

Mystery, psychology, humor, and unforgettable characters blend seamlessly in this page-turner that keeps readers guessing until the end. A contemporary riff on Sartre's admonition that we are condemned to freedom: bound by personal responsibility to every decision we make.

Condemned to Freedom

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JOHN DEFRANK

One man's justice
is another man's reckoning

A NOVEL

Condemned to Freedom

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 26, 8:04 PM EPITAPH FOR A LEGEND

Big Bob Samson should have appreciated the last evening of his life: the soft requiem of a dove in a nearby hemlock, the heady incense of honeysuckle and mulberry on the sultry summer breeze, the blood-red sunset flowing along the western horizon. Instead, Samson raised his arms, turned his face to the sky, and thought of himself.

He was the chosen one, the man the Freedom Consolidated School District had depended on to resurrect its football program, and later the man who brought glory to the District as its superintendent. The community took pride in its football and education traditions, and Samson took credit for both. He was the creator; Freedom was his world.

Having emerged from the air-conditioned sepulcher of the District Office for the first time in twelve hours, Samson strode toward the steps, moving with the bearing and confidence of an ex-United States Marine. He was proud to count himself among that elite group, contending that there are no *ex-Marines*—*semper fidelis* means *always* faithful. They break recruits to the core before absorbing them into the Corps. In most, the Marines develop character, but if the core is rotten, it twists into caricature. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference.

Samson's football record spoke for itself. His arbitrary leadership style and questionable knowledge were balanced by supreme self-confidence and, even his most grudging detractors had to admit, strong organizational skills. He also had been blessed with the greatest run of talent the county had ever seen and a coaching staff made up of excellent teachers and willing disciples. Through the years, the details blurred; mirages became reality and eventually mutated into the legend that was Big Bob Samson.

Success as a coach allowed Samson to circumvent the established route to administrative power. As a teacher, Samson lectured colleagues on how things ought to be, and would be if he were superintendent. He was the man with the plan: run a district as you run a military unit or a football team—with discipline, organization, and honor. He bypassed the dues-paying role of assistant principal to become the high school principal. Three years later, he vaulted over better-qualified superiors to be appointed district superintendent, further enhancing his stature in Pennsylvania educational circles.

Thus was his reputation built, and wherever Samson went he was treated with a reverence he had come to expect. Anyone who treated him with less than “proper respect” became a lifelong enemy. Most feared personal and professional retribution, but if it came down to it, Samson was prepared to “kick ass and take names.” He followed a regimen of weightlifting and boxing that carved his frame into lean fighting trim. There were times he had challenged men to fight, but to his regret, those incidents never got past the verbal humiliation of his adversary. Secretly, he wished someone would physically attack him so he could inspire awe through retaliation.

Samson envisioned that someday a movie might be made of his life, and he often imagined his final scene. It would be grand and poignant, an occasion of pride and sorrow for those whose lives had been graced by his presence, all accompanied by a sound track of French horns in melancholic but heroic anthem.

His end, however, came with a tiny jingle of car keys that brought heavenly promise but served instead as his death knell. Bob Samson, “Big Bob” to admirers from afar and friends up close, *Doctor* Samson, as he insisted to everyone else, faced his last battle almost alone. He would have preferred it that way, because the scythe that cut through pride and flesh came as unappreciated as the sunset and the mourning dove and the scented breeze. In the end, Big Bob Samson knew the reaper and came to realize that death overcomes all myths incarnate. And, as the day faded to black, so did the life of a legend.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 28, 11:38 AM TWO-PRONGED ATTACK

The Newcastle Borough Municipal Building stood hard against the southern ridge of the Freedom Valley. Originally named Iron Hall, it was a monument to rustic gentility; its walls were built with stone hauled from the nearby quarry, stone left as dregs by the miners who supplied the raw materials for the historic iron forge. Massive oak doors, hewn from the surrounding forest, were sturdy gatekeepers to the past; gleaming elongated windows reflected communal aspirations for the future. The fixtures, forged in the local furnace, were chevrons of respect held for this emblem of community.

When the iron ore played out, Iron Hall came to symbolize the local ironworkers themselves—dregs left behind for greater riches elsewhere. Strong and proud, but dregs, nonetheless. The sense of insular community was lost forever as the men went to work in the steel mill in the neighboring city of Freedom. Iron Hall, the only community center large enough to host the annual Fasnacht Day festival and every kind of bee imaginable, thus became the Municipal Building, and history was partitioned into borough offices and the police station. With the signature pride that natives of Pennsylvania Dutch country hold for their property, craftsmen's care was taken to preserve its architectural integrity.

Solid and traditional, apt descriptions for both the building and the law enforcement crew it housed. Chief Harley Snitz had headed the Newcastle Police for 31 years, due in large part to personal hallmarks of prudence and courtesy. That his prudence ran to stodginess, even downright stubbornness, only endeared him to his constituents, as those traits fell in line with community mores. So respected was Snitz that when smaller adjacent boroughs cut their departments in cost saving measures, their governing bodies gladly chipped in fair shares to have the Newcastle force patrol those municipalities. As a result, Snitz's crew had grown to more than twenty officers and support staff and ranged across a crescent running from Avalon on the eastern edge of Freedom City through Newcastle Borough in the south to Culver Pond in the southwest—the entire southern third of Freedom County.

In recent years, the emergence of drugs, with the inevitable thefts and assaults that followed, stretched the limits of Snitz's force, and the fact that people wanted their children to be regarded as children and

only the pushers be brought to justice stretched the limits of his patience. The increasing problem made some citizens wonder if the Chief's time had passed. He wanted to handle drug investigations with his own unit, despite pressure to seek help from the Pennsylvania State Police.

Bob Samson's death was a different story. Snitz never had handled a murder investigation, so teaming with that esteemed outfit made sense. If he held any lingering doubts, the events of the weekend had convinced him. On Friday night, after Samson's wife reported him missing, activity was confined to Snitz's own department. Then, after the body was discovered on Saturday morning, news crews from Freedom and the nearby cities of Harrisburg, Lancaster, and York arrived to cover the accident that had befallen the local sports legend. Actually, "felled" would have been a better word, for it seemed that Samson had gone down like Achilles by what some thought to be his only weakness: reckless driving through the winding hills of southern Freedom County. By the time regional late news aired, the death of a beloved school superintendent and one of the most successful football coaches in mid-state history was the lead story. And through the miracle of television, Snitz's face, weathered by years and world-weary wisdom, had become familiar to central-Pennsylvanians.

The Chief shunned the public light, but he was thankful that the media still viewed Samson's death as accidental. His decision to enlist the help of the State Police was looked upon as an act of magnanimity and, yes, prudence that further endeared him to the citizenry. Truth be told, it was also a formality; they were already involved. A State Police crime scene team had discovered that the initial theory of the cause of Samson's death—a drive off a cliff and resultant drowning in the quarry—was wrong.

Still, Snitz did not appreciate being called to State Police barracks to organize the investigation. In his mind, Newcastle Borough was where the murder occurred; that was where the investigation ought to begin. Summoning his resolve, he insisted that their investigator travel to his turf so they could begin working on leads right away. To his surprise, the invitation was accepted without debate.

Standing at the picture window behind his desk, the Chief was as much taking respite in the view as he was watching for the trooper who was to become his partner when an unmarked cruiser roared into the

lot. Snitz sipped coffee from a paper cup and shook his head in mild amusement as a tall man in civilian clothes unfolded out of the vehicle.

Why do police go to so much trouble making their cars inconspicuous that they actually stand out? Who would buy a car like that? Then there was the officer himself. This was certainly the investigator Snitz had been waiting for. It was too muggy for a jacket, unless a person was concealing something, like a sidearm. Any lingering doubts about the man's identity were snuffed when the Chief noticed the crew cut—the planar perfection of which would have done the Carrier Enterprise proud—and white athletic socks, peeking out over black soft-soled shoes, spit-shined neon signs that advertised *cop*. Snitz's first impression, sense of style notwithstanding: if ever there were a recruiting poster for the Pennsylvania State Police, this man should be the model. As the trooper moved forward, his jacket flapped open to reveal a black T-shirt straining against a coiled steel torso that matched a stern face of chiseled obsidian.

As Snitz left his office to welcome the investigator, he passed Phyllis Utz, his dispatcher, and Ed Knepp, his second-in-command. The two were sharing donuts and complaints about the intrusion of an outsider onto their turf. Aware that even under the best of circumstances the locals were reserved toward newcomers, the Chief said, "He's here; make him feel welcome." And then, more as an order than a request: "Please."

His flinty glare had barely sparked when the trooper entered, craning his neck to take in the surroundings before leveling his gaze on the three people staring up at him. The deputy and the dispatcher remained motionless, except for jaws engaged in slow, thoughtful mastication. The Chief smiled and stepped forward, extending his hand.

"Harley Snitz, welcome to Newcastle."

"Chief." A small crease etched upward at the corners of the state policeman's mouth. "Trooper Neidrich. I'll be heading up the investigation from our end."

Snitz made introductions. His face flushed when Knepp gave a wary nod and Utz's face squeezed into something that came across like the reaction to a gas pain.

If Neidrich noted their disapproval, he gave no sign. "Beautiful building you have here, Chief. Sorry if I offended you by asking you to

come to my office, but I've learned to trust the security at our barracks."

"I surely understand." Snitz stared at Knepp, whose own eyes were downcast, gazing over his imposing epigastrical horizon that put the donut box on the desk in partial eclipse.

"Let's go to my office Trooper Neidrich. ... Coffee? Donut?"

Again, Neidrich's lips made an almost imperceptible curve into what might have been a smile. "Coffee's good." Patting his midsection, he added, "But no donut, thanks. And please call me Nick."

The weight lifted from Snitz's chest. Years of police work had honed his ability to judge people, and so, despite the trooper's somber presence, he felt he was going to like the young man. At times, the State Police acted as though they were a superior breed, firm in the belief that they underwent more grueling and sophisticated training and upheld a loftier mission than local lawmen. Snitz, for his part, had always held himself as a model to the community and believed that fitness and integrity were essential to the profession. The trooper seemed to treat the Chief as a peer.

Snitz shot a sidelong glance at Knepp to see if Neidrich's words had made an impression. The sergeant hefted the donut box like a football under one arm so he could eat with his free hand as he shuffled down the hall.

"I'm new to the area," Neidrich said. "What kind of support can we count on?"

"The city cops will be there if we need them. They have enough business of their own, though. The DA's a lame duck, he'll be happy to leave us alone."

"Good," Neidrich said. "Any suspects come to mind?"

"Most folks loved Bob Samson."

"Let's keep respect for the dead out of this." The trooper's words nipped at the heels of Snitz's.

The curt admonition shook the Chief into professional mode. "How do we know for sure he was murdered?"

Neidrich's features softened and the almost-smile reappeared. "Guess I'd better explain." As quickly as his expression had relaxed, it hardened again. His eyes paused on Snitz before honing in on Knepp. "I want to emphasize, though, the longer people think the death was an accident, the better off we'll be."

“We’ll keep mum; won’t we, Ed?” Snitz said, a slight threat in the undertone.

After watching Knepp bob his head in vigorous assent and mime the movement of a key turning on his lips, Neidrich continued. “Samson was dead before he went over the cliff. There was no water in the lungs, so he wasn’t knocked unconscious by the impact, then drowned. Impact wounds came post mortem. His seat belt wasn’t buckled, but the air bag went off. Then there’s the fact that —”

Knepp interrupted. “Wait a minute. Bob always wore his seatbelt. I’ve ridden with him in that Mercedes; man, he tooled!”

“Interesting,” Neidrich said. “Trajectory from the cliff-edge to where the car settled in the water indicates he wasn’t moving fast enough to have been out of control.”

Snitz winced. It would be pointless to tell Knepp he should have chided his hero for being reckless; his sergeant never had the guts to stand up to Samson. “If he always wore a seatbelt except on Friday ...” the Chief scrubbed his chin with the palm of his hand, “that might support a scenario that he was helped off the cliff.”

Neidrich started to speak, but Knepp broke in again. “What’s that have to do with the price of bologna in Lebanon?”

Snitz exhaled a deep, slow breath. “You see, Ed, either the murderer didn’t realize Dr. Samson always wore his belt, or he wanted the plunge to maximize body damage, or both.”

“True,” Neidrich said, “and some of the injuries can’t be explained by his dive. In fact, some were obviously the result of an assault.”

Knepp broke into raucous laughter punctuated by a scowl. “You’re saying he was beat up? Nobody could handle Big Bob Samson. No one in the county.” He looked to Snitz for support, but found only a disapproving frown.

“Ed’s exaggerating, but it would take a tough man to handle Dr. Samson, I dare say. What kind of injuries are you talking about?”

Neidrich leaned forward, elbows on knees, and clasped his hands. Snitz noticed fingers like old tree roots—the gnarled trophies of a hand-fighter—before the trooper’s words pulled his mind back to the topic at hand.

“Wounds were inflicted by a tubular object about an inch in diameter. Black and gold paint flecks—highly shellacked, *japanned*—

were embedded in the wounds. Nothing in the car or the quarry matched up.”

“The past year there’s been quite a few muggings,” Knepp said. “Has to do with drugs—getting money for drugs, I mean. I’d be for thinking we should check some of our usual drug suspects. Bet your bottom dollar Bob dinged them up a bit.”

Snitz shook his head. “Most drug-related robberies have been purse-snatchings or car break-ins. Not many outright assaults, unless they were deals gone bad.”

“Could’ve been a mugging,” Neidrich said. “Wallet was rifled. But druggies probably would’ve left the body. Besides, this attack was efficient.” Neidrich leaned even closer and spoke in a near-whisper.

“Here’s the clincher, along with the blows, there was a single thrust of a sharp—very sharp—instrument up through the solar plexus. Straight-edged double blade.”

After a moment of stunned silence, Knepp bolted upright. “Must’ve been two perps, maybe more. It’d take at least two people to kill Bob. Ain’t, Harley?”

Ain’t, Harley? — a shard of local argot, meant to elicit agreement. It would have made the hair on the Chief’s neck stand on end if he were ever anything less than impeccably groomed. Whenever Knepp emitted the phrase, Snitz wanted to disagree, even if the attached assumption was correct. “No one is invincible, Ed.”

Rather than acknowledge his boss’s tempered response, Knepp continued. “And it would take two people to move him; he weighed a good two-twenty. But what I don’t understand is why they’d move his body.”

“I can think of two reasons off hand,” Snitz said. “The killers wanted it to seem like an accident, or, more likely, the location of the attack could lead to their identities.”

“That’s my thought,” Neidrich agreed. “So we need to backtrack his steps.”

Knepp sat up. “I can help you with that. I know his hangouts.”

“Good, we’ll check those places right away.”

“Have you established time of death?” Snitz asked.

“The body being in the water makes it tough to be exact. Security system has Samson coding out at 8:03. Sunset was 7:48—dusk, good cover for an attack.”

“Bloody knuckles?” Knepp asked. “Skin under the nails? DNA?”

“Again, water’s our enemy. We got some hair and fibers. Also, grass stains on his pants and gravel in the cuffs, which could’ve come from falling during the assault or the body being dragged. But there was no indication he fought back. Whoever it was got the drop on him, maybe someone he knew. Back to my original question, any suspects?”

“Dr. Samson made some enemies.” The Chief scrubbed his chin again, and his face screwed into a pucker from the effort it took to say something negative about a person. “He had power. Sometimes he used it for good, sometimes for not so good. He went after folks who rubbed him the wrong way. Enough for someone to murder him? I don’t know. Folks didn’t mess with Dr. Samson, though. I’d figure someone to shoot him before taking him on close range.”

“OK,” Neidrich said, “Let’s cross-reference people who had an ax to grind with those physically and emotionally capable of carrying out the job.”

“I think two addicts ambushed him for drug money.” Knepp rose to choreograph his hypothesis, playing three roles and embellishing his improvised skit with staccato commentary. “One perp holds a gun on him. The other perp takes his money. Bob takes the punks on. He disarms the one with the gun, but the other perp stabs him. Then the perp who had the gun picks it up and pistol-whips Bob after he’s down. To get rid of the evidence, they take him to the quarry and send him off.” Knepp bent over, palms on knees, puffing for breath. He mopped a sleeve across his brow and stuffed his shirt back in his pants, a futile effort because, as he squatted to retake his seat, his shirttails made another break for it. “Yep, it was druggies,” he wheezed, nodding with conviction, having forgotten the integral point that Samson had suffered no defensive wounds.

Taking advantage of his sergeant’s mental lapse, the Chief squinted and said, “That’s an interesting scenario, Ed; I think you ought to follow up on it, especially since drug investigations are your specialty. You can be in charge of that prong of the investigation.” Snitz glanced at Neidrich, who was staring at Knepp, impassive except for a furrowed brow. “Meanwhile, I’ll work with Trooper Neidrich.”

“Good to go that way,” Neidrich said with a nod, understanding the Chief’s intent. “Someone who knows the locals following both lines of investigation.”

Wide-eyed, Knepp asked, "How many State Bulls can I have to help me?"

Neidrich started to respond, but Snitz cut in, speaking with slow-paced sagacity: "You should follow the drug lead alone. That way, when the truth about Dr. Samson's death breaks, and the State Police are concentrating on the personal grudge angle, we'll draw attention away from you. That way, you can operate with greater latitude." The Chief nodded, adding softly, reverentially, "A lone wolf."

Gazing off into the middle distance, Knepp said, "I like that."

Snitz turned to Neidrich and changed the subject. "As far as suspects, there have been rumors of affairs, but if they're true, he did a good job covering his tracks. He moonlighted business deals, too, real estate and such. Maybe someone felt cheated."

"That's where we'll start," Neidrich said.

Knepp had just inhaled a huge chug of coffee and almost choked in his eagerness to speak. "Don't forget the Freedom Con people. My sister-in-law, Lionda, is a secretary in the District Office, and she gives me the inside poop. Most school people loved Bob, but a few hated him. For the haters, start in Kerry Wyatt's office, where Lionda works. Wyatt's in charge of special education, counseling, psychology," Knepp gave a dismissive wave, "that stuff. Him and Meryl Morgan, she's the Director of Secondary Education; they didn't get along with Bob. They're eggheads. Wyatt's a bleeding-heart, always going on in that psychobabble. Morgan keeps coming up with ideas to fix things that aren't broken. Because of Bob, the District runs like a clock."

"You consider them suspects?"

"Wyatt's too old and Morgan's a woman." Knepp sneered. "Plus, they're chickens. But they're in tight with the guy who would do it for them: Doc Randori. He's Wyatt's hatchet man. No one likes him, and he doesn't like anyone right back."

"That doesn't make him a suspect," Snitz said. "Dr. Randori's an all right fellow."

"To you, maybe, but I've visited Lionda when Randori's there. Everyone will be joking around, then I'll walk in and the others keep going, but he just stares at me. He never talks about his personal life, and he doesn't socialize."

"Wanting privacy doesn't make him a murderer, Ed."

“It sure makes him suspicious. Besides, nobody hated Bob more than Randori.”

Neidrich sat forward. “Tell me more.”

“They had bad blood from back when Randori coached football at St. Thomas More. Bob coached there first, you see, and he had the best record ever at that school. Then Bob came over to Freedom Con. Randori followed Bob at Thomas More and never could fill his shoes. His Catholics played against us, and we whupped him every year.”

“Come on, Ed, there’s a little more to the story.”

Knepp bent closer to Neidrich and lowered his voice. “Darn right there’s more. According to Lionda and Theresa Wagner—that’s Wyatt’s other secretary—Randori was an administrator, Wyatt’s assistant, until Bob demoted him to guidance counselor. Bet that cut his pride. Yep, if I was looking inside the District, that’s where I’d start.”

Neidrich studied Knepp’s face. “Any suspects besides this Randori guy?”

“No one who had the motives and ability like Randori.”

“How so?”

“Randori has a bad temper—and he’s a karate expert. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“Not ironic, Ed,” Snitz said, “it’s coincidental.”

TUESDAY, AUGUST 30, 6:36 AM

NON REGREDIOR

Swollen purple clouds kept the dawn at bay, muting the rectangular starkness of the Freedom Consolidated District Office. A crouching shadow took the steps in lithe strides then slipped through the glass entrance door and dissolved into the inky, tomb-like interior. Working toward the rear of the building, the intruder was swift and silent, a predatory cat—with each step, the outside edge of the foot touched the carpet then padded inward onto the ball and propelled the body forward.

Outside the Pupil Services Suite, the intruder surveyed the secretarial station, the buffer zone between the hallway and Kerry Wyatt's office. At the far end, a lamp cast a small cone of illumination for Theresa Wagner, one of Wyatt's two administrative assistants, who sat with earphones on, typing a recorded transcript. As usual, Wagner had been the first employee in the building. Soon, though, Kerry Wyatt and Lionda Knepp, the other assistant, would arrive.

Reaching Wagner's throat unnoticed would be difficult. The path was a treacherous route through unkempt stacks and random files strewn like autumn leaves across a forest floor, leaving narrow estuaries of carpet that led to Wyatt's office, the secretaries' desks, and the vault. The vault. It held the records of every student who had undergone psychological testing. The intruder froze in reflection.

A late-afternoon breeze pushes lace curtains aside, ushering slanted sunlight into the bedroom. Shadows dance along the wall and flutter on the ceiling, but neither gentle breeze nor warm sunlight brings solace to the little boy cringing beside the low, marble-topped dresser as he stares through a sliver of doorway into the hall. He wishes he could shut the door like a stage curtain and end the scene. There is no ending this scene, though; nothing a ten-year-old can do. It has to play out, and it will end. It has to end.

An anguished howl pierces the air: "All right! All right!" The hall light clicks on, and then silence, except for a quivering sob and the drone of airplane propellers in the high distance.

The light switch clicks again, and the boy screws his eyes shut as the banshee scream pierces the air. "I get it! ... You proved you could find me! ... You always find me!" The light clicks on and off, on and off,

accelerating to strobe-like speed until the boy can stand it no longer; he claps his hands over his ears and opens his mouth in a silent scream as the frantic voice rings out, "Leave me alone! Please leave me alone!"

Footfalls trip down the steps. The front door opens and slams shut. Again, welcome silence. The boy opens his eyes and pivots to the window, parting the curtain so he can peek down onto the peaceful suburban scene. He looks up and down the street and holds his breath, hoping it is over.

Hope crashes down as his mother reappears in the middle of the street, arms aloft, face raised to the skies. Even the elms that line the street cannot muffle the piercing shrieks. "You win! ... I give up! ... You win!" She chants over and over, the supplicant falling to her knees and crossing herself. "God, make them stop!"

Neighbors peer through windows. Bolder ones step onto their porches to stare or exchange glances, repulsed yet transfixed by the horrid matinee.

The curtain dropped on the amber past, and wild eyes constricted to slits of grim determination. The intruder glanced up at the clock to see how long the reverie had lasted—seconds.

Bending at hips and knees, he snaked forward, a stare fixed upon his prey. One wrong move would incite a preemptive strike to cut off a scream. Reaching for Wagner's throat, the attacker snarled, "Who killed Bob Samson?"

The assistant's hands shot up, her chair flew back, and she let fly a haymaker. "I hate you, Randori!" she shrieked.

Leaning back as the telegraphed punch whizzed within inches of his nose, Doc Randori responded with a satisfied smirk, prompting a schizophrenic reaction as Wagner laughed despite herself while cocking her fist for another swing. Before she could launch it, the lights went on.

Kerry Wyatt, the Director of Pupil Services, entered and he surveyed the scene. His graying temples pulsed and bulldog jowls set, and he pointed an accusing finger at Wagner. "You!" he seethed. "The greatest educational philosopher since John Dewey has been lost to the world, and you try to decimate our ranks even further? What is wrong with you, woman?"

Riled and ready to rumble, Wagner shot back: “You call yourself a psychologist? Joking about Dr. Samson’s death; you’ll go to hell for that!”

Wyatt’s feigned fury melted into a broad Cheshire Cat grin, and his glistening, coal black eyes gleamed at the sudden opportunity to confront moral indignation. “Is that right, Mother Theresa? As I recall, no one harassed Bob Samson more than you did.”

Still struggling to regain her composure, the woman screeched, “He wasn’t dead then!” Glancing past Wyatt, Wagner spotted Meryl Morgan entering the office. “Boy, am I glad to see you. Help me out here.”

Most people were glad to see Morgan. The consummate administrator in demeanor and ability; at the same time, she was no one’s idea of the classic schoolmarm: a mane of wavy raven tresses framed her face; dark eyes and lush lips competed for attention with a perfect olive complexion—a masterpiece set atop a pedestal of tortuous Mediterranean curves. Realizing that, to many, her beauty defined her, Morgan rarely let down her guard; it was only around Wyatt and Randori that she came close to relaxing.

She serpented along the same route Randori had taken earlier. “You know, if a person got off on bureaucratic effluence, this place would be positively orgasmic.” Morgan’s words came curt and pointed. “Let me guess; Doc has been harassing Theresa again, and Kerry, in a weak attempt to add humor, has confirmed that even the most intelligent man will prove himself an imbecile if given half a chance.”

“Meryl, I’m appalled,” Randori said. “You, of all people, jumping to unwarranted conclusions. I was testing Theresa’s reflexes. Then, when Kerry came in, we started discussing Bob’s place in history.”

“Better history than current events,” Morgan said. “Hate to say it, but there it is.”

“You too, Ms. Morgan?” Wagner said, gaping. “I thought if anyone had compassion it would be you.”

Morgan trained a stern gaze on Wagner. “Bob Samson was no friend to the kids in this district, at least not the needy ones.”

“Why help the *great unwashed*?” Randori said. “Their parents don’t pull our strings. Freedom Con takes care of the country club set and the jocks.”

Lionda Knepp, Wyatt's second administrative assistant, arrived in time to hear Randori's sardonic declaration. She tossed her purse on her desk and, without greeting or introduction, launched into a creditable imitation of Samson's booming basso: "We got to get rid of Randori. Who needs a counselor when we could hire another cheerleading coach for me to bang."

Morgan arched an eyebrow. "How counterintuitive is that?"

Wyatt and Randori smiled at Morgan's words. The previous year, Randori had begun using "counterintuitive" as a euphemism, synonymous with the World War II military acronyms SNAFU and FUBAR, but more covert. Whenever Samson and his administrative cronies arrived at one of their many faulty conclusions or unethical decisions, Morgan, Wyatt, or Randori would respond with something like, "Sorry, but that seems counterintuitive," and bring sub rosa relief to an otherwise frustrating experience.

Wyatt moved to the entrance of his conference room. "Now that Meryl is here, let's meet before things start hopping." As he closed the door, he said to no one and everyone, "And now that Lionda is here, she can accompany Theresa in a game of ring around the rosary over Bob's soul."

Inside, Wyatt pulled a chair away from the table as a gesture for Morgan to sit beside him, but she was already moving to a seat alongside Randori. "That headline in the *Chronicle*," she said: "'A Legend in His Own Time.' Can you believe that? Then, the article—"

"Yeah, well I'm a rumor in my own time," Randori cut in. "What garbonia. And I'll pass on paying respects at the funeral if you don't mind."

Morgan laughed and gave a backhand slap at Randori's arm. "God, Doc, you wouldn't respect anyone who acted like a boss. You're lucky; you don't have to be political. Kerry and I are on the Cabinet; if we didn't show, people would notice." Her brows rose with a sudden new interest. "I wonder if Virgil will go to the funeral." She referred to Virgil Davis, an assistant principal/athletic director who was their main ally at the high school.

"Virgil will go," Wyatt said. "He and Bob were ex-servicemen and they coached football together. Virgil once told me that he always attends funerals of colleagues, even those he didn't like. It's a matter of respect for a comrade who fought a common foe. He sees him to the

grave, and, as a symbolic send-off, tosses dirt on the casket. It's a custom the men in his unit started, and he's continued it ever since."

"Speaking of dirt," Morgan said, "Bob dealt him so much that I would think some tiny part of Virgil would be glad to be rid of him."

Wyatt shook his head. "To Virgil, it's a matter of honor. He told us there was only one exception to their custom, a soldier they were so prejudiced against that they ended their relationship with the man altogether."

"Virgil?" Morgan said, incredulous. "Prejudiced?"

"Hard to believe, I know. But you heard it, too, Doc; isn't that what he said?"

"Something like that, but I don't think he meant it the way it sounded; he just had too much to drink. I will be anxious to hear if Virge keeps up his custom, though." Randori pushed himself erect. "Can we talk about something else? I don't want to waste any more time on Bob Samson."

Wyatt nodded and heaved a deep sigh. "Well, now there's an opening at the top. Are you going to apply, Meryl? I'll support you."

"Me too," Randori said, grinning, "but that would probably hurt more than help. Besides, I'm worried that Phil Olson has his political ducks in a row." Olson, one of Bob Samson's protégés and the Director of Elementary Education, was Morgan's counterpart and equal on the organizational chart. "Phil knows what's near and dear to each board member, and he's kissed it passionately, proving once again that, at Freedom Con, platitudes trump philosophy."

"Meryl is best qualified," Wyatt said. He reached to touch Morgan's forearm, but her eyes shot a glare that made his hand recoil. "At the emergency Board Meeting last night they promised a fair and balanced selection process. Meryl will far outshine Phil."

When concentrating on a person, Randori resembled a predatory bird: piercing, close-set eyes; Roman nose; set jaw; hair brushed back into a tight ponytail—all elements that intensified the impression. As he examined the slight tumescence of the veins in Wyatt's neck, the counselor forced a disarming smile. " 'Fair and balanced,' I can't wait. Phil's the kind of guy that rises in this system. He says the right things to the right people, never makes waves. And, above all, he always chants the District mantra, 'We have to do what's right for kids,' even while he makes decisions that contradict it."

“Meryl got her position on merit,” Wyatt said. “And I’d like to think I was qualified when they created this job for me.”

Randori shook his head. “You guys are too close to the situation. Sure, you’re the best qualified to do what you do, and, believe me, you make us all look good. But, neither of you is appreciated. Kerry, you run Pupil Services because no one else can or cares to, and it’s your head on the block when things go wrong, which is inevitable. Meryl, you’re like the first lady. You look good in the position—and Bob would’ve liked to see you in a few other positions, too.”

“That’s inappropriate,” Wyatt snapped, “even by your standards!”

Morgan held a hand up to stave off Wyatt’s defense of her honor. “It’s all right, Kerry.” She shot a hard sidelong glare at Randori. “This is why we keep Doc around: he’s like a pet ape that throws shit at our rose-colored glasses.”

Randori searched Morgan’s eyes and saw the wounds his words made. “Look Meryl, if you wanted to be superintendent, you should’ve pandered to the country club set or picked up some board member’s pet project. Instead, you focused on helping the neediest kids, which everyone thought was cute, but it wasn’t politically savvy.”

“Don’t you think you’re being just a little cynical?”

“Cynical, Meryl? Bob wanted you on the Cabinet so he could say, ‘Look how enlightened I am, having a woman on board.’ The way he set things up, though, the principals run the buildings and he ran the District, which leaves you and Kerry in a purgatory where you have all of the responsibility to make things work but none of the power to—”

“Stop,” Morgan said. First anger, and then a fleeting sadness swept across her face.

“I’m sorry, Meryl,” Randori said. “I didn’t mean to—”

Morgan gripped the counselor’s hand and rose to leave. “Shut up.” Turning her back to the men, her voice softened. “Don’t worry about it, Doc. It’s one of the caustic realities of befriending a person who holds the human race in disdain.”

Her verbal parting shot delayed her long enough to avoid a literal parting shot by way of a door to the face as Lionda Knepp burst in, eyes wide. “God, Meryl, I’m so sorry! I hate to barge in but, but—”

From the far reaches of the office came Theresa’s disembodied voice. “Oh, for heaven’s sake Lionda, spit it out.”

“Bob Samson was killed!”

“I hear Harry Truman isn’t doing too well, either,” Randori said, grasping the opportunity to lighten the pall he had cast over Wyatt and Morgan.

“No, wiseass, I mean his death wasn’t an accident. Ed just called. But please don’t say anything to anyone. It’s confidential.”

“Not for long, I’d wager,” Wyatt said. His dig at the Knepps’ lack of discretion would have passed unappreciated except for Randori’s quick glance.

“But he died in a car accident,” Morgan said.

“Ed said some of the injuries were inconsistent with a car crash.”

Randori smiled, but without humor. “Bob’s car took a header a hundred feet into a quarry. Seems like a pretty wide array of hurts could occur.”

Wyatt pressed for details. “What kind of injuries?”

“Ed didn’t say.”

“There goes my theory,” Wyatt said with a resigned shake of the head. “I thought he was trying to see if his ego would fill the gorge.”

Morgan frowned at Wyatt and prodded: “Did your brother-in-law say anything else?”

“Well, you know how the paper said he might’ve hit an unexpected curve? Dr. Samson grew up out there; he knew that road like the back of his hand. Then they thought, what with all the deer in those woods one might’ve run in front of him and he swerved. But there were no skid marks. Seems like he just drove real slow right into the quarry. Anyway, my source on the police force,” Lionda said, almost giddy at having the opportunity to use the phrase, “thinks things are going to get interesting. The State Police are in on it now.”

Wyatt checked his watch as a signal for adjournment and flashed his Cheshire Cat smile. “Well, at least we won’t lack for something to talk about at the wake.”

Lionda rushed her boss. Wyatt backpedaled into his office, slamming the door in her face, but the buzz-saw shrillness of her voice cut through to reach his ears. “Don’t you dare! Everything I told you is confidential police business.” Her last words, “Do you hear me?” rose near the range of canine-only reception.

Randori patted the secretary’s arm and smiled with reassurance. “Don’t worry, Lionda, we won’t let them take Ed’s bullets away again.”

Mystery, psychology, humor, and unforgettable characters blend seamlessly in this page-turner that keeps readers guessing until the end. A contemporary riff on Sartre's admonition that we are condemned to freedom: bound by personal responsibility to every decision we make.

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