

Two years after the events highlighted in **SHORT LINE**, Nick Daniels, the intrepid reporter from Chicago's southeast side, discovers the stark answers to questions he sought out then, who murdered his friend and his foes, all at his own peril!

COLEHOUR

By James J. Klekowski

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COLEHOUR

A Novel by
James J. Klekowski

ELLIS AVENUE STUDIOS

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COLEHOUR

“Sara is in the Sky Nine chopper above south Lake Shore Drive this morning. What’s going on in that pool beside the Drive, Sara?” The early morning anchorwoman smiled into the camera.

“Looks like some kind of police action, doesn’t it, Robin?”

“Can we zoom in on the squads? Is that a body??” To her credit the look of horror that had suddenly replaced her smile quickly changed to a genuine look of concern.

In unison, “Oh my Lord!”

It was not really my intention to start off this volume as I did my previous collection of blogs and stories surrounding the murder of my lifelong enemy, but . . . welcome to Chicago. Having just passed the two year anniversary of the events I chose to expose in a book I named after a local railroad yard, Short Line told the story of an ambitious politician and the four neighborhoods on the southeast side of Chicago, over which he wielded a large amount of control. Thanks mostly to the corrupting influence of said nemesis Joey Miller, that control was seriously jeopardized when Miller got part of his head blown off at the very beginning of the five days and nights presented in Short Line. The story also introduced some very good souls living and working in those four neighborhoods, from policemen, activists and journalists, to a few people I truly love. Many of the local haunts of those people were also revealed, eateries, watering holes, churches, schools, parks and the occasional unmarked historic site or railroad highlight. I love history almost as much as I love railroads. My name is Nick Daniels and I’m a reporter and writer for the Calumet News Service.

The water puddle highlighted on the news this morning with the floating corpse was the little boat pond in Harold Washington Park. A shallow, cement-lined knee-deep container where in some other era, well-behaved, well-manicured Hyde Park boys, like Leopold and Loeb, along with their nannies or chauffeurs or footmen, launched their miniature naval flotillas to their hearts’ content. The corpse in

question did have the good taste not to interfere with the visual aesthetics of the installed handiwork of internationally renowned artist Virginio Ferrari, a piece often described by the local art critics as being essentially an obelisk with a rooster on top. Public art . . . Go figure. The body was closer to the southwest end of the circle of water anyway, some leagues distant from the artwork, in nautical terms.

With the local television stations starting their weekday news programming well before dawn, it's no surprise that some station would actually catch the latest water-bound body floating on the surface in one of Chicago's fine lakes, lagoons, streams or rivers, accidentally, while covering rush-hour traffic on adjacent Lake Shore Drive. And just in time for the arriving police detail reaching for their long hooks, like the kind bad stage performers used to get. Now the really bad ones get their own specials on cable. Without relying on social media to provide the footage, it still took a lot of something below the belt for the morning programmers to let the visual of a corpse air on live TV. Or they were asleep at the controls. Take your pick.

While first one, then two helicopters buzzed above the scene, the police officers elected to the unwelcome early morning task of fishing the body out of the pond made the tactical mistake of letting the corpse roll over on its back without a cover at the ready. From the footage I saw later that evening, played over and over, the dead man seemed determined even in death to have his picture taken, revealing to the zoomed-in lenses and an audience in the thousands the unfortunate victim's face, with the initials 'ND' clearly marked on his forehead, the son of a bitch! An officer on shore quickly came to her senses and tossed her own coat over the victim as they pulled him in close to the short cement wall, but the deed was done, to be replayed on local and national news outlets throughout the day, until the next lurid story broke somewhere. I don't remember what it was about, probably another presidential twitter crisis. Aren't they all these days? And a corpse just before shift change, on top of it all. I wonder if the officer put in for her coat cleaning bill? Of course, I hadn't seen the footage yet, being stuck in rush hour traffic myself.

“Hey, what’s up with all the copters?” I asked Lynn, my passenger and significant other. Lynn looked up from the paperwork in her lap.

“Hey yourself, watch the traffic, Nick! Everybody’s slowing down ahead.”

“Must be something going on in that park. Let me check a minute.” I reached to press the sixth button on my car radio, automatically set for WBBM-FM news radio, switching from some morning jazz programming on WDCB.

“You’re not used to this kind of traffic, babe!” She had to rub it in.

We had just made the turn north of the Museum of Science and Industry, alongside Prospect Point, when the stop and go traffic began. Lynn Sanchez and I were driving downtown this brisk early September morning, she to her work at the Cultural Center, me by special invitation, attending an all-star event in the city council chambers. Four days a week since the beginning of the year now, Lynn had worked for the Cultural Arts Commissioner in the former city library building, another executive secretary position that she had lucked into this time around. It was turning out to be a very good fit for her. Since I’ve known Lynn, she has always been a bit of a gal Friday. She was right, I’m not used to rush-hour traffic, though I know it’s a part of every commuter’s life on the roads around town. I’m just lucky it hasn’t been any part of my working life... another reason to live and drive on the southeast side of Chicago! Free parking and lots of it! Until the next city council-approved screw-up with more meters planted where they don’t belong comes along.

‘BBM radio didn’t have the story yet, though I’d find out later that WGN-TV had it live on the air when the body was turned face up for all to see. Great images for the kiddies tuning in for a breakfast surprise before school.

Continuing northbound through the off and on traffic congestion, I couldn’t help but stare at one of the newest pieces of architecture over the Drive, a pedestrian bridge about four blocks north of 47th Street, resembling blue hot dogs strung together over both the Drive and the Illinois Central and Metra Electric railroad tracks to the

west. I hadn't ventured out onto the bridge just yet though the span was completed last spring. I had already been across the next newest pedestrian span over the Drive, about four blocks south of 31st Street, that looked like a floating concrete ribbon suspended by a tall, white upside down tuning fork! It also stretched from Burnham Park over the Drive and the below grade Metra train tracks, right up to the Stephen A. Douglas tomb doorstep. Amazing engineering and art in both bridges.

Dropping Lynn off on the Randolph Street side of the old library building, just at the entrance to Garland Court (not named after Judy, but a Michigan stove company, of all things) we exchanged kisses until an anxious driver behind us let me have it with his car horn in typical Chicago fashion. Must be on his way to a great free parking space, I thought. When his car passed by I noticed it's specially designated city plates, indicating an alderman or commissioner or some other higher mucky muck. Yeah, free parking on me. Just ahead on my side of the street the very top of the three-story tall metal artwork by local sculptor Richard Hunt caught the morning sunlight, gleaming like a flaming beacon. That's art for the public! Driving away from the curb I just made the yellow traffic light across Wabash under the elevated, pulling over to the right side of the street, and into the high-rise parking lot entrance. I didn't want to be arriving by car too close to city hall, for my own sense of comfort. Funny, Lynn gave no hint as to today's special occasion the whole ride in. Well, I know she can keep a secret. We'll enjoy having a special fourth anniversary evening all to ourselves.

Making my way to the pedway, a series of subterranean passageways one level below the streets of downtown Chicago, I headed westbound traversing two CTA rail lines (red and blue, in that order), passing the Daley Center and up the escalator into the County Building. I stepped briskly across the long ornate beaux arts lobby and directly into the City Hall side of the block-long corridor. Awaiting my arrival was Benjamin Franklin Levi, one of several attorneys Larry Galica, my boss and editor-in-chief at the Calumet News Service, kept on retainer. Across the years of writing for the Service I had gotten to know most of them, one by one, story by story. Ben was one of the

younger lawyers at his firm, must be in his mid to late fifties by now, bespectacled in Drew Carey-type glasses, a head shorter than me, with that receding hairline that afflicts men of a certain age. His suit had seen better days, too, though it was probably cleaner than the sport coat I was decked out in. I carried a spare tie in a side pocket, just for days like this. I pulled it out for Ben's approval.

"Sorry I'm late, Ben." My tie appeared a bit wrinkled, but it matched my sport coat.

"What else is new?" We shook hands as he motioned for us both to step to the next available elevator. I indicated the staircases on either side of the LaSalle Street entrance. He gave me a quizzical look, glancing at his carrying case. I let him win this one as a bell went off and the top half of a globe above an elevator door lit up white, indicating its upward destination. I'm sure the officers behind us manning the security desk had enjoyed our bit of pantomime. The doors split open and we entered with more than a half dozen other passengers, people in the rear of the cabin calling out floor numbers in hope that those closest to the buttons would press them. I started to speak but the look Ben gave toward our fellow travelers suggested one too many eavesdroppers among them. He probably had a valid point since we were deep into gossip central as far as this city was concerned. Blessedly, the ride was up one floor. We exited without serious incident into a vacant corridor.

"Now look, Nick," Ben started right in, waving a finger in my direction while I tied my tie in a half-Windsor fashion of a sort, "I know you don't take any of this very seriously but that's your name on that subpoena in your pocket." He reached into my sport coat and deftly removed the folded envelope-sized ephemera as if he had a second career as a pick-pocket (I make no intentional comparison between the professions). "And in his wisdom, Larry has sent me to do my job and protect his interests as well as your own here, so if you'll allow me to set this morning's pace, I will do so, and get us both out of here with our dignity and our asses intact!" All I could do was smile and nod for fear of laughing out loud. "Good! Now we understand each other." Ben handed back the subpoena after making sure it was in working order. Then he finished fixing my tie as best he could.

"May I ask a question?"

"Go ahead, Nick. I am here to serve those who would be served."

"Did you ever meet Joey Miller?"

"Only through your blogs." For a lawyer, Ben made his points short and sweet.

"Can you figure why a reporter would be called before a city council subcommittee to testify in the two-year old dead end of a homicide investigation?"

"Are you aware of the make-up of this particular subcommittee, Nick?"

"City Hall ain't my beat." I emphasized the slang.

"It should be for every good reporter in this town. Here's the aldermanic personnel currently signed up for this little hearing, if you would be so good as to peruse the newly publicized list. There's nothing quite like city hall efficiency." One name did sort of jump out and give me a cold slap. I gave Ben a nonplussed look as I handed the paper back. "Which is why I'm here for you, Nick."

"When did you find this out?" I indicated the paper in Ben's hand.

"The moment I stepped in the building one of our legal runners handed me this, half an hour ago." I got his final hint about my tardiness. "Shall we check in with the clerk?"

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Antonio J. Coronado, Alderman of the 10th Ward of the City of Chicago, had certainly been one busy guy since he and the mayor came to terms over the remains of Joey Miller that Friday afternoon at Kuzniar's Funeral Home two summers ago. You might even say they had become quite the bosom buddies, after sizing each other up with their fists in a back workroom at the parlor on Commercial Avenue, or so the story goes. Some guys really get a kick out of that kind of personal understanding between themselves and their rivals. Just coming to an agreement of the pecking order, everybody gets some, and since an open door to the fifth floor in City Hall invites a new set of possibilities, the smart guys, and gals, fall in line. With outstretched

hands, you may say. They will tell you, and their constituents, in glossy advertising literature, how their own personal advantages benefit their wards in a kind of trickle down manner.

In the case of Antonio and me, well, since Lynn quit his office the very weekend Joey was buried, it's been open season on the Service and a couple of my friends as well. Oh, nothing specific, not like Tony carried his own set of balls around anymore, no, they were comfortably in the pocket of the mayor now. But a guy with a grudge and a little power in this town can go a long way to disrupt the lives of others, if that be his pleasure. No doubt he took some of that out in the plethora of city inspectors sniffing around the Service offices, searching out building code violations. And driving Louise Beavers, the Service office manager and all-around mother general, nuts. It's amazing how many city departments there are in this town really, each and every one with their own set of codes and inspectors to enforce them, for the safety of the public, of course. From the outset, gratefully, the fire department wouldn't play along with the alderman's hardball tactics. Their inspectors actually do save lives for a living, God love 'em.

Chances are my blogs were in part to blame for Antonio's stepped up localized wrath, especially the ones I wrote just after all the summer action, when the eyes of the press corps were still focused on the 10th ward. The Service did well by my own calculations, too, for its bottom line and prestige for Larry among his peers. But time has a way of shortening the attention spans of many readers as well as reporters, even the good ones. Other newer, shinier stories appear, like the presidential campaign mess and continuing drama. And that north side baseball team agony. And ecstasy. And agony. Twice. And ecstasy. Three times.

Coronado didn't send the hounds sniffing around my little domicile as Lynn, his sister-in-law, still had plenty of pull with her sister, Tony's patient wife, Lydia. I had that going for me, though my contractors did have some issues with their licenses and permits to work on my place last fall, 'til the spare money ran too low for us to continue, for a while.

My friend Polish Jay, however, was not so lucky in love. The city inspectors came at him with a certain vengeance starting in October, with Jay's legal team still fighting some of the more obscure violations in court. Poor ventilation? In his open-air backyard? Since many of those inspectors were also precinct captains, cronies and soldiers in and around the 10th ward, they knew the property intimately.

Next, the city went after every nail and pipe of the original 104-year old structure, the big train barn on Avenue N. Jay had already corrected the various code violations left over from the previous ownership, but hadn't bothered to get them off the books, leaving an opening for the city to hound him and giving his attorneys something to do.

It was a one-two punch for Polish Jay, when the EPA sent him a letter last summer letting him know that living next to the largest polluter on the city's southeast side had consequences. His backyard ground had elevated levels of manganese and lead, and it would only be a matter of time before the EPA would be back to remove six inches to a foot of topsoil. Oddly, Jay's koi in their long pond were in excellent health. Go figure.

The nude sunbathing in the summertime and clothing optional hot tub parties in the winter, however, were another matter for both the ward's elite and a downtown media hungry for scandal. In retrospect, this was life after the most divisive election in our nation's history . . . where was the local press to turn to for headlines after such a daily feast? Jay is not, by any standard, a shy guy. Even if the public didn't understand, I'm sure most people didn't care one way or another, most of us having been born in a state of nakedness. Well, maybe not the conservative right, of course, I mean the rest of us mere mortals.

Yes, I had attended some of those parties in Jay's backyard myself, which were by invite only and age appropriate, but as you already know, I'm not very shy, either. And getting to that hot tub in the depths of winter wearing nothing but your imagination can be tricky in the snow! In some countries it's considered a healthy regimen. Before the attacks by the alderman's office got personal, quite a few of those ward inspectors had joined in the fun tubside, but

they were far fewer in number after the scandal broke. Maybe it was the weather?

Another smart thing, Jay had petitioned early on for his property to be off limits to commercial drones, limiting their fly zone to within five hundred feet of the place, which was how anybody had gotten wind of the ‘nudie bashes’, as the newspapers had labeled them, in the first place. Of course, even with a law in place, there were plenty of bogie drones out there helping themselves to a peek. Ever relist your number with the no-call phone systems out there? Still get unwanted calls? Like that. With all that going for him, I know the attorney bills were taking a toll on Polish Jay, but being another southeast side lifer, he just wouldn’t quit. My, but how we are stubborn down here!

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Benjamin Levi held the door to the antechamber of the Council Room open for me. A very large sign covering half the door indicated that all cell phones and recording devices were to be immediately turned off upon entering this room, with violators subject to arrest. Whatever happened to welcome mats? Checking my sport coat for moth holes and hidden microphones, I stepped inside, where, also waiting to give testimony, were my favorite odd couple from the southeast side Calumet District, detectives Rocky J. Ungard and Traci Ducree, he all dressed up in the same tired suit I’d first encountered him in two summers ago, she in something modestly spectacular. How did she do a look like that on a city salary? Why were they called, I wondered? Joey wasn’t their case, my friend Leon Perez was.

I grabbed Ben’s elbow and tugged him into another path through the swarm of invitees and their attorneys, past the detectives and closer to the tall doorway leading directly into the council chamber, right up to the clerk, seated behind a table, taking names and checking the lucky subpoena winners in. His pencil-thin mustache looked almost painted on. Standing alongside the clerk was an armed uniformed officer, complete with clipboard. His name plate read ‘M. Zuniga’. He was a large man, middle-aged but boyish in the face, and a bit heavy in the belt area, clicking his ball-point pen, impatiently

waiting for the clerk to call out the next subpoena number. Which the clerk did most enthusiastically, the eyebrows of the rotund officer rising when he checked the number against the name on his clipboard. Ben gave out a sigh.

"You're first on the list, Mr. Daniels! Oh, yes!" the officer announced a little too loudly for such a small room, I thought. Heads were turning in our general direction.

"Thanks. Where should I -"

"Oh, go right in and get comfortable! Hmm?" the clerk chimed in and motioned to the open doorway beside his table. "There's another table right in front of the council row and the nice man inside will swear you in!" Was he kidding me with this Franklin Pangborn imitation? "You and your attorney just go get settled and we can get things started, okee dokee? Yes indeed!" Ben grabbed at my elbow and started leading me inside. "It's not a real party until the guest of honor arrives!" Okay, maybe not quite Franklin Pangborn, but the clerk was definitely channeling Frank Nelson from the Jack Benny Program.

Like any good reporter I couldn't help glancing over the clerk's clipboard as I moved by, scanning the list of people about to give testimony before the city council subcommittee. A bad habit? Maybe, but it's taken years of practice to read copy upside down. I didn't see Vic Hanley's name on the short list, but was that -

"Weren't you even going to say hello to me, Nick?" Detective Ducree suddenly had hold of my other elbow. That voice of hers again, oh my.

"Good morning, Detective Ducree." Ben came to a halt and turned to watch my style develop. "I gotta ask and pardon me for doing so, but how do you look like that on a city salary?" I think I made her blush, a little. I think I was, too. Ben sighed.

"Got any good hot tub parties lined up for the fall, Daniels?" I had forgotten Ungard was on the scene, too.

"Sure! Want to join in sometime, Detective Ungard? Plenty of room at the deep end!" I could hear Ben sighing again behind me. I hoped he brought his antacid tablets.

“Alright you two!” the clerk interrupted. “Let’s get this show on the road now! Detective.” He indicated her hand on my elbow, which Traci released, though still looking through me. “Mr. Levee? Your client? Hmm?” Ben resumed his impression of a tugboat and we stepped into the grand and overwhelming chamber. “A real party!” the clerk added, shaking his head. “Next!”

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As the official seat of government, Chicago’s current city hall with its main entrance on LaSalle Street, was designed by the architectural firm of Holabird & Roche, and dedicated on February 27, 1911. The 11-story structure, done up in the classical revival style, houses the offices of the mayor, city clerk and treasurer, some city departments, aldermanic offices for the 50 (count ‘em, 50!) wards and the city council chambers. And that’s just the west half of the square-block building. The east half, built first, is the county building, with a few convenient floors linked, starting with the lobby. That information is available to the general public via Wikipedia and the like online, or any good book on the matter. The real story isn’t always televised, or available on paper.

Of course, this isn’t the first city hall building in Chicago’s history (one was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1871), but most notably hailed among all of them for its level of graft, greed and corruption. Across the last few administrations, it seemed as if an ATM machine was hooked up directly to the taxpayers’ pockets. Considering the crime rate within the walls of this magnificent monument dedicated to the bloat of Chicago government, the ante has been upped in favor of those pulling the strings inside the edifice and from without. The Skyway deal, (where’s that billion plus bucks, aldermen?), the parking meter deal, (did ANY of you public servants read this thing you saddled the taxpayers, their children and grandchildren with?), and any number of minor deals approved by the city council committees that will cost generations of the taxed-to-death residents of this great American city.

There have been plenty of up and coming prosecutors on the hunt for corruption in this town, or at least doing just enough crime-

solving to bolster their name recognition at the polls when they got on some party ballot. Lots of aldermen have spent time in the slammer for one crime or another, a couple have even died behind bars, but since they still get to choose whether or not any inspector general will ever be able to go through their papers, phone calls and e-mails in search of common graft, lines continue to form whenever aldermanic seats come up for reelection. And still, Chicago ain't ready for reform. Can you beat that?

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But I digress while awaiting the start of this by-invitation-only grand performance. And guess which one of my admirers on the city council lent his heavy hand in putting me in the hot seat this morning? I'd been inside this rather vast auditorium before, of course, the first time almost twenty-one years before, when I was given a standing ovation for being a better man than I ever thought I might turn out to be. I didn't imagine that today would be as memorable, even though the gallery was packed, for some reason. With any luck I still had reason to expect some justice out of this city, for all those people, friends and otherwise, that were murdered those long five days and nights two years ago on the southeast side. I know, any weekend around here seems to provide terrifying numbers of wounded and slain citizens of my hometown, and the press coverage, including my own, has not always been of a compassionate nature. But Leon, Bernard P, Eduardo Z, even Joey Miller, all deserve rest, and their families and friends, closure.

The press coverage was as thick with thieves as any of the few times I'd been among them, my brothers in ink. I'm sure the mayor's unexpected announcement only two days before, which a few of the regular press corps missed out on covering, letting the city know that he wouldn't be running for a third term, sending more than a few big-name as-yet unannounced candidates scrambling for blank petitions, had nothing to do with a loaded press gallery this morning. I can't remember the last story I had to cover from that press area, but the vista is memorable of what I could recall from the television screen

more than from my own memory. The power of the press, when used properly, is a mighty thing.

The first friendly face I encountered in the council chambers was Lieutenant Vic Hanley in uniform, sitting among some invited spectators, just behind the seats usually filled with aldermen. Sitting next to Vic was a bespectacled young man in his mid to late thirties I thought, a stranger to me, in a plain dark blue suit and neatly tied tie, his white shirt standing out in the crowd. Broad shoulders, tapered waist, the man worked at keeping in shape. I couldn't make out the name on his brass ID affixed to his suit coat. He and Vic seemed to be deep in conversation. I gave Vic a nod when we caught each others' eyes. He nodded back and pointed up above him, to the public gallery, where I spotted more than a few 10th ward precinct captains and workers. I'm sure they weren't here on city time. Yeah, right. Maybe they were only punched in on their county gigs. Vic's friend gave me a grim look, like I'd been caught stealing candy or something. Maybe I was getting a little paranoid.

Taking a long look at the faces upstairs, I saw that off to one side, two of Ann Marie Benedetto's older brothers were among the crowd, watching and waiting. My first love from our high school days, Ann Marie had later come under the influence of Joey Miller, and died in a bus crash, caused by two of his followers in crime, losing her unborn child as well. Once I was finished with the ceremony of being sworn in by a council clerk, which for some reason set off more than a few press cameras, I joined Ben off to one side and sat down beside him.

"Do you remember the Leon Perez murder, Ben?"

"Yes, your friend who was killed in your apartment building, right around the time Joey Miller died."

"The same morning, two years ago in August. I saw his brother, Ernesto's name on the clerk's list of witnesses."

"Why would he have been called to testify, Nick?"

"I don't know. The only connection the police have made so far between the cases was that the murderers worked for Joey. There was never any credible evidence that Joey ever met Leon or that the two knew each other."

“Well, maybe bringing his brother, er, Ernesto in will clear up the connection between the two. I was more concerned with the name I saw on the list, with the letters FBI after it.”

“FBI?”

“Reporters aren’t the only people who learn to read upside down, Nick.” The five aldermen on the subcommittee had been filing in and were taking their seats, with Alderman Marian Davis of the 8th Ward as chair, about to gavel the proceedings to begin. “I think we’re going to get more questions than answers and we’re not going to like either pile. Fasten your seatbelt.” Optimists are such fine company. I wished I was with one right now. The gavel came down hard.

Being on the top of the list on that clipboard didn’t mean Ben and I would be getting out of here anytime soon, as there ended up being half a dozen people giving testimony before me. Arden Sasuta went first, the former detective being brought out of retirement, flown in from the Del Boca Vista Phase 2 senior community in sunny Florida, no doubt. I admired the bright red, flowered shirt he had on under his leisure suit, lime green. His tan gave it all away. Gave a wink in my direction when the subcommittee was finished with him. All his answers were in his notepad, like he had gotten the questions in advance.

Next up was Sasuta’s former partner, Detective Gabriel Ramirez, in what looked to me like a very expensive slate grey suit. White shirt, navy blue tie. Good look for a man on the way up. Getting saddled with the Miller case hadn’t caused a dent in his career one bit. Ramirez had all his answers to all of the subcommittee’s questions on his iPad, or so it seemed to me. Was this whole thing a staged performance? Then my Alderman got his turn at the open microphone. Coronado’s questioning of the detective went south early, and I got the feeling this was just some unrehearsed bit of theater on Antonio’s part for the multitude of cameras present, just what I’d expect somebody on this subcommittee to do, find a scapegoat and set up the blame train. Or was he planning on a sooner-than-expected announcement for higher office? He’d already had two days to think about it.

Coronado was more than a little rough on the detective, but then I remembered the differences in their Hispanic origins. You’d

better believe there's a rivalry between the peoples of North and Central America and those from the islands of the Caribbean. For his part, Ramirez didn't break a sweat from all the finger-pointing. But even after some dramatically loud moments, nothing new was produced in the way of answers to who killed Joey Miller. Or why. Were any of us prepared for the next witness?

A Black gentleman, late middle-aged in appearance, took the hot seat in front of the row of city aldermen, still tall when he sat down, broad shouldered. Blue suit and tie. Distinguished.

"State your name, please?" Alderman Davis requested.

"Percy Hilliard, ma'am."

"What is your occupation, Mr. Hilliard?"

"Special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, retired, ma'am." A very slight twang in his voice, southern but not lately.

"How long have you been retired from the FBI, Mr. Hilliard?"

"Three months, ma'am."

"Congratulations!" Some mild laughter from the audience. "Are you able to discuss your connection to this investigation before us, Mr. Hilliard?"

"Insofar as I am able, ma'am, without jeopardizing any ongoing case for the Bureau, yes."

"Thank you. What was your last assignment for the FBI, sir?"

"I was assigned to investigate the illegal activities of a west side crime organization." I watched for any reaction from Alderman Coronado, but he just sat there, not even checking his notes, listening to the testimony as if he'd heard it all before.

"West side, you say? Was there a connection between this crime organization and the antecedent in our as yet unsolved case?"

"Yes, ma'am, the late Joey Miller was an active participant in this specific west side crime organization for a number of years."

"Thank you, Mr. Hilliard. The chair recognizes Alderman Coronado."

"Yes, thank you, Alderman Davis. Mr. Hilliard, what was your relationship with the late Joey Miller?"

"As part of my duties in this particular case, Alderman, I was assigned to infiltrate second-hand, the west side crime organization.

Without revealing specifics in the case, across the developing months of the investigation early on I was able to procure the assistance of an insider.”

“Are you able to reveal details of how you secured this insider cooperation?”

“No sir. I can tell you that once the cooperation of our insider was acquired, we had complete access to every aspect of the crime organization.”

“What does all this have to do with Joey Miller, Mr. Hilliard?”

“Joey Miller was our inside man, alderman.” The collective gasp of the audience, press and others present was potent. Ben and I looked at each other in disbelief.

“Joey Miller fully cooperated with the FBI in your investigation?” Coronado was having a field day with this.

“Yes sir, eventually he did.”

“Eventually?”

“I’m not able to go into details of how the FBI procured Mr. Miller’s cooperation, sir, but suffice to say once we had it, it was in full.”

Ben leaned over towards me, whispering, “When you got ‘em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.” I knew exactly what he meant. Coronado, seated above the witness with the cabal of aldermen, was asking him the questions but staring through me.

“Essentially, you were Joey Miller’s handler then, Mr. Hilliard?”

“Yes Alderman, he reported directly to me, and the Bureau had his complete cooperation.”

“How did this cooperation manifest itself, Mr. Hilliard?”

“Mr. Miller allowed listening devices to be installed in his offices, automobile and on his person. Among other things.”

“So, Joey Miller was an informant for the FBI?”

“Yes sir, he was.” The audience in the gallery above was getting out of hand, the volume of their talk getting louder by the minute. The chairman of the subcommittee gaveled for silence.

“Is the FBI currently involved in the investigation of his death, Mr. Hilliard?”

“I cannot speak for any current FBI involvement at present, sir, but while I remained as an active agent there was not an investigation into his homicide on the part of the Bureau. My understanding is that it was and remains at a local level.”

“Do you feel that Miller’s death was a direct result of your infiltration efforts, Mr. Hilliard?”

“That would only be speculation on my part, Alderman. Personally I don’t believe Mr. Miller died as a result of any discovery of his activities for the Bureau, but the method in which Mr. Miller died had been used in the past by members of this particular west side organization. His homicide effectively ended our infiltration efforts.”

“Thank you for your testimony in this matter, Mr. Hilliard. Our next witness, please?”

Alderman Davis felt the need to re-chair her own subcommittee “A, yes, thank you, Alderman Coronado. Did any other alderman on the subcommittee have a question for this witness?” I turned to get some kind of reaction from Vic, but his seat was empty. His friend was gone, too.

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The image on a very large plasma television screen, revealing a live feed from the subcommittee hearing, went silent as special agent Hilliard continued his testimony. The man handling the television control turned away from the screen and towards the other occupants of the room.

“You were right, Samuel. My opinion of our departed member was misinformed, to say the least. Today my mistake stands corrected, humbly.” Giving a slight head nod in Samuel’s direction, he spoke with a slightly foreign accent. The other two younger gentlemen sitting off to one side of the room, dressed as if they were twins though they weren’t, paid close attention to the conversation between the older men.

“Thank you, sir.” Samuel also spoke with a slight accent, though not as deep as his boss. The room the men occupied was rather opulent and gave the impression that the owner had an old-world appreciation for the finer things. Subdued lighting, tiffany-style lamps,

wooden window shades, thick carpeting, plush sofas and tasteful décor, bookshelf-lined walls, all combining in the hallmark of traditional design, complete with the haze of fine cigar smoke. The only object that seemed out of place in this otherwise perfect upscale man cave was a round glass cylinder on the central wood-carved desk, filled with some kind of liquid, and floating in that thick, opaque liquid was something that resembled a part of the human anatomy. That only the male half of the population possessed. An open cabinet shelving unit on a far wall held a number of other glass cylinders, like the one on the desk. "Does this, then, justify my action taken, sir?"

"With regrets, yes. Justified. Necessary, if you wish."

"I thought the use of the initials a bit dramatic, sir."

"Always good to have somebody else to blame in these matters, Samuel. Conveniently supplied by our adversaries."

"I'm not entirely sure what they're supposed to represent, at this late date sir."

"All the better, Samuel. Deniable culpability, our attorneys may say. Let that reporter sweat a little. They do a lot of sweating on the south side."

"And the boy, sir?"

"The sins of the father, Samuel. But quietly. Are we in agreement, Mr. Orion?" The slightly older of the two young men in the room signified in the affirmative.

"We're not sure what his present location is, sir."

"That, Samuel, is your burden."

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"Your name, please?"

"Ernesto Santiago Perez, sir, ma'am!" 'Nesto appeared as nervous as he sounded, correcting himself in front of the subcommittee line-up. I felt sorry for him, but joined in the giggling from the audience, anyway.

"You don't have to be nervous here, Mr. Perez," Alderman Davis tried to reassure him. "We appreciate you appearing before this subcommittee."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Alderman Coronado, I believe you have some questions for this witness?” Davis seemed to be trying to move the proceedings along, though enough had already been said this morning to write a couple more chapters of books about this town.

“Thank you, Alderman Davis. Mr. Perez? What is your age?”

“Thirty-four.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Different jobs.”

“What kind of jobs, sir?”

“Sometimes deliveries, sometimes busboy, sometimes work on the docks in South Chicago, stuff like that.”

“Manuel labor?”

“What do you mean?”

“You work with your hands, Mr. Perez.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you ever belonged to any organizations in the South Chicago community, Mr. Perez?”

“What kind?”

“Any kind of organized groups of people.”

“I’m a Democrat.” The audience laughed out loud, along with a few of the aldermen present. Coronado seemed impatient for some results from ‘Nesto.

“Two years ago you suffered a death in your family, Mr. Perez?”

“My brother was murdered, you mean?”

“Yes, your older brother Leon Perez was murdered on the same morning as Joey Miller.”

“Yeah.”

“Have the Chicago police provided your family with any results of their investigation of this tragedy?”

“They said he was killed by two guys who worked for Miller. And you.” The audience murmured uneasily at this confrontational news. Coronado paused a moment, let it go.

“To your knowledge, did your brother Leon belong to any gang in the South Chicago community, Mr. Perez?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I mean, not for a long time. When he was a kid, he joined up with the Counts. But only when he was a kid.”

“To your knowledge, do some gangs have an initiation for incoming members?”

“All gangs have something to join. Usually a kid takes a beating to get in a gang, like a violation.”

“Is that the only method of initiation gangs apply to potential members?”

“I don’t know. I never been in one.”

“Do some gangs have new members get tattoos to join the gangs, Mr. Perez?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. Once you’re in the gang you can get a tattoo to represent. If you got the tattoo first you could get killed.”

“I see, thank you. If I may present to the subcommittee an autopsy photograph of the late Leon Perez, nothing graphic I assure you, just the image of his shoulder.” The eight by ten black and white photograph passed around, first to the members on the dais, then to the witness, showed Leon’s left shoulder with a tattoo, but Coronado flashed it too fast for the audience to get a good look at any of the details. “Is this a gang tattoo, Mr. Perez?”

“No.”

“No? Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Ernesto replied. Coronado thought for a moment.

“Would you please stand for the subcommittee and remove your jacket?” ‘Nesto followed Coronado’s request and slowly stood up, unzipping his black windbreaker. Laying it aside on the back of his chair, Ernesto had revealed he was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt. “Would you also remove your white shirt?” I could see he was sweating heavily, his shirt showing wet spots.

“This one?” Ernesto indicated the shirt he was wearing, as if Coronado was talking about some other shirt in the room. The audience was amused by the burlesque gag, but the chairman was not and let her gavel do the talking.

“Please?” Antonio replied.

“Is this necessary, Tony?” Alderman Davis forgot the decorum of the room briefly. Ernesto now stood before the subcommittee wearing only a plain white t-shirt above the waist.

“I think it will be in a moment, Chairman Davis. Now Mr. Perez, would you roll up your right undershirt sleeve?” Ernesto complied in silence, revealing skin, naturally tanned and muscled. “And the left sleeve, if you please?” The room had gotten very quiet, and Ernesto glared at Coronado, and slowly revealed a tattoo on his left shoulder, but something more. The tattoo appeared to be covering a burn mark, like a branding. I don’t think I’d ever seen that design before, rain clouds above a mountain peak and some words beneath it. “If the subcommittee members would please note that both brothers have the same tattoo design, on the same shoulder, with the same burn mark, and the words in Spanish, *‘Niños del Yunque’*. Could you explain the symbolism behind your tattoo, Mr. Perez?”

“*Pinche juevos, diabl.*” Ernesto said under his breath.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think the clerk was able to understand that, sir.”

“It signifies a fraternal order.”

“Like some kind of gang sign?”

“No. Not like some kind of gang sign. Like the lifeblood that is passed down from the Tianos, from the sacred mountains of El Yunque in Boricua.”

“Of course it does,” Antonio mocked the young man, indicating the autopsy photo. “And the branding on top, Mr. Perez?”

“The branding is the first sign of acceptance into manhood, and the acceptance of the responsibilities. The body art comes later, when it is earned. *Tu sabes nada.*” If daggers could fly out of one’s eyes, Coronado would be a dead man, from the look ‘Nesto gave him. Antonio began to say something but was cut off.

“Thank you, Mr. Perez. I think we could all use a few minutes’ break,” Alderman Davis suddenly announced. “Let’s reconvene in fifteen minutes, then, and give our witness some time to, to, get dressed.” From her look I’d guess she and Coronado would be having some words between acts. Then she handed him a note that the clerk

had handed her a minute before. Coronado looked like the cat after the canary went missing. When he turned to look my way, I thought his usual smile had turned a darker shade of sly.

The audience stood en mass to stretch, and there was some activity in the press arena, some of the reporters going live. Ernesto had put his white shirt back on but didn't bother to button up. His white undershirt looked like a wet rag. He stepped over to where Ben and I were seated and, instead of offering a handshake, gave a deep, almost reverent bow, and made for the exit. From the look of him, I didn't think he was coming back.

"What the hell was that about, Nick?"

"Got me. I never saw the kid so, so . . ."

"So what?"

"I don't know. Rattled to his core?"

"I mean the bowing. Are you in some kind of cult, Nick?"

"Hey! I just got here myself!"

"I need a cup a coffee," Ben announced. He seemed drained of color, but I'd seen him with this 'lost boy' look before.

"How about a Danish, Ben? On me!"

"Where you gonna get a Danish in city hall, Nick?"

"I know a little coffee shop up the street a bit."

"We can't be late getting back here."

"They're not gonna start without us, are they?"

"Your lips to God's ears."

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A small black and white television set with bad reception and low volume was positioned over the sinks of a busy diner-type restaurant kitchen, the sinks piled with morning dishes. The busboy with reddish brown hair under his hairnet catching up with the pile, Angel Sosa, smiled at the results of the coverage of the council chambers hearing, but continued his work on the stack of used dishes, singing a traditional island tune in Spanish, while two older Latino-looking men worked on pots, pans and silverware in other sinks in the kitchen. In the background, a train arrival announcement could be heard echoing behind the clatter of all the dishwashing.

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I needed the fresh air and sunshine, and a little time to think about what questions were awaiting my return to the council chamber. LaSalle Street was busy with the early lunch rush, and I wondered out loud to Ben if the coffee shop was such a good idea. I recommended Manny's Deli on south Jefferson as an alternative, about two miles conveniently out of our way, but Benjamin latched onto my arm and walked me northbound across Randolph and then across LaSalle when we caught the green light, directly into the little coffee shop on the northwest corner of the intersection, which was already filling up with the lunch crowd.

"I don't see an empty table, Nick." Ben sounded burned out.

"Hey! Why don't you two join us?" B. J. King called out from farther inside, seated at a table with Chicago Daily News reporter Arthur Josslyn. I started to move towards the duo, but Ben had second thoughts.

"I don't think this makes for good judgment, Nick."

"C'mon, Ben, what could possibly go wrong with coffee and a Danish?" We maneuvered around the throng and joined the pair. After introductions and placing our orders, things got down to business quickly.

"So Nick," Josslyn asked, "should we be looking for any retractions in your upcoming articles for the Service regarding Joey Miller?" Ben sighed.

"Why would you expect a retraction, Arthur?" I casually asked.

"Is this on the record, Mr. Josslyn?" Ben felt the need to clarify, as our order arrived.

"On or off, Mr. Levi, my readers would certainly expect a reporter of Nick's caliber to admit when he has wronged the reputation of a public servant, now that the facts have come to light." B. J. was just sitting back and enjoying the show, loudly sipping his coffee for emphasis. He even stuck his pinky in the air when he caught me glaring at him.

"I didn't get it wrong, Josslyn. Joey was everything I wrote about him and more, whether this committee pins a medal on his gravestone or not!"

“What new information have we found out about this case so far today, Nick?” Josslyn took a slow, silent sip of his coffee.

“Now Nick,” Ben tried to intervene, “as your attorney I would suggest we ask for the check and return to city hall.”

“We found out that the FBI had something over Joey’s head so potent that it made him change stripes, that a couple of brothers had matching tattoos, and an alderman is out to take over this town, one subcommittee at a time!” Ben got up to leave, signaling our waitress for the check.

“That is precisely what we found out today!” Josslyn said, smiling. “I’m looking forward to your testimony then.” Oh yeah, now it would be my turn on the firing line. Damn. B. J. toasted his coffee in my direction. I didn’t know what Josslyn’s angle was. My legal advisor and I said our ‘goodbyes’ and then Ben handed me our check at the cashier’s counter.

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“Would you please repeat that for the mayor, John?” Lieutenant Vic Hanley handed the most secure phone in city hall back to its current owner seated at his inner office desk on the fifth floor, acting Director of the FBI, John Kirkpatrick on the other end. Vic’s bespectacled friend turned away from the conversation and shook his head as if to say, ‘This guy ain’t gonna buy anything from his own people today.’

“Go ahead, Director Kirkpatrick,” the Mayor said while glaring over his glasses in Vic’s direction. “Tell me why this information has been kept from me by my own people for two years now. I’m listening.”

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“If everyone could settle down, we will continue, thank you,” Alderman Davis announced from the row of alderman reassembled for the next round of questions, slamming down her gavel once more. I appeared to be the last witness, having missed out on the testimony of Detective Ducree and her saggy partner, and a few others on that clerk’s list. I found out later that Ernesto Perez had not made a second

appearance before the subcommittee, after the break. Smart move on his part. "Would you please state your name, sir?"

"Nick Daniels, Alderman."

"And your current occupation?"

"I am a writer and reporter for the Calumet News Service."

"And how long have you held that position?"

"For more than twenty years, Alderman."

"Now Mr. Daniels, you wrote a series of articles just after the death of Joey Miller, in which you alleged his behavior across the years you knew him was less than honorable. Is that correct?"

"He was a neighborhood thug, ma'am." My answer made Ben moan, and got a few catcalls from the gallery above. A couple of taps from the chairman's gavel brought the room back to order.

"In light of the revelations from testimony we heard earlier this morning in this very chamber, are you still of that opinion, Mr. Daniels?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So being an informant for the FBI doesn't make a change in your opinion of the late Joey Miller?"

"As a reporter I'd be asking the FBI what they had to hold over Joey Miller's head to get him to cooperate with them, Alderman. From retired special agent Hilliard's testimony it was clear Joey didn't make the first move, ma'am. And I would have pressed the retired agent to reveal what exactly he meant by 'among other things' in his words from this morning."

"All good points to be considered. Thank you -"

"I would also have pressed the retired special agent for a timeline of Joey Miller's actions that may have been illegally vetted by the FBI while he was their 'informant' and under their supervision, ma'am."

"Thank you for your candor, Mr. Daniels. Alderman -"

"If I may continue, Alderman, as a citizen of this great city of ours, I would ask this subcommittee for some explanation of why a reporter -"

"I think I may field the next question from the witness, Alderman."

"The chair recognizes Alderman Coronado."

"Thank you, Alderman Davis. Nick Daniels." Here comes the highlight of my day.

"Good morning, Alderman." Did it get very quiet in here?

"Nick. Daniels."

"Present. As requested, Alderman." Nothing like a showdown to whet the mob's appetite before lunch.

"This committee has been looking forward to your testimony, Mr. Daniels?"

"I'm not sure what assistance I may -"

"Your news service covers a lot of territory, doesn't it?"

"In area, we -"

"And a lot of subject matter." I thought I'd just sit back and let Antonio have the spotlight, but I was too tense to lean back in my chair now. I could feel the sweat start to build at the nape of my neck. "Politics, crime, industry, nature, discount coupons." The last comment got a few laughs from the audience. The press area of the chamber had some activity going on, apart from the hearing it seemed, the attention of my colleagues was on their cell phones and pad devices. They kept looking at me. Ben caught wind of it, but we were both stuck at the witness table.

"It's a local news service, Alderman. Copies are handed out in your office on Comm -"

"And you are the chief reporter for this 'local service', Mr. Daniels."

"Just one among several." I couldn't get myself to call him 'sir'. It wouldn't come out of my mouth, which was getting very dry. "Are you going to get to a question anytime soon, Alderman?" Without turning to look at him, I thought Ben was about to have a coronary.

"Certainly. As the chief reporter for your news service, are you aware of the identity of the body that was found this morning on the south side of our great city?" Off to the side I caught a glimpse of Vic Hanley standing just inside the anteroom doorway, catching his breath and signaling me. The Franklin Pangborn look-alike clerk from earlier handed a council assistant a folded piece of paper and what looked like

a late-morning edition newspaper, which the young woman walked over to Alderman Davis.

"I have been here since this morning awaiting your questions, Alderman, on my day off from the Service." Ben instinctively touched my arm, I realized my hands were gripping each other a little too hard. "Who's body was discovered, Alderman?" Vic was waving his arms excitedly, it looked like he was saying 'Get up and get out!'

"I don't know. The police have not released his identity pending notification of his relatives. But from the reports I have seen, I think you should know who's body that was found floating in a pond this morning, Nick. Daniels!" There he goes with emphasizing my name again. Right! The helicopters over Hyde Park.

"Why should I know that and not you?" 'Sir' almost slipped out.

Coronado pointed a finger at me, almost smirking. "Because your initials were on his forehead!" The audience was on their feet, the press was snapping pictures, the chair was gaveling for silence, control, anything! Over all that I could hear Ben moaning beside me. "In fact, Mr. Nick Daniels, this is not the first victim who has been murdered in this city with your initials on his forehead, is it?" Though taken aback for the moment, I had had enough. Instinctively I stood up, knocking my chair over behind me with a bang that was lost in the noisy din of the chamber.

"No Alderman, I guess he isn't the first, God have mercy on his soul, whoever he was, but why do all these dead bodies tagged with letters on their foreheads seem to be pouring out of your office?!" Two could point fingers. It was Coronado's turn to be taken aback, Davis was still trying to restore order, with no luck, and the gallery had exploded in shouts and expletives. I could feel Ben just staring at me, but having read the note and seen the headline of the paper, Alderman Davis started passing them down the line of her peers, with grave reactions from each. The press didn't know which way to aim their cameras. For some reason, I then realized, I had been standing and then stepping around the small table Ben was still seated at, just after Coronado, having finally read the note with a surprised look on his face, started stepping around his fellow alderman, walking in my

general direction. I didn't notice exactly when Ben had come around the other side of the table so that he was now standing in front of me, facing Coronado's sudden charge. For a big guy, that rotund officer assisting the council clerk sure could move when he wanted to, blocking Antonio from getting any closer than he already was. The noise became deafening. Some of his own colleagues were trying to talk some sense into the guy. Ben had wisely steered me towards the exit where city workers who wouldn't have missed this scene for the world had huddled, almost blocking the doorway. I could hear calls from the dais for investigations, further testimony, my head on a platter, and the useless pounding of that flaccid gavel. In the crowd, I missed Vic.

"Another proud day for the southeast side!" someone in the chamber exclaimed as Ben and I hurried by, into the waiting cameras of the press corps de jackals in the antechamber.

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A small flat screen color TV was perched on a rollaway table, the owner clicking the sound off as he picked up the mobile phone on his bed. "Louise? Is Nick on today? Then have Mr. Daniels in my office first thing tomorrow morning!" Larry Galica clicked the off button on the phone and picked up the TV remote. "Another proud day for the southeast side," he grimaced.

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"Plan B, Nick!"

"Got it!" Ben had already prepared me for a quick exit in case the hearing went south, and was beckoning the press his way for a 'real scoop' as he put it to them, letting the reporters know I'd be right back after a short vomit break in the men's room. After stepping into the near-empty hallway, I made a dash for the stairs, and ran up them two at a time to the third floor, where the two government buildings share a common hall. The sounds of the last five minutes were still ringing in my ears, and the adrenaline was pumping! I slowed my pace and took a deep breath as I entered the county side of the structure and

made for the elevators. Even the air was cooler on the other side. I didn't hear any following footsteps, so the ruse had worked!

The elevator I entered had only one passenger on her way to the lobby. "Good morning, Ms. Goldsmith," I said to the reporter from the City News Bureau. I noted the top half of the cover of 'Short Line' peering out of one of the tote bags she was carrying.

"Mr. Daniels," she acknowledged. I thought we might both have the same thing on our minds at the moment, but instead we just exited at the main level. Holly walked back towards the City Hall side of the building while I casually stepped onto the nearby 'down' escalator and headed back to the lower level pedway, longing for the safety of my Lincoln.

Standing at his post in the lower hallway of the Daley Center building, in which the city's criminal courts are located on its upper floors, I found Steve Rodriguez, younger brother of Memo, the 10th Ward guy who had helped me in the battle of the Jovial Club two summers ago. Steve was decked out in his Cook County Sheriff's uniform, complete with sidearm and bulletproof vest, more svelte in the stomach area than the last time I'd seen him at his post in late February when I was paying off my property taxes at the Cook County treasurer's office, but clean-shaven and bald as an eagle. Some guys like the convenience. I think Steve's was out of necessity. As I neared his post, guarding the lower level judicial entrance to the building, he was directing a patron seeking court assistance, to the right room.

"Hey Steve!" We half shook hands, half hugged.

"Hey Nick! Hang on a minute." He checked the ID of a young man and let him pass. "How did the hearing go?"

"Fine. Fine. How's the family?"

"Good. Good. Christine's up in the lobby." His wife of more than twenty years was also a sheriff in the building, but she filled out her uniform better than her husband did his. "The boys are looking forward to getting back into their school groove." They have two sons, and live a couple of blocks from Polish Jay's place on the East Side.

"Excellent! Say 'hi' to Christine for me." We half shook hands, half hugged again. I recalled sending Steve a text after the seventh and deciding game of the world series in 2016, asking if he would ever be

able to live with his wife now? Christine is a huge fan of that north side baseball team. Steve is from the southeast side of Chicago. He wrote back that I was ‘the fourth person to send me the same text! Help!’ Funny, their bungalow never did get decked out with a big ‘W’ like a lot of homes did then.

“Will do. Yes ma’am?” Steve was right back at work. A bit of a local legend, on his time off from his county work, Steve is the drummer in a Mexican dance band that changes its name every couple of years. I thought it might have been for legal purposes, but as yet haven’t found out why. They never tried any of the names I offered, for some reason. I’ve caught them practicing in Steve’s garage a couple of times. Great sounds. What was wrong with ‘Topiary Dogs’?

Making my way further east in the pedway I was about to pass through the Blue Line subway station, a brisk thoroughfare with all the hustle of the underbelly of a big city, when I spotted a fresh pile of Daily News newspapers being clipped open by the woman vendor wearing a plaid babushka outside her kiosk, a late morning edition, I guessed, with a color portrait of my face on the cover! The headline read, ‘Initial Man’ Before Council’. I handed over some loose change and read the first few paragraphs. Nicely written, almost prose. Now I really wanted to lose that lunch I hadn’t eaten yet. When I slowly lowered the paper, the author of the article, Arthur Josslyn, was standing in front of me.

“How long have you been sitting on this story, Josslyn?” I bluntly asked, emphasizing the front page.

“From your answers at city hall a couple minutes ago, I’d surmise not as long as you have, Nick.”

“The reporter’s not supposed to be the headline.”

“No, we’re not. But you’re not just any reporter, buddy, which is why we want you on the staff of the newspaper you just bought a copy of.” I was really amazed by his offer from out of nowhere, and I was sure my face showed it. I needed to change the subject.

“And what is this ‘Initial Man’ crap?” I slapped the photo. Not a bad likeness, from B. J. King’s camera less than an hour ago, of me being sworn in.

“A hook. That’s all. Got you to buy a copy, didn’t it?” A commuter briskly stepped by the two of us with a ‘Harrumph!’, glancing up from his copy of the Daily News, doing a double-take to confirm my face with the photo on page one.

“Thanks for reading The Daily News, sir!” Arthur had a comical side, I noted.

“Your paper is selling to the fedora crowd, and I don’t need a tag, Josslyn. I’m fine writing from where I’m at. I’m not a downtown reporter, you know.”

“For the moment.” He just couldn’t wipe that all-knowing smile off his face for a minute.

“I’m also not a punch line, even if it does sell papers, man.”

“Please give my offer some serious thought, Nick, it’s not something my paper makes lightly, or on a whim. And a, don’t look now, but here come a few more downtown reporters!” he said, smiling.

Looking back down the long pedway concourse where I had come from, a crowd of reporters and photographers from other media were headed our way through the glass doors. I wondered how long Ben had held them off my trail with his witty banter and charm. Without saying our ‘goodbyes’, though I thought I heard Josslyn chuckle, it could have been something from a train below of course, I ducked around the kiosk as quickly as possible to avoid being spotted by the pack of ink and screen jackals. I got lost in the sudden torrent of commuters coming up the stairs and escalators from a departing train on the lower level. I packed myself in with the throng heading up a staircase to the street level outside.

Once we reached the very top of the stairs, I glanced back at the exiting people. No glimpse of the bloodhounds from what I could see down the stairwell, so I took my time heading south on the east side of the busy downtown Dearborn Street, admiring the views. To my right and across the street stood the 3-story Picasso statue in Daley Plaza, which I took a moment to admire, recalling a memory of sliding down the side of the metal behemoth on a snowy winter evening some years ago, during one of the city’s Christmas tree lighting ceremonies Lynn and I attended. As big as the artwork was close-up, from across the street it was dwarfed by the canyon of downtown buildings.

After another look for the posse coming up from the subway entrance, but with none in view, I hooked a right turn at the next street onto Washington at Dearborn. This corner has become notable for the fishbowl news broadcast booth installed here a few years back, when this particularly disappointing building was completed. Looking like something out of the fifties with a hint of Mies Van der Rohe but without any of the brilliance, this was the best a city could settle for after letting a place called Block 37 sit for decades without a dime in property tax being generated.

Once, at one of those city-sponsored biennial architectural exhibits, I saw a model of a building complex with two towers, one taller than the other, draped in a green glass skin, with soft, rounded sides, designed by Helmut Jahn, and proposed for this block of real estate. Like something out of Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*, it was a structure on the verge of majestic for the capital of architecture in America. Instead, we settled for a couple of shoe boxes. Daniel Burnham, we hardly knew ye.

The television booth was empty, but the two screens above the space where the midday news team had been seated a short time before were replaying the early edition of the broadcast. There was the image from the helicopter view of the body rolling over in the pond, revealing the man's face, and my initials on his forehead. Hell, I know that face! No sound coming from behind the glass, just the monitors, a clip of the city council chambers, Coronado and I exchanging viewpoints, Ben putting himself between us. Ben looked good on camera, even his old suit. Where did I know that face from? Breaking away from the other sidewalk viewers, passing under the large, silver, unblinking eye on the side of the studio I made a beeline to my safe parking loft and drove south. Home turf. I wondered if B. J. knew about my secret parking spot and told Josslyn? After all, they did work together at the Daily News. Or did my paranoia kick in again?

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Spring around these parts of the Midwest lasts about a week, giving the early budding plants just enough time to pop open, look around and change their minds. Winter overstays its welcome each and

every year here, lets Spring get a peek outside, slams the door shut and drops another dozen feet of snow before relinquishing my lakeside city to another blazing hot summer. With the spring thaw comes the annual floating of the corpses, left over from the previous winter, found bobbing in several of our local bodies of water. Some are fresher than others. What was that dead man's name, again? And what case did I know him from? My cell phone vibrated, I had forgotten to switch the sound back on. It was the Service office.

"Good afternoon, Louise!" I said brightly.

"Good afternoon, yose'f!" she replied. "Mr. Larry would like to see you in his office first thing tomorrow mornin'. Mm hmm!"

Gulp. "Yes, ma'am," I said, less brightly. I guess my boss may have caught the show at city hall. Mm hmm.

It's good to have some time alone after a bout like that, even if it's behind the wheel, just to get my mind off the morning. The ride back to the southeast side was the perfect decompression for me, triggering more than a few memories and thoughts along the way. As I passed the Field Museum and Soldier Field, I imagined what this all looked like at the time of the Century of Progress World's Fair in the 1930's, with the giant Sky Ride looming over the south end of Soldier Field, and the line-up of automotive-themed pavilions from the giant automakers, culminating with the spectacular roof of the Travel and Transportation building, in its day the largest dome ever erected. And there was Sally Rand and her fans at the Streets of Paris exhibit. Progress, indeed.

I remembered the large lit-up sign that ran the length of the two block-long building across the Illinois Central railroad tracks, reading 'The Lakeside Press' from my childhood rides on the Drive with my family. That was gone, too. But McCormick Place kept on growing, even with the city's plans to demolish the exhibition hall nearest to the lake. Still couldn't snag the Lucas Museum on a bet. Too bad.

With all those well-intentioned monuments to Chicago's movers and shakers along this stretch of highway, you'd think there might have been room for a small plaque in memory of a guy who had a hand in making so much of them come true, a man by the name of Lenox Lohr. Never heard of him? I'm not surprised. A member of the

Army Corps of Engineers before the U.S. entered the Great War (World War I), Lohr excelled at organizational skills vital to the war effort and served as a Major in the military until 1929, when he was tapped to head the new Chicago World's Fair, as the exhibition's general manager. Most likely Rufus Dawes, head of the fair's investors and brother to Vice-President Charles Dawes, was familiar with Lohr's talents for getting things accomplished on time and under budget, as they both had served in the Corps together during the war.

Lohr got the 1933 fair up and running and even expanded the event into another season (1934) with a small cash surplus at its closing after having repaid every private investor's money, and that during the worst years of the Great Depression. Afterwards, Lenox Lohr moved his considerable talents to New York City's radio market, specifically NBC, becoming its president for seven years, but he wasn't done with Chicago yet.

Returning to the Windy City in 1940 from his work in New York, Lohr replaced the retiring Rufus Dawes as president of the Museum of Science and Industry, a position he would hold until his death in 1968. During his tenure the museum became the great adventure destination that every kid in Chicago remembers from our childhoods. The Santa Fe model train pike, the Christmas Around the World festival, the walk-through human heart, even Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle, all were innovations during Lohr's twenty-eight years of service to the museum. And there was more from the man.

In 1947 Lohr was approached by members of the railroad lines that criss-crossed Chicago and the Midwest, to organize a show highlighting a century of railroad travel in America. Instead, he proposed a production that would chronicle the history of American transportation. This lakefront spectacle, the Chicago Railroad Fair of 1948, became another major success at the hands of Lenox Lohr, drawing more than two and a half million visitors in its first year of operation. I still have a copy of the show program from my parents' collection of our city's memorabilia, as I'm sure many other Chicagoans do.

In 1955 Lohr was elected chairman of the Metropolitan Fair and Exposition Authority, a precursor to the McCormick Place-Navy

Pier, or ‘McPier’ Authority we have today. Lohr secured funding from the Springfield legislature to construct an exhibition hall capable of hosting world-class conventions, trade shows and exhibitions. By agreeing to name the place after the publisher of the Chicago Tribune, Col. Robert McCormick, Lohr secured marketing and publicity from one of the top newspapers in the Midwest for the lakefront construction of the hall. Where is there a Lenox Lohr for today’s Chicago?

A little farther south on the Drive, where Michael Reese hospital once stood, the city almost had the perfect site of the 2016 summer Olympics village. Almost. Gotta remember to pick up a small floral display for the dining room table for tonight’s dinner. As I passed the 47th Street exit, I recalled that not too long ago a President’s residence was a few short blocks away. Now Hyde Park will host the site of his Presidential Library and Center, just steps from the Museum of Science and Industry. God bless America.

I stopped dwelling in the past as I drove by the site of this morning’s discovery, where a police presence, and from the electronic towers I guessed a press presence as well, still existed at the south end of the boat pond in Harold Washington Park. The TV stations must have set up live remotes from the pond, for their noon and early evening broadcasts. I still couldn’t remember where I knew him from, but I knew I saw him with pal Joey at some political fundraiser I covered. Gotta check my stories to trigger the memory.

Seemed like every organization was busy planning their own ‘gateways’ all over the southeast side community and here was the real thing, already a preferred choice among motorists, the reroute of Route 41 thru the old South Works property, beginning at 79th Street and South Shore Drive. I continued my way south, returning to the border of South Chicago. With another brilliant sculpture by Richard Hunt already in place though hidden by the trees, the new reroute was dedicated just about six years ago, which I covered for the Service. Of course the mayor wouldn’t have missed a ribbon-cutting ceremony, along with many other local and state dignitaries present for the speeches and celebration. A good crowd of locals were in attendance, too, on that cool morning with a breeze right off the nearby lake,

including one local office-seeking activist, Tony Coronado, leading a group of demonstrators, picketing for higher minimum wages in the city and state. A convenient line of police kept the smaller group from any interference of the larger group, but they got the press coverage they were looking for.

With his continuing policy of ‘no off the cuff interviews’ that morning the mayor was in true form, and with no handlers in sight, he jumped over any conversation and instead congratulated everybody as he worked the crowd, even this reporter, deliberately catching us all off-guard one by one so nobody could ask an actual question of hizzoner. Like we somehow had built the reroute ourselves? We just paid for it, Mr. Mayor. The speeches were forgettable, but I did get a piece of the pale lilac-colored ribbon after all the cutting.

As the route straightened out to a direct north/south drive, there off to my right was St. Michael’s soaring tower gleaming in the early afternoon sunshine. If that wasn’t a beacon of hope for the community, I didn’t know what was. A little farther south on the left, the massive ore walls of the giant deceased steel plant remained, waiting for a plan, any plan, but during the past couple of summers, it saw life as a backdrop for performances by the Shakespeare Theatre troupe, usually housed at Navy Pier. Really great performances! Lynn and I kept promising to try the climbing wall that had been added to the south ore wall, but we just hadn’t gotten it off our list, yet. My stomach rumbled.

Why do I keep missing lunch all the time? I knew what I really wanted and had a taste for, and for some time... smoked shrimp! Like some kind of fish magnet, the Lincoln drove me the remaining short distance to the Calumet Fisheries on 95th Street at the river, almost parking itself near the bottom of the roadway that raises 95th Street up to the bridge level. It was the closest available space that mid afternoon, as the year in-year out repair work of the bridge and its approaches, stretching into its third year, yielded half the street to construction barriers. The maintenance and repainting work on the Skyway Bridge visible to the south of the sidewalk approach where I was walking looked like it was nearing completion, even though rigging and massive strips of canvas were still covering both north and southbound lanes of the steel structure, more canvas under the

superstructure flapping in the breeze that made Chicago famous. I felt a cold shudder pass through me, remembering two summers ago and the discovery of Joey Miller's dead body under that bridge. Now they're trying to repaint him into some kind of hero.

The picnic tables set up just next to the 95th Street vehicular bridge were packed with foodies. Stepping around the line queuing outside the building, I walked down some steps parallel to the river, down to the smoker shack adjacent to the main structure. The place really was busy for a weekday, but it's been like this for quite some time. I didn't know whether that James Beard award they had hanging on the wall in the joint helped any, but it didn't seem to hurt! The manager of the place, Carlos Rosas, was just stepping out of the smoke house.

"Hey, Carlos!"

"Hey, Nicky. Watcha got goin'?"

"A hunger, Carlos!"

"We'll fix you up right away. Alberto!" He called for a young worker from inside the main building. "Saw you on the TV news, Nick. Why you always pissing off Coronado, man?"

"I don't know, Carlos. I just do, I guess." Young Latino Alberto joined us. Did I just instinctively check out his left shoulder? Gotta be the hunger.

"So what do you want, ten pounds, Nick? Twenty?"

I patted my stomach, "Just a half a pound of smoked shrimp! And a half order of fries, please. And tartar sauce, Alberto." I handed him a twenty dollar bill.

"Got it." Alberto reentered the main one-story building.

"I think you're hooked on my smoked shrimp!"

"I know I'm hooked on your smoked shrimp!"

"You gotta try the smoked sturgeon. Hey, when is the Service gonna do another article on us, man?"

I pointed to the line of people waiting to get inside. "I think you're doing okay, Carlos."

"We can always do better, Nick! C'mon, Mr. TV reporter."

"I'll pass it by Larry. You willing to reveal your secrets to my readers for the perfect smoked fish, Carlos?"

“What secrets? C’mon in, I’ll show you something, Nick!” He motioned to the smoker doorway, but Alberto came back with a small bag and my change. I rifled through it and handed him back a dollar bill.

“Next time, Carlos! I got a hunger!” I held up my lunch, proudly.

“Okay! Hey, no tipping, Nick,” Carlos said while Alberto pocketed the buck with a chuckle and returned to his work inside.

“This is Chicago, Carlos. Gotta tip!” I hurried back up the stairs, through the line of hungry people and almost sprinted to my Lincoln. I ate as I drove, pulling out a few hot french fries with my right hand while steering with the left. I drove up and over the bridge and further east bound, past my former property to the east of the Short Line railroad yard entry tracks, where the new owner was already constructing a brick apartment building. The little white cross and candles and such that people set up after Leon’s murder were still there just in front of the parking lot, looking like they had been refreshed recently. Driving directly into Calumet Park and curving around the roadways, I pulled into a parking space overlooking the boat ramps on the lakefront, to eat my lunch in peace. Whether the seagulls begging for leftovers liked it or not.

After downing my late lunch I drove the short distance to the field house in Calumet Park, recently designated a cultural center for the southeast side. Quite a step up in prestige and expectations for the old place. Public art in the forms of sculpture dotted the park now. I walked inside the main lobby, giving a private wave from the heart to the Whisper ship inside the glass case to my right and walked closer to the closed iron double doors of the museum on the left of the lobby. Boxes which had been sorted and packed to one side of the large room, occupied by the museum since the eighties, were awaiting the move to the ‘new’ archival space. A couple of volunteers who I didn’t recognize, were measuring the rest of the mostly empty space, planning the layout for the recently approved showcases the museum board had ordered. So much change because of a little bell. And a couple of murders. Go figure.

“Hey, Nick!”

“Hey, Dee.”

“How’s the move going?”

“Looks good. The new crew has it under control. I just wanted to have a peek at the progress.”

“There’ve been a lot of you old timers checking in this week.” I’m an old timer? I gave her a look over my non-existent glasses like, “Say what?” “Oh, you know what I mean!” We shared a laugh. “Have you seen their new space?”

“Not since the rehab wrapped up. How about you?”

“Been too busy here and at my other park, but I’m going to the opening ceremony, by invitation!”

“Me, too!”

“Sorry a lot of your real old timers won’t be there to see it happen. Bad couple a winters.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ll be with us in spirit, though. They’re going to have their names mentioned as part of the opening ceremony.” The office phone rang, with a distinctive echo in the hallways of the grand building.

“I gotta go, Nick. Short-handed. Good seeing you!”

“Same here.” Dee Seaton was the latest manager of the place for the Park District, and a keeper as far as the museum was concerned. Just the right person with a young and fresh attitude to bring this place up to its full potential for the community. I wondered if more people didn’t know how lucky they were to have her on their side?

As Dee reminded me, the past two winters were particularly brutal among the core membership of our little museum, as we lost more than a few legends to illness and age. Both Frank Stanley and Alex Savestano, founders of the place decades before, were gone. Our treasurer, Ora Coon, for whom a filing system had inexplicably been named for, had passed away. Even that booming voice of Joe Mulac, resident retired artist, had been somehow silenced. Has it already been two years since I attended the wake of our past president and recording secretary, Gloria Novak? Hard to imagine the time passing so fast, and I never got the chance to ask her about her time working on the Manhattan Project back in the 1940’s as a secretary. I didn’t even

know about that facet of her life until meeting her family at the wake. I made sure that fact was added to her obit in the Saturday edition of the Cal. Their names may not be above the doorway, but they will remain in many of our hearts and minds for a lifetime. Like one's parents, if you were lucky enough to have had a set like I did, there are other helping hands and voices coming in and out of our lives, that don't really leave us, even after they're gone.

About that damned bell. A mystery unsolved to this day. Digging into the history of the McGuffin, as Hitchcock termed that item in a movie plot that kept the audience's attention for no other purpose, no one as of this writing has ever found out why a bell from a cargo ship had been cast in solid gold. Even as a commemorative item, it was singular. We could trace the vessel and the history of the Kirsten Shipping business from Hamburg, Germany, begun in 1878 by Adolph Kirsten. The ship with the golden bell, the *Cleopatra*, was one of two cargo ships, along with the *Desdemona*, built after World War II, with the *Cleopatra* first launching on September 27, 1951. All the ships built for the Kirsten Line were named after female characters from Shakespearian plays, with some names being used multiple times. The pair of vessels was destined for transatlantic service for A. Kirsten Shipping on their Hamburg-Chicago Line, something planned in the thirties but stymied by World War II. Both vessels were designed to fit exactly into the newly-constructed Canadian-U.S. waterways' system of locks.

After serving her owners well for their business, the *Cleopatra* was partially demolished beginning in December of 1989. Rumor has it that her lower portion could be in use as a barge in any channel on her old route, still working the waterways today. How Frieda Zimmerman came into possession of the bell from the *Cleopatra* is unknown. The bell was donated to the historical society years back by the retired teacher and community activist. There was some connection uncovered between the local Calumet area shipping industry and the Zimmerman family. Over the past winter the society had an exact replica of the golden bell cast in brass, which now remains hanging on the wall in the spot where the original had been stolen by Bernard P and company. Last time I looked, anyway. Things seem to keep

revolving around in there like a slow historical merry-go-round to me. The museum has a complete history of the vessel available, along with some photographs of the Cleopatra for the public, right below the reproduction. Just another solid gold local mystery, unsolved.

Not that it had been much of one, but it was kind of nice having an actual scheduled day off from the Service, even if the morning was entirely devoted to my work. My latest series of articles for the Service were wrapped around the projects that the revitalization committee of the South Chicago Chamber of Commerce had been developing and executing across the last two years for the Commercial Avenue business district and beyond into the neighborhood proper. Even with only local press coverage, the artwork would get a good send-off and recognition once the installation was complete.

With Lynn working downtown four days a week, I had the opportunity to expand on my bachelor cooking skills for the both of us, relying on the great television ladies of the past to provide the right recipes for memorable dining. Julia, where are ya when I need ya? Top shelf of the kitchen book rack, like an old friend. A gift from my sister, I already had the pages bookmarked for this special occasion. Yes, guys do plan ahead where meals are concerned. A very nice chicken casserole, with mashed potatoes and a broccoli cheese soufflé. Skipping the salad, I planned on making hot fudge sundaes right after the meal, which I would serve with a white sauterne wine. The meal, not the dessert. Conveniently it was the same wine I was using in the chicken casserole. And yes, guys can fuss over a dinner for their loved one, with such a special occasion as this, our fourth anniversary of living together. More like a milestone.

It's also financially smart to buy your own groceries, prepare the food yourself, and eat in. Even for the single guy. Yeah, a meal or some fast food out every once in a while is good for everybody's social interactions, as well as the economy, but not every night. On my budget, not even every other night. Besides, cooking for two is fun!

If it sounds like I'm trying to convince myself of everything I've just touted in the last couple of paragraphs, you're right, I am! I've been eating out for most of my bachelor life, which is about half my time on this planet, and now, Lynn takes a job downtown, out of

the neighborhood, and I'm the guy standing over the stove four nights a week! Sure, half of you are thinking, well it's about time! And the rest of us are saying, 'Say what?', but this is the pickle I find myself in and I'm going to make the best of it that I can, since I'm cooking for two these days. It really does make economic sense for us to cook at home mostly, and it was my turn to step up, but it's a big change in this dude's life, I can tell you that! Domestication is not pretty, but thankfully Tums makes a chewable tablet for those less than special nights.

The first few months of 'Nick Does Dinner' were nothing to brag about, and the burned everything could at least be covered up with another try at the same recipe. And while calling everything Cajun wasn't really an answer to hunger, I am, in the end, resigned to learning to cook, frankly, from the best I could find. Since those books have been sitting on my various shelves in various dwellings for decades, what the heck?

The dining room table, a hand-me-down such as it was, I personally considered it having a touch of class tonight, with the centerpiece flowers matching the table cloth that matched the napkins! Our daily dishes would have to do, along with our daily if not completely matching silverware, but the thick candle in the middle of the bouquet of flowers would be a welcoming beacon of light for our special night. Not that other nights around here weren't special, but technically, going by the calendar, this was a biggie and a memory in the making night.

The chicken casserole is not complicated to prepare, just a little time consuming, but very rich in the caloric count, so I didn't make it often. Julia has a great recipe for potato salad, but my mashed potatoes are already superb! Round these parts only Steve's Lounge in Hegewisch can top them. The broccoli soufflé may not sound appealing to most foodies, but once you taste it you're hooked! (It's the cheese.) The southeast side is blessed with some really good eateries and restaurants, but quite often the best meals of the day are served right at home, if you're lucky enough to get an invitation. Now that I have progressed from the Cajun cook to something more

predictably edible, you'd be lucky to obtain an invite to a meal under our humble roof.

Everything was perfectly cooked and ready to serve, the casserole and soufflé warm in the oven, and the potatoes covered and already mashed on the stove, fresh rolls on a flat tray also on top of the stove awaiting their turn in the oven (always pop them in a few minutes before you're about to sit down to dinner), when I drove the short distance from our place over the Calumet River to the Metra train station in South Chicago, end of the line for the spur. I found a spot among the other drivers also waiting for their own commuters to exit the regularly scheduled trains at this terminal on 93rd Street east of Baltimore. From the time on the car radio I guessed Lynn had missed her regular train and would be a little later than usual. I checked my phone time. Yup. The car radio was six minutes fast, a visual trick I used to keep myself on time. Don't laugh, it worked on occasion.

When the next train had pulled in and no Lynn exited, I sent her a text letting her know I was at the station for her. A few minutes later my phone rang. It was Lynn.

"Sorry, babe! A few of the girls from the film office downstairs got a handful of free tickets to "Coco Mocha, The Musical" at the Palace Theatre, so I invited myself along!"

"Oh. Sounds good."

"Yeah, we'll grab a bite and walk over to the show. Are you having anything special for dinner? We still have that leftover lasagna from Roma's. You should really finish that, babe."

"That's a good idea, Lynn. Thanks."

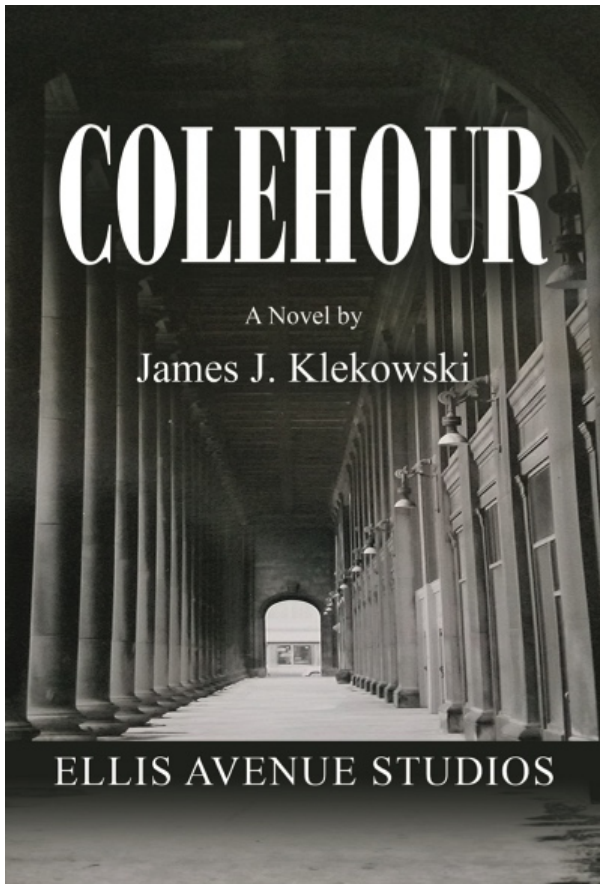
"Why don't you break out a bottle of wine and make it a party, Nick?"

"I should do that."

"Okay, I gotta catch up with them now. Bye."

"Say 'hi' to Yolanda for me."

"Oh, she retired in June, babe." I hung up the cell and started my car.



Two years after the events highlighted in **SHORT LINE**, Nick Daniels, the intrepid reporter from Chicago's southeast side, discovers the stark answers to questions he sought out then, who murdered his friend and his foes, all at his own peril!

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