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will entertain the reader
with its suspenseful plot.
You will be guessing
until the end.**

A social group called the POETS Society, (Phooey On Everything Tomorrow's Saturday) plans a party based on social media friends. The planning of this Friends Faceoff event becomes the catalyst for the development of love, mystery and suspense.

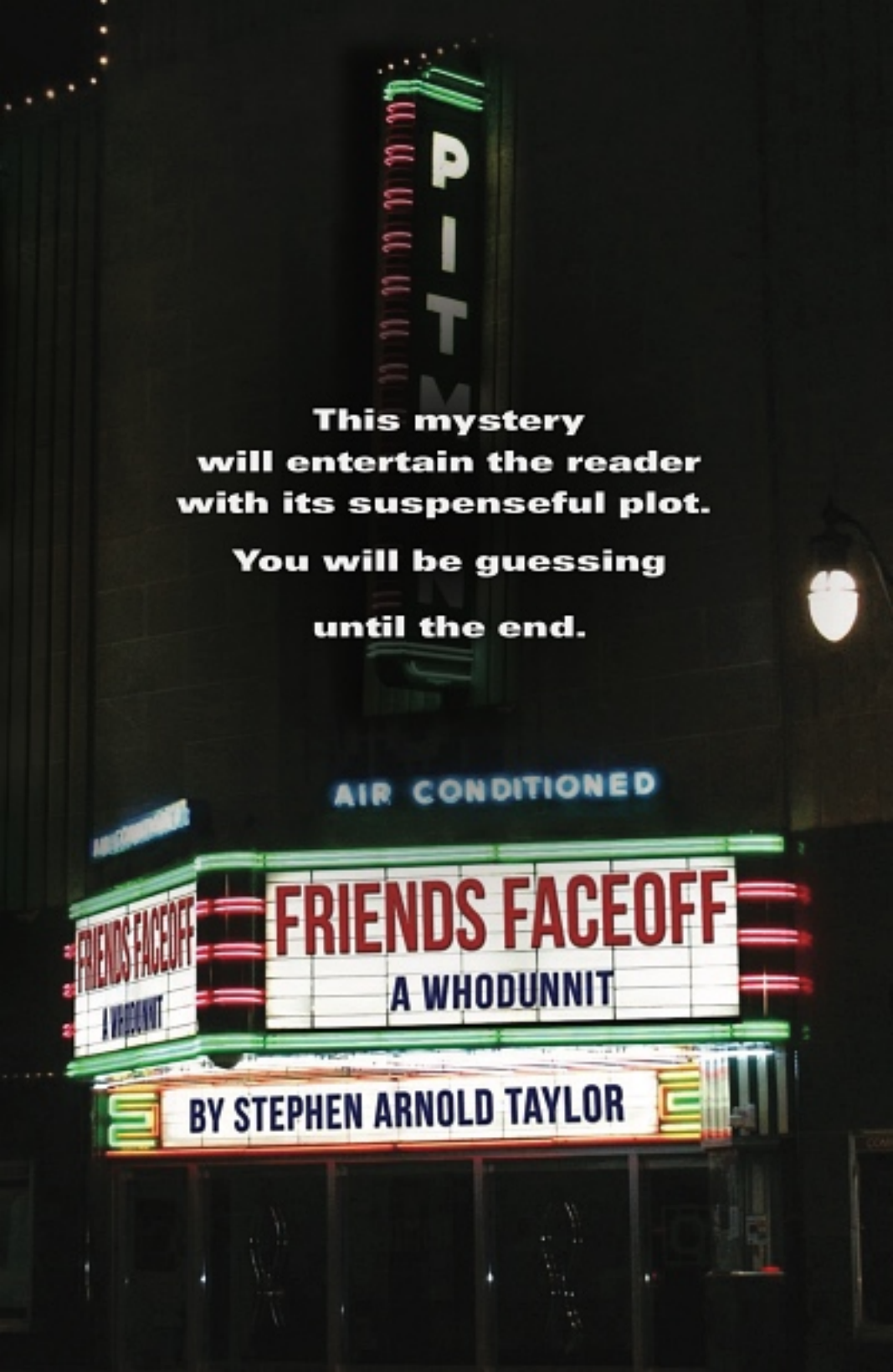
Friends Faceoff

By Stephen Arnold Taylor

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AIR CONDITIONED

FRIENDS FACEOFF
A WHODUNNIT

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BY STEPHEN ARNOLD TAYLOR

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64719-605-9

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-64719-606-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

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Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2021

PROLOGUE

Phooey On Everything Tomorrow's Saturday

POETS Meeting

“Good Vibrations” rang loud and clear from the Warehouse's old rafters. Formerly a feed and seed establishment, the Warehouse had been converted to a grand restaurant and bar. It was a perfect place for the POETS Society of Riverview, Alabama, to meet.

The group was primarily comprised of long-time friends and graduates of Riverview's three original high schools: Amicalola High, Nathan Forrest High, and Riverview High. Nathan Forrest, the smallest school, was eventually closed, and students were filtered into Riverview High. Eventually, friends from the three schools noticed they all frequented the Warehouse on Fridays. Before long, running into one another had turned into regular meetings, and they began to attract members, just like social media.

The group began meeting every other Friday after work for a couple of hours to blow off steam. The friends didn't care about socioeconomic status, making for an eclectic group comprised of business professionals, food service professionals, laborers, teachers, and more. Of course, membership was invitation-only which meant you were in the social elite if you had been invited to be in the POETS group.

###

Forty minutes and several beers into the meeting, the group discussion began to get a bit off-color. Tank Wilson, the local butcher, exclaimed in response to a discussion of how size matters, “The only thing smaller than my bank account is my schlong,” roaring with

laughter. A couple of the women suppressed laughter, a few of the women smiled. Missy Hendricks just rolled her eyes.

JoAnn Underwood nudged Billy Mac Logan under the table. She knew that Billy Mac was the only person who could reign in Tank Wilson. Billy and Tank had played together on the undefeated championship high school team, the Amicalola Blue Devils. Tank was middle linebacker; Billy, the quarterback.

Billy Mac stood up and said, “All right everybody, it’s time for our unofficial leader, JoAnn, to bring this discussion back from its present decline and present the eagerly awaited idea someone brought up at our last meeting. Silence, please! JoAnn, the floor is yours.”

“What subject always comes up when we gather for our regular meetings, fellow POETS?” JoAnn began.

“Well, that subject has to be social media,” said Emily Watts.

JoAnn nodded. “Bingo, Emily, social media. The greatest phenomenon of our time. All sorts of characters sounding off in different ways, from torrential political rants to slanderous remarks targeted to the fan bases of not only major league sports but also athletic programs of colleges and universities. And, what about all the pics of food, those culinary delights (or not so delightful) presented by all the chef wannabes?”

“Do I even need to mention all the personal stuff people love to share, such as grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and family gatherings?” JoAnn continued. “No longer do we need to interact with other people physically. With the internet and social media, we can now connect with hundreds of people, most of them we have never met, but we now “know” via friends of friends through our smartphones!” Age doesn’t matter, young or old; social media can sure keep us occupied and addicted to our phones. However, it certainly fulfills a real need, the need to be socially accepted and liked.”

Friends Faceoff

She went on, “But the only thing it cannot do is to allow us to experience the intimacy that face-to-face contact with another human being brings. And that brings up the question that has spawned my idea.” JoAnn paused to create anticipation.

“Damn! JoAnn! I feel like I have just heard The Gettysburg Address! What a speech,” exclaimed Bobbie Jean White.

The crowd applauded, and JoAnn continued.

“Thank you, Bobbie Jean. I think I got a little carried away. The question is, how many social media friends do you personally know? How many have you never spoken to or met face to face?”

Bunches! No telling! A lot! Tons!

“How about we invite them all to a Friends Faceoff. We should have it at the Pitman Theater, which has been recently renovated by the city. It seats about 450, has plenty of parking, and still has that old theater stage where we could have a short program and dancing.” JoAnn stopped and looked at the crowd.

Billy Mac rose quickly to his feet. “I move that we do it!” he said.

“I second!” said Emily.

Billy Mac called for an unofficial vote, “All in favor, say aye!”

Everyone in the POETs roared their approval.

“Listen up everybody!” JoAnn called. “We have some work ahead to make this party—which I think we should call Friends Faceoff—happen. Is it okay with everyone if I take the lead? Raise your hands if you want to have a vote.”

“We wouldn’t want anyone but you, JoAnn,” said Billy Mac.

All hands remained down.

“It’s settled then; I will take charge of organizing the event. Now we will need volunteers to plan food, decorations, and festivities. Rather

than take the time now to figure it out, I'll send an email to everyone listing what's needed. If I get more than one response for each job, two can always share! Email me, no phone calls, please, with any suggestions you might have. But now, it's time to enjoy the rest of the evening and Phooey On Everything Tomorrow's Saturday!"

Everyone raised their drinks in a toast.

Chapter 1

JoAnn

It was a bright, sunny day at Berry Street Park. The sixth-grade elementary class was having a party complete with sack races, dart-throwing contests, and pole climbing. The pole had been greased heavily. The idea was anyone who could shimmy up it and touch the flag at the top would win a basket filled with Girl Scout cookies, Little Debbie snacks, jellybeans, and a five-dollar bill.

One little girl waited patiently while others tried to climb the pole.

After six people had tried and failed, the girl eyed the pole. It was time, she thought. She raised her hand, and the judge waved her on. She walked to the pole, got a firm grip, and walked her hands up the ten-foot pole with her legs providing a firm wrap-around grip. BOOM! She reached the top, touching the flag.

She won the prize. Her name was JoAnn Underwood. When asked how she was able to do that, she replied, “I waited until the six people before me got all the grease off the pole.”

That was JoAnn, smart and athletic.

All of her life, JoAnn excelled in almost everything she tried. She was just one of those people with the “it” factor.

###

Years later, while attending Stanford University, JoAnn met her finance, Devon. He was a professor there but not in her department. It was love at first sight. Devon had nicknamed her “Underwood from Hollywood”. He said she was as beautiful as any actress in Tinsel Town.

Two months before the wedding, Devon was tragically killed in an automobile accident; a drunk driver ran a red light. It was a very difficult time for JoAnn. She had just found out she was pregnant with Devon's child and had planned to tell him that day. Although he was gone, she was determined to raise the baby on her own.

JoAnn began to make plans accordingly when she miscarried and lost the child. JoAnn felt as if she lost Devon twice. However, she had been raised to be strong and tenacious. She continued her studies, completing a Doctorate in Behavioral Neuroscience, graduating with honors.

Right before graduation, friends invited her to a party where she met Marvin Holderfield. He was athletic, tall, dark, and handsome. He attended the University of Texas studying Criminal Justice and was visiting a mutual friend. The two hit it off, finding they had common interests, and spent the rest of the evening talking.

During the evening, Marvin told JoAnn his lifetime ambition was to become an FBI Agent and marry his high school sweetheart. She told him she intended to open a Psychology practice back home in Alabama and hoped to focus on the criminal mind.

The party ended with each swapping numbers and agreeing to stay in touch. JoAnn found herself attracted to Marvin, but she wasn't ready for a romantic relationship. Even if she was, he wasn't available. Still, a friend was always welcome in her life.

Marvin went back to Texas to finish school. He married his long time sweetheart right before he graduated and started a family not long after. JoAnn moved back home to Riverview and started her psychology practice. Her reputation grew. Not only did she attract patients from Atlanta and other parts of the Southeast, but she was also highly sought after as an expert witness in criminal cases.

###

As they had promised the night they met, Marvin and JoAnn had remained friends and maintained contact for over five years. JoAnn was busy doing paperwork one evening when the phone rang.

“Hi, Marvin, it’s been a bit.”

“Yes, it has; time flies when you have kids!” Marvin replied. “How’s your practice? Still being called as an expert witness?”

“Yes, I really love that part of my work.” JoAnn nodded into the phone. “It’s good to hear from you. How’s the family?”

“Everyone is healthy, and so far, no one has been arrested or sent to the principal’s office. You know what they say about cop’s kids.” Marvin chuckled. “Let me get to the reason I called besides just catching up. I could use your expertise if you are interested.”

“Sounds intriguing,” JoAnn replied “What do you need me for?”

“We have a serial killer in custody,” Marvin continued, filling in the details for JoAnn “He refuses to speak with anyone in law enforcement. He’s being held at the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta. I was hoping you’d come and interview him, see if you can extract any information from him. I thought of you because of your interest in profiling. Normally, we don’t contract out work; we use our people. But, we are way under on expenses and short on staff. I promise the pay will be worth your while with all your expenses covered. I’m figuring it’ll take about three or four days, give or take.”

“Email me the dates,” JoAnn replied. “I’ll be more than happy to rearrange my schedule. I’d never pass up an opportunity to interview a serial killer. It’s right up my alley.”

#####

JoAnn arrived in Atlanta the week following her call with Marvin. She couldn’t wait to get started. She spent hours over the next few days

with the suspect. He hadn't been to trial yet, but he wasn't eligible for bond thanks to the evidence against him.

JoAnn was able to strike up a rapport after reassuring him she was in no way, shape, or form in law enforcement but rather a private practice psychologist. He was thrilled to speak with her and, as if a dam had broken, began to brag about every detail of fifteen murders—not the ten the FBI was aware of. He wanted JoAnn to give everything he told her to the press. He wanted everyone to know what he'd done. He wanted fame.

Unashamedly, JoAnn led him to believe she would give the media every detail, immortalizing him along with the likes of Ted Bundy.

He was a giant of a man. And like Bundy, articulate, and well-mannered, someone you'd never suspect with one exception: he hated his mother and father. She had been a dominating woman who only paid attention to him when she was displeased. His father never stood up to her and took a lot of abuse. He blamed his son for the abusive treatment he received from his wife.

The suspect craved the attention and approval of his mother and was as abusive to his father as she was. He tortured and killed small animals and worked his way up, hoping to get her love and attention. His first human kill was his father. When that failed to impress his mother, he killed her next. He told JoAnn he loved killing; it made him feel in control and powerful. None of this surprised her; she let him believe he was in control of the interview, allowing him to brag about what he'd done. Thanks to her innate ability to connect, she was able to bring closure to fifteen families.

Thanks to JoAnn, Marvin climbed the ladder faster than many other young agents. He had been right to have her consult; the bureau even offered her a job. Although she declined the offer, his career was off and running.

Friends Faceoff

###

Since Devon's accident, JoAnn hadn't dated. She poured her heart and soul into her work. Then one day, Billy Mac Logan walked into her office. He needed help coming to terms with his drinking, as well as being wrongfully fired from a job he loved.

She was very attracted to him; he was a very handsome guy, even with blonde hair. She was sure Billy Mac was attracted to her also. However, since she would never compromise her ethics or take advantage of a patient, even if he felt the same, nothing developed. JoAnn got to know Billy Mac well through therapy. He was perfect for her, the type of guy she would put aside her fear of loss to date.

Chapter 2

Billy Mac Logan: All American Boy

“Thirty-four belly right on two!” (hand clap) “Break!”

Those were the signals Billy Mac, quarterback, called. For number three, the play was for the fullback, Tank Wilson, to have the ball faked to him by Billy Mac. Then, Billy Mac could follow him through the four-hole between the guard or tackle. If there was no daylight, he would skirt around the end, but Billy Mac was confident there would be daylight. He was always confident.

Tank was a 250-pound fullback—a powerhouse of a boy. Staying low to the ground, he could easily take out two defenders and was the team’s best chance of sealing another victory.

“Ready, set up, two,” Billy Mac barked.

The ball was snapped. He stuck the ball in Tank’s belly, pulled it out, fast, and stayed right on Tanks hips, went for two yards and a first down. Amicalola High was leading by seven with a minute left, and he could take a knee and run out the clock, but with Tank in front, he decided to take a risk. Tank knocked the middle linebacker flat on his back. Not only did Billy Mac make the first down, but he also broke free and scampered seventeen yards into the end zone.

Touchdown! That gave Amicalola their second straight State Championship.

###

The team had three outstanding offensive players. Billy Mac Logan – quarterback, Tank Wilson – linebacker and fullback, and Jeff Thomas – a big, fast, sure-handed wide receiver. They were undefeated two years in a row.

Friends Faceoff

The three of them had plans after the game to celebrate. At that time, Amicalola County was dry. That didn't stop the three boys from getting beer; they brewed their own behind Tank's house. It wasn't a quick process and took about a month before it was ready to drink, but it was worth the wait. None of the boys had any idea of the alcohol content, but they knew it was much stronger than store-bought.

After the game, they headed for Tank's house and celebrated their win until the wee hours of the morning. They were the poster boys for camaraderie, were best friends, and seldom seen apart. But nothing lasts forever.

Jeff's family moved back to Cleveland, Ohio. Billy Mac went to college, hoping to leave Riverview in his rearview. Tank stayed in Riverview and worked at the butcher shop.

No one could have ever guessed what the future would hold for them.

###

Billy Mac attended Auburn University on a football scholarship, but his college career was over as fast as it had started. He sustained a knee injury and never fully recovered. As a result, he decided to transfer to Jacksonville State.

The end of his athletic career weighed heavily on Billy Mac. Being an exceptional athlete fed Billy Mac's self-esteem and ego. When he lost that, he lost part of himself, and like his father, he began drinking in earnest. He was firmly on the road to becoming an alcoholic.

Life threw him some curveballs, and despite his alcohol addiction, he weathered the storm reasonably well—until his career as a cop ended, and the spiral began. That was when he met JoAnn Underwood, a woman of exceptional talents and beauty. She convinced him to attend

the twelve-step program with AA, and continued seeing him until he once again had a firm footing.

Billy Mac secretly wished she was not his psychologist.

Chapter 3

The Bond of Friendship

Two days later, on Monday morning, after the POETS meeting, Billy Mac arrived at JoAnn's office. He needed to speak with her about the party and other personal matters.

"JoAnn, I really appreciate what you have done for me over the years." Billy Mac began. "The last ten years have made a new man out of me. Thanks to you and Alcoholics Anonymous, I'm proud of who I am now, and I have a successful business. So, before we get into this party planning, please let me pay you for the time you've spent with me over the years. Before you say no, this is something I've wanted to do for a long time now."

JoAnn shook her head. "Then I guess you already anticipate my answer," she replied "No. I told you then, and I'll tell you again: when I started my practice twenty years ago, I purposely budgeted time for pro-bono work, kind of a little deal I made with God. You were in need. I worked with you because I could; you were down and out and had very little money."

"Well, I wish you'd take some form of payment," Billy Mac said. "If not money, maybe a gift; it just doesn't feel right to me, not thanking you properly. I'm a successful private detective and have the means to thank you."

JoAnn gave him a look, similar to his mother when she meant no.

"Okay, okay" he laughed. "I give up." "Okay, okay," he laughed. "I give up. But, at least let me tell you how much I admire and respect you and your family without you stopping me. It must have been quite a challenge for your family to move to this little Southern City. I can't even imagine how hard it must have been to gain the white community's

respect here. Although, your father being the Priest of the Episcopal Church must have helped. Of course, your mother's an amazing woman, becoming the principal of Coosa Elementary. There weren't many African American women serving as principals then. It was a time filled with prejudice and civil unrest. Still, they didn't seem to let the events of the time bother them. They persevered and earned the respect they deserved, not an easy feat in the South."

JoAnn smiled. "Thank you for your heartfelt speech. I'm blessed. Despite any obstacles that may have been present, my parents raised me to be respectful of everyone, even if they didn't reciprocate. I believe that helped many of my classmates to see the same way, at least I hope so."

"Anyway, on with the business at hand," she continued. "Thanks for volunteering to be my assistant! I have spoken with the Mayor and some council members. We can rent the Pitman for next to nothing! They just want enough to cover the utilities. They think this party will give the new venue some great exposure outside of the town's borders."

"Super!" Billy Mac said. "I think the easiest way to keep the party exclusive and manageable is for each POETS member to provide a list of people they want to invite, not to exceed 25. We'll need to ask some local dignitaries, too. Politics. I hate it, but that's how the world goes round."

"I agree." JoAnn nodded. "I think \$25 per person should cover us nicely. We can provide some wine and beer, setups for BYOB, and finger food. Oh, my! Look at the time! It's time for the conference call with our volunteers."

###

One Week Later

“Billy Mac, I think we’re all set.” JoAnn said. “Tank is providing a fantastic deal on chicken fingers and other food items, and his guy Cortez is helping him organize delivery and set-up. Missy Hendricks has volunteered to be in charge of invitations. She’s going to address and mail them. I believe she’s started an invitation design business and hand writes them in calligraphy. The price for the theater is \$300. We’ll go over all of this at the POETS Meeting Friday.”

“Isn’t Missy Hendricks also coordinating all invites?” Billy Mac asked.

JoAnn nodded affirmatively.

“Well,” he said, “Let me know what I can do to make this party the biggest success story this town has ever seen.”

#####

Friday at the POETS’ Meeting

Billy Mac carefully reported the progress and plans for the big event to everyone at the meeting. When he was finished, he asked if there were any questions.

Bobbie Jean spoke up, “Billy Mac, I have a question about invitations? I understand that we are each to invite up to 25 social media friends. Well, some of those will be mutual friends and overlap, is there a plan to prevent duplicate invitations? Also, the event may not sit well with some of the townsfolk because it is private; you know how people around here can be! So, I guess my question is, can we pull this off without appearing snobbish? And lastly, does the theater seat enough to accommodate our numbers?”

Billy Mac nodded thoughtfully. “Good questions, Bobbie Jean. To answer your first question, Missy has a computer program to keep the guest list straight. It detects duplicate names. How to do this without

appearing snobbish? There is no way, but there is nothing wrong with a private group hosting a private party, so screw anyone that has a problem with that.”

Gregory Sistern, the new President of the Bank of Riverview, raised his hand.

“Yes, Greg?”

“I would like to make an offer.”

“Please do.” Billy Mac nodded.

“Billy Mac, fellow POETS, I’m offering to pay all expenses for the party. Additionally, we can donate the ticket money to upgrade the town park, especially the playground. This should waylay any appearance of our group being snobbish. Although, I suspect many non-members have thought that for a long time.”

There were nods of agreement and sounds of surprise as the group considered this offer from one of the town’s newest residents, followed by “Wow, that’s fantastic, Greg!”, and “What a wonderful gesture!”

Billy Mac continued the meeting. “First, a quick vote, any problems with Greg paying expenses for the party?”

Everyone nodded with approval.

“All right, the matter’s settled.”

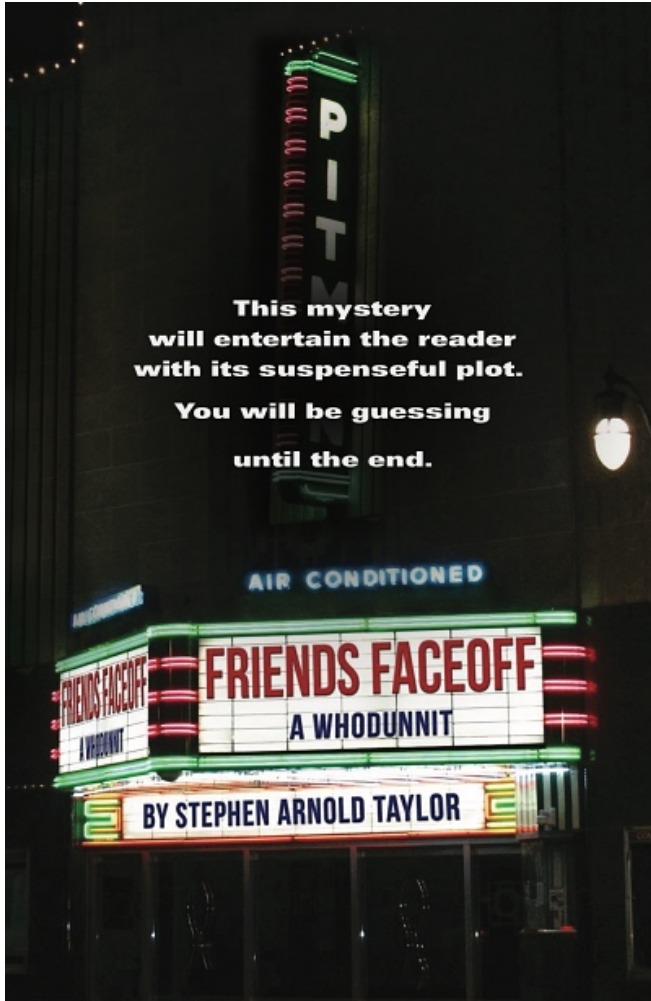
“Gregory, you are a marvel! What a wonderful offering! You should, at the very least, be recognized in some way. I propose that you and Billy Mac co-emcee,” said Missy.

Greg looked at Billy Mac and shrugged his shoulders inquisitively.

“Well, as the unofficial official emcee, I think me and Greg co-host—” Billy Mac suggested. “Course, you can emcee by yourself, Greg, if you would prefer.”

Friends Faceoff

“Oh, no, Billy Mac. You’re the best emcee this town has!” Greg proclaimed. “I’ll do it with you, though, and we’ll discuss it over lunch or dinner. I would be honored to emcee with you.”



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