, passing into the entrance hall. Shea extended a hand, "Let me take your jacket. We can work in the den. Do you want to call headquarters before we begin?"

Weiss removed his suit jacket and handed it to Shea as he answered, "I already did -- the wonders of technology, you know?" He loosened his tie, sighing loudly, "God! What kind of sadist invented the necktie in the first place?"

Shea chuckled as he lead the way to the den, "Become an educator. Then you can wear some other equally senseless costume -- but at least you'll be able to breathe."

As they entered the den, Weiss answered, "No chance! Your line of work is too stressful for my blood! Standing up there, day after day, in front of large groups of people, most of them young kids trying to trip you up while ducking all the work they can, isn't my idea of easy work -- and I hate talking in front of groups of people."

"So you just naturally gravitated toward a safe, placid career in police work," Shea replied sarcastically. "Make yourself comfortable, Timid Tim."

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The den was a converted bedroom on the first floor of the Shea house and was, nominally, Matt's workplace. In fact, it had become the family study room. It contained a large old wooden desk that Ann had found on some bargain-hunting trip. After having it trucked home, she had refinished it and put a new laminate top on it. She had made it an anniversary present for Matt shortly after they had moved into the house five years earlier, when he had accepted the position at State Line University.

On one corner of the desk there was a telephone in the shape of a well-known canine cartoon character, and there was a computer centrally positioned on the desk, with a printer arranged alongside. Except for those objects, the desk was often virtually buried under pens, reference works and sundry materials relevant to some project on which one of the family was working. There were many shelves in the room, most containing books, but some that also housed an odd assortment of family souvenirs. There was a small sofa placed against one wall, beneath a group of the ubiquitous shelves. In front of the sofa there was a long, marble-topped coffee table and, in front of that and facing the sofa, were two comfortable easy chairs.

Opposite the sofa and behind the two easy chairs, a section of wall was devoted to a chalkboard, which at the moment was covered by a combination of mathematical symbols and graffiti. Standing to one side of the chalkboard was a portable lecturing easel, with chart paper mounted on it. The top sheet of the chart paper contained a rough drawing of some artwork, apparently intended to advertise a high school musical comedy that was scheduled to run in the near future.

As Weiss settled himself on the sofa, Shea sat in one of the chairs facing him, and Ann entered the room carrying a small tray on which she balanced three cordial glasses and a bottle

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of liqueur. She offered Weiss first pick of the glasses, saying, "I believe that some Irish Mist might compensate us weight watchers for the dessert we all passed up at dinner tonight. Is that all right with you, Joe?"

Weiss accepted, gratefully adding, "If we must go ethnic, I can't think of a better way to do it."

Ann offered a glass to her husband and, setting the tray on the coffee table, she picked up the remaining glass, sitting in the other chair that faced Weiss. She smiled at him and raised her glass in a toast, "Nazdrowie!" Shea responded, "Slainte!" and Weiss concluded the toast, "L'Chaim!"

Ann laughed, "Now, *that* was an ethnic toast!"

They sipped the sweet, but potent, liquid and, then, Weiss smiled at Ann, "Forgive me, Ann, but I've recruited your husband back into police service for the evening. I have one nasty situation on my hands and I've been coming up empty so far."

"It's all right, Joe. But, I don't want to get in the way. If my being here interferes with your work, just say so and I'll drive over to the high school for a sneak preview of the show. I'll have to pick up the girls around 10:30 anyway. Would it be better if I leave you two Sherlocks to work alone?"

Shea shook his head in response, "No, I don't think so, love. We're just trying to find some ideas that will help to make some sense out of the whole thing if, indeed, it is just one related set of events. You're bound to add to the brain power here." He turned his attention to Weiss, "What do you think, Joe, shall we start by reviewing what we already know? Perhaps Ann will see something that we've missed."

Weiss nodded, "I guess. I sure don't have anything else to suggest."

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