

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

By Dennis E. Power

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The popping toaster briefly irritated Robert T. Ironside. The sound broke his concentration from a collection of papers spread across his breakfast table.

Without looking up from his reading, Ironside yelled at the top of his lungs, "Mark! Toast!" When Mark Sanger did not appear after a moment, Ironside irritably pushed himself back from the table and wheeled himself over to the kitchen counter. Reaching up from his permanent sitting position, he snagged the toast and wheeled himself back to his breakfast table. He absently spread marmalade on the toast as he continued to pore over the documents on the table. The documents were police reports, crime scene photographs and Photostats of hand-written or typewritten notes.

Mark Sanger walked into the kitchen.

"Where the flaming hell were you? I had to get my own toast."

Pouring a cup of coffee Sanger grinned, "I hope that didn't tire you out too much, we have a long day planned. I was getting the van gassed up and prepping it for the long road trip you wanted to take today."

Ironside grunted in reply as he took a closer look at two of the photographs. So engrossed in his study was he that he did not hear the door buzzer nor familiar tread of Sgt. Ed Brown.

"Morning Chief." Brown said as he entered the room.

Ironside lifted his eyes from the papers.

"So you changed your mind about going with us on our wild goose chase, eh?" Ironside said with a quirk of a smile that never quite reached his stony face or cold grey eyes.

"I am afraid your trip will have to be postponed a bit. The Commissioner has case that he thinks needs your personal involvement".

"Blast and damn!" Ironside angrily tossed the photographs on the table. "Stewart McMillan knows that I am bogged down with this Scorpio case. What the hell is so flaming important?"

"The Commissioner feels this case is right up your alley. His wife agrees" Brown smiled at Ironside's involuntary shudder at the mention of McMillan's wife.

Ironside gave Brown a dour look. "I am almost afraid to ask. How exactly is it up my alley?"

Brown smiled humorlessly, "The victim is also in a wheelchair."

After Ironside had finished thoroughly cursing Commissioner McMillan and his interfering wife, Sgt. Brown filled Ironside in on the particulars. The victim was L. B. Jefferies, a renowned photojournalist."

“Never heard of him.” grunted Ironside

“Photojournalists are usually not that well known but you have probably seen his work. He used to have his photos in all the major newspapers, specializing in war zones and international trouble spots. An injury several years ago sidelined him and he became an urban news photographer and portrait snapper. He was alone in his home last night waiting up for his grandson to put him to bed. He had fallen asleep watching television and awakened to find someone in his room. They pointed a gun at him and fired twice into his chest. His grandson found him still conscious probably moments after the shooting. No description of his attacker. No one saw anything, as usual. He has been floating in and out of consciousness but has not made any coherent statements.”

“What is his prognosis?”

“Doctors say it is touch and go. The bullets clipped his heart and did some jumping around in his chest. The slugs were from a 38. Special. No ballistics as of yet. “

Ironside nodded and asked where Jefferies was hospitalized. Brown told him.

“Alright, Mark, let’s head over to San Francisco General.” To Brown, he said, “Having the investigating officer meet us outside Jefferies room. I want an update on the current status of the investigation. Maybe I won’t have to waste much time on this.”

Once Mark Sanger had pushed Ironside up to Jefferies room, a detective in his mid fifties with a potato nose and wearing dark grey suit and ever-present fedora met them outside the door.

“Lieutenant Stone... I was hoping they had gotten someone qualified to investigate this case but I guess I will have to settle for you” Ironside said gruffly.

“Well now, Chief, I think they can reassign Callahan to it if you would prefer.” Mike Stone said with a grin, especially when he saw that dark look that had crossed Ironside’s face at the mention of Callahan’s name.

A rare smile flitting across Ironside’s face. “It is good to see you Mike,” he said shaking Stone’s hand. “What can you tell me, anything new?”

“Not much I am afraid. No fingerprints on the scene other than Jefferies and Jefferies’ grandson. The bullets do not match any known ballistics. The perpetrator appears to have been rifling through Jefferies file cabinets prior to being discovered by Jefferies. The grandson is not certain if anything is missing, he does not live with Jefferies but has an apartment across town and is a full time student at Golden Gate. His grandfather is a private man and refuses any help other than being put into his bed. The grandson knew that Jefferies was working on a new book but does not know what it was about. We just don’t know enough about Jefferies to know if the book was related to his shooting or if he had enemies from his past.”

“What about other relatives? He has a grandson that usually points to a wife and at least one child.”

“Jefferies is a widower, his wife Lisa Fremont Jefferies died in an auto accident two years ago. His daughter and her husband were also killed. Jefferies was the only survivor.”

“Is that how he ended up in the wheelchair?”

Stone looked over his notes. “No, he was already wheelchair bound at that time. Apparently Jefferies suffers from a severe case of osteoarthritis in his legs caused by repeated traumas to his legs. In plain English he’s paying for having his legs repeatedly broken.”

“I guess I need to talk to him.” He motioned for Mark Sanger to push him into Jefferies’ room. Ironside saw a rather frail man in his mid-sixties connected to a variety of medical equipment. When he saw Ironside Jefferies sat straight up, his eyes widened and he rasped “Thorwald!” Jefferies fell back unconscious and various machines began clamoring.

Mark Sanger pulled Ironside out of Jefferies’ room as medical personnel flooded it.

“Well, at least we have one clue.” Ironside dryly commented to Sgt. Brown and Lt. Stone. “Who ever this Thorwald is, he frightens Jefferies. Any man causing a reaction like that is probably not a friend of Jefferies and may have had something to do with causing him harm. We will need you and Eve to find out everything we can about Jefferies and his connection to this Thorwald.”

Two days later Sgt. Brown dropped by Ironside’s apartment with a manila envelope.

“I am afraid that Thorwald angle just won’t pan out Chief. It seems Thorwald is dead.”

“What’s the story”?

“It seems that back in the fifties Jefferies broke both of his legs and was confined to his apartment building. His apartment building was one of those several story jobs with a central court. Jefferies amused himself by watching the goings on in the apartment block through his telephoto lens and binoculars. The neighbor right across the way from him was Lars Thorwald. Thorwald had an invalid wife who was bedridden. Jefferies saw Thorwald leave his apartment with several suitcases in the middle of the night. The next day his wife was gone. Due to the efforts of Jefferies, his then fiancée and his therapeutic nurse they got the goods on Thorwald. Thorwald had killed his wife and used the luggage to dispose of her body. Although Thorwald threatened to kill Jefferies nothing ever came of it because Thorwald died in prison. He was stabbed to death in yard, oddly enough because of a mistaken identity. Some hoodlum thought Thorwald was a crime boss named Rick Coyle. The killer had apparently ratted on Coyle and was taking pre-emptive measures, or so he thought.

Taking a photo of the envelope, he showed it to Mark and Ironside, remarking “I can see why Jefferies took you for Thorwald.”

Ironside glanced at the picture which showed a man who bore an uncanny resemblance to Chief Ironside with the exception that this man wore steel rimmed spectacle, had a few more pounds, whiter hair and thicker eyebrows.

“I don’t see any flaming resemblance at all. Jefferies was obviously under a lot of pain medication,” Ironside growled.

“There is good news about Jefferies however he has recovered sufficiently to talk. At least for a short period.”

Ironside, Sgt. Brown and the omnipresent Mark Sanger returned to L. B. Jefferies room.

Jefferies was still weak from his attack and was only able to turn his head slightly while speaking to them.

“Sorry I called you Thorwald, you do bear some resemblance to him.”

“So I have been told,” Ironside said with ill humor.

“I would have met you eventually but I hoped it would have been under better circumstances.”

Ironside was taken aback by this and wondered if Jefferies had lost his train of thought.

“You do know who I am, don’t you Mr. Jefferies.”

“Robert T. Ironside, formerly Chief of Detectives for the San Francisco Police Department, now a highly paid police consultant.”

“Well, that’s true except for the highly paid part.” Ironside answered with a rare and fleeting smile. “Why do you say we would have met eventually?”

“I had hoped to put you in my newest book. It was going to be about men like us who overcame their disabilities to lead not only full and active lives but also lives that made a difference.”

“Who were the other subjects of the book?”

Jefferies started to answer but was interrupted by a racking cough. Red-flecked foam covered his gown.

Mark Sanger jumped up and jabbed the nurse call button.

Ironside pushed forward, “This is important, can you tell us anything your attacker.”

Jefferies said between choking coughs. “Like us.” His eyes seemed to glaze over and he looked confused, “George. Why George? Why?”

Ironside and his crew had to clear the room once again.

A few moments later the crash team exited the room, shaking their heads sadly.

Ironside had a pensive moment and then said, “Well, now it’s a murder investigation.”

In the next two days a couple pieces of information surfaced that provided a possible clue to a motive for the Jefferies murder. Jefferies darkroom revealed a few rolls of undeveloped film. Ironside was both shocked and angered that these were all photos of him working on cases either at the scene of the crime or at police headquarters, lecturing at the police academy and socializing. All were either taken with hidden cameras or cameras with very good telephoto lens. A few blocks from Jefferies apartment a garbage pile yielded up several burnt papers and photos.

Ironside ate lunch with Sgt. Brown and Eve Whitfield and discussed the case. Ironside's working theory was given that Jefferies liked to work in secret and that he apparently researched his subjects thoroughly before approaching them for permission to be in his work. One of his subjects did not want to be in the book and had killed Jefferies for something that Jefferies may have discovered about them or at least thought he had discovered about them.

Eve Whitfield gave Ironside a puzzled look. "So you believe that one of the men these wheelchair bound men that Jefferies was researching hired someone to kill him."

"Or that they killed him", Ironside snapped.

At Eve's questioning look. Ironside said, "Just before Jefferies died, he said "Like Us" which I take to mean that the killer was also in a wheelchair. Just because someone is in a wheelchair does not mean that they are a saint or even a nice person."

Eve and Sgt. Brown exchanged knowing looks and smiles.

"When you two get through making gooney eyes at each other, I want Eve to see if she can track down Jefferies' publisher and see if they have any idea of who his subjects were for the book. Also I want you two to use the few photographs were not totally damaged and see if you can identify the subjects and of course cross reference them."

While Ironside spent his time pouring over the evidence from the so-called Zodiac case, trying to see if the various murders were actually the work of one person and to see if the so-called Scorpio killer might be Zodiac or a copycat killer. Eve and Sgt. Brown contacted Jefferies' publisher, Howard Publications to see if they could discover the identities of the people Jefferies had intended to feature in his book. Jefferies had been close mouthed with them as well, only informing the publisher when he had done all the necessary research and had signed release forms. Jefferies had signed release forms from Professor Charles Xavier, from Dr. Everett Scott and Sir Wilfred Ainsley. Eve remarked that a very nice young lady that reminded her of Commissioner McMillan's wife had helped her with this research.

Sgt. Ed Brown was able to identify three more men by showing the photos around to newspapers, libraries and universities. Jefferies had photos of Sir Quincy Harker, Dr. Niles Caulder and Professor Damien Harmon.

Ironside's exasperated look when Brown told him all of the names indicated that Ironside had never heard of any of these men.

"They are all fairly famous in their own particular fields. I am surprised that you never heard of Damien Harmon, he is police consultant like you, and a world-renowned criminologist and psychologist. He consults with the New York City Police Department."

"I came up through the ranks, as you well know, using sound police methods and deductive reasoning. These so-called criminal psychologists and criminologists want to make things easier for the criminals and less so for the police."

“That may be true in many cases but this Harmon is a real law and order kind of guy. From what I can gather he was put in the wheelchair by some punks back in the thirties. They cracked his skull and spine. Since then he has helped the police with some of their hardest cases, often coming up with evidence that the police missed.”

“Hmmp, sounds too good to be true. He bears further investigation. Make certain that he was in New York when Jefferies was killed.”

“Anybody else not from San Francisco?” Ironside asked hoping to eliminate as many suspects as possible.

“Most of the people are not from San Francisco. Xavier, Harmon, Ainsley and Scott all live in New York. Which makes sense, until two years ago so did Jefferies. Niles Caulder lives in Los Angeles. Quincy Harker is a London resident.” Brown answered.

Eve broke in, “That is normally true except for this year, he is a visiting professor at Golden Gate University.”

“What is his field?”

“Archeology-specifically written languages and philosophy”

“Sounds harmless enough”, Mark Sanger remarked.

“On the surface anyway. Harker is rather well notorious in England, at least with the various tabloids.” Eve remarked with a bit of amusement in her voice.

Eve showed them a variety of Photostats of newspaper front pages from the The Sun, The Daily Mirror, the Daily Star and The People. “Revealed at last! Vampire Hunter’s son crippled by Nazi Vampires!” “Famous Vampire Hunter has secret Vampire Sister, sources say” “Mysterious deaths and disappearances connected to Oxford Don!”

“What is all this nonsense!” Ironside barked.

“Harker has apparently been the target of tabloids for years, ever since it was discovered that his parents were the models for the characters in the novel Dracula.”

“What bearing does that have with this case? “ His cold blue eyes telegraphed his thought that she had better say something relevant or drop this particular line of conversation.

“Although my Scotland Yard resources were reluctant to confirm or deny it, apparently there truly are some odd deaths and disappearances connected to Quincy Harker. One more forthcoming source said that Harker had a high security clearance and that his work during the war had not consisted merely of cryptology.”

Ironside pursed his lips, “So perhaps our Mr. Jefferies uncovered a secret that either Mr. Harker or the British government did not want disclosed, even inadvertently. Steepling his hands, he said, “I would like to speak with Dr. Harker, see if you can arrange a meeting.”

The meeting between Robert Ironside and Quincy Harker took place in the house that Harker was renting for the semester. It had once belonged to noted suffragette and author Fremont Jones. Ironside had been let in the room by a young woman in her mid-twenties who introduced herself as Edith, Harker's daughter. Ironside was wheeled into a large sitting room, still furnished in the Victorian fashion with brocaded wallpaper, over stuffed furniture, Ironside momentarily doubted that this was their exact relationship when he saw Harker who was at least seventy, although he looked fit and trim.

Harker noted Ironside's look, "My wife was much younger than I." Harker was pouring himself a cup of tea from a white porcelain teapot. "Would you like tea or something stronger, Mr. Ironside?"

"Tea is fine, thank you."

"Edith dear, why don't you take this nice young man into the kitchen and give him some tea and biscuits, while Mr. Ironside and I talk."

Mark Sanger bristled at the suggestion.

"Mark is not my servant to be dismissed. He is my bodyguard as well as my personal assistant." Ironside answered, also annoyed.

Harker chuckled, "I did not mean to give offense." He waved his hand. "As you may have guessed from my surrounding I am a man of another age and so my attitudes often reflect that era. He is welcome to stay if you believe his presence is needed. However I would prefer that Edith not be present."

"Very well father," Edith left in a bit of a huff.

"I suppose you have come to... what is the term? Grill me on the Jefferies matter?"

"Why would you think that?" Ironside asked pointedly.

Sipping his tea, Harker smiled. "You have no doubt discovered by now that I was one of the subjects of his upcoming book, as were you, I might add. However I had already signed a consent form."

"Howard Publications does not appear to have your consent form on record." Ironside stared at Harker with his implacable blue eyes. Harker's gaze never wavered.

"Perhaps, Jefferies had not posted it as yet. I truly do not know what happened to it. However even if you weren't misleading me about the consent form, you still would have felt compelled to visit it me because of the scurrilous stories in the press about my family and I. You may also have discovered that I do not have an airtight alibi for the night Jefferies was shot, that a gap of a few hours exists where no one knew where I was. Interviews with my neighbors will uncover the fact that I was not home and had been seen leaving a few hours before Jefferies was shot."

"What were you doing?"

Quincy Harker tugged on his beard and smiled "Tracking a vampire."

Ironside gave him a sour smile. "I do not have much of a sense of humor, so could you please tell the real story?"

"There is no real harm in telling you this since it is a poorly kept secret, deliberately so. The rumors that I never left British Intelligence are quite true, although I am more of a researcher than an active agent these days. When I do go out in field I am what you could call a beater. While it is true that sometimes people I have had contact with do disappear... I have nothing to do with the actual disappearance. I was doing an investigation on a Romanian gentleman named Iorga, whom we believe was connected with the deaths of several of our agents in England and France. I was on stake out watching him attend a benefit ball for an orphanage. I left when he did to discover where he was staying."

"Weren't you afraid of being spotted" Mark Sanger interjected. Normally Ironside would have given Sanger a baleful glare for having asked a pointless question. This time however he let it go, interested in the answer.

"No, my dear boy, that was part of the plan."

"And if Iorga disappears, you will undoubtedly have an alibi for that as well?"

"Quite. Believe me, I had no reason to kill Mr. Jefferies... he had an understanding of discretion. Let's just say that he used his photographic skills to help the allies win the war."

"That is an interesting tidbit, at least, opening up another line of investigation."

"Unfortunately that is not true. Jefferies was just a photographer, not an agent. As a soldier he worked with various partisan movements it is true but just briefly. They got him close enough to snap pictures of various military and industrial complexes which allowed for bombing missions or commando raids to take them out, one of his most effective assignments was that of surveillance photographs the Chateau de la Vilaine which led to a most successful commando raid. In post war Vienna he once snapped a photograph of a black marketeer thought to be dead causing a manhunt through the city. However that man was shot to death in Vienna's sewers. Jefferies caught that on film as well. Very famous shot, I believe it appeared in your Time magazine. No, I fear that you are on the right track but I am not the right person."

"Any suggestions?"

"Means and opportunity, and possibly motive, point to the nearest other suspect, Dr. Niles Caulder. I do not know much about him, but he strikes me as... duplicitous. Would your care to join Edith and myself for dinner or you eager to get on the trail"

Ironside was not entirely convinced that Harker was innocent and agreed to have dinner. Harker's eyes glinted in amusement as he raked his eyes over Ironside's wheelchair.

During the course of dinner, Mark Sanger said, "I know I am probably being a crass American, but I have to ask. "What is the real story?"

Edith murmured "Oh Lord" rolling her eyes at the ceiling.

Quincy Harker gave Mark Sanger a cold stare. “You mean the real story about Dracula? Did he exist? Was he really a blood sucking monster, one of the undead?” he asked in clipped, dispassionate tones.

Mark Sanger had been stared down by the best and so met Harker’s gaze without flinching.

“Yes, that is what I meant.”

Harker relaxed his face into a small smile, “Very well. The truth is a bit more shocking than the fable written by Stoker. My father was a solicitor who traveled to Transylvania at the behest of a man calling himself Count Dracula. Whether he was a descendent of the real Dracula or just a poser is unknown. As Stoker said my father was the intermediary in property transactions. My father soon discovered, although by accident that Count Dracula was a pervert. He did indeed drink blood or rather lapped blood from a cut inflicted on a woman during intercourse. Dracula was however not a killer but he had worn out his welcome with most of the prostitutes in the towns near his castle. My father tried to prevent Dracula from going to England because of his perversion and so Dracula imprisoned him in the castle. By the time my father had escaped Dracula was well on his way to London.

“Upon arriving in England Dracula chose to prey upon women who were acquainted with my father, specifically my mother and her friend Lucy Westerna. He would sneak into their bedrooms at night dope them into a semi-stupor with chloroform, give them pinpricks on their necks and rape them. Stoker of course only hinted at the latter. As it turns out Dracula had awakened some of Lucy’s perverted desires and she became his willing partner. However his visits were too frequent and she became anemic. Professor Van Helsing tried to use the relatively new science of blood transfusion to bring her back health. At that time blood typing was unknown and so Lucy went into shock from the transfusions and fell into a coma. Everyone was convinced that she was dead and she was interred. She probably would have suffocated had Dracula not opened her coffin for one last look. Whether it was the transfusions, the lack of oxygen or just incipient madness, Lucy also took to sucking blood, although she actually believed herself to be a true vampire. She preyed on the children near her cemetery. My father was among the crew that tracked Lucy to her coffin and killed her. They did not actually believe that she was a vampire but knew that justice had be done and wished to spare her family the humiliation of public disclosure of her crimes. Besides she was already in the coffin.” Harker said with a gallows laugh.

“Dracula fled the country and all three of Lucy’s beaux and my father tracked him back to Transylvania. Knowing that it was kill or be killed, Dracula managed to kill one of the party, Quincy Morris, for whom I am named, before Dracula was himself stabbed to death by Morris’ bowie knife. And that’s really all there is to it. “

As Ironside and Mark Sanger were leaving, Quincy Harker remarked, “I hope that you had enough tape in the recording device built into your wheelchair.”

At Mark Sanger’s surprised expression, Harker said “You will find that you tricked out wheelchairs are not as uncommon you might have thought”

Mark Sanger remarked as he put Ironside inside the van that Harker was one strange dude and offered the opinion that Harker might be the killer.

Ironside shook his head negatively. “No, he did not kill Jefferies. He is very adept at keeping secrets and telling outright lies and mistruths but he did not kill Jefferies.”

Taking Harker’s advice, Ironside next turned his attention to Dr. Niles Caulder. According to the information that Eve and Sgt. Brown could get was that Niles Caulder had been a surgeon and biochemist. He had been hurt in a laboratory accident and became a paraplegic. He then devoted himself to taking care of special care patients all of whom were quite wealthy. Cliff Steele had been an award winning racecar driver but an accident at the track had broken just about every bone in his body and covered him with burns. Caulder had devised a metallic body cast that covered Steele’s entire body; the suit gave support for Steele’s shattered bones and provided constant medication for the burns. Unfortunately there was a drawback in that Steele’s body became dependent on the steel suit for support.

Another patient was test pilot Larry Trainor whose plane crashed near an atomic bomb site. He suffered radiation poisoning as well as severe burns over most of his body. Caulder’s treatment was to wrap Trainor from head to toe in chemically treated bandages. As with Steele this became a permanent cure, once the bandages were removed and air hit Trainor’s naked skin, it grew inflamed and swollen causing Trainor agonizing pain. The bandages had to stay on.

Caulder’s wealthiest patient was movie star Rita Farr who suffered from a mysterious ailment after she had accidentally breathed in volcanic gasses during a film shoot. In addition to giving Farr a chronic lung ailment, her body’s biochemistry suffered a reaction from the exposure to the volcanic gas. Her thyroid gland was affected making her fluctuate between hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism with the attendant rapid gaining of weight and rapid loss of weight. Caulder devised a drug regimen and a special diet that kept her body in equilibrium. All three of these patients had to stay at Caulder’s exclusive sanitarium in order to receive constant and continual treatment. Another patient that Caulder had seen was a young boy with a skin pigmentation problem. Caulder never succeeded in treating that particular disease.

Caulder had taken his three patients on a therapeutic vacation to a small fishing village in Maine. Caulder was the only one to return, the others had been killed when their yacht exploded due to a faulty gas tank. At least they were surmised to have been killed but no bodies were found. Caulder had been found on the beach, his wheelchair had shielded him from the brunt of the blast.

Ironside frowned at the coincidence, yet could not fathom Caulder killing off his cash cows... unless they were insured. Perhaps Jefferies had inadvertently discovered something about this incident that Caulder had not wanted disclosed.

“Eve check on the finances of Dr. Niles. Find out if he had insured his patients or if he had a sudden influx of cash. Ed, see what you can find about Caulder’s location when Jefferies was murdered.”

Eve returned with the news that Niles Caulder was independently wealthy from a variety of inventions. His four patients had actually stayed at his sanitarium at no cost. They had not been insured and so Caulder had not benefited from their deaths. Caulder had subsequently closed his sanitarium and had begun funding and working at a psychiatric hospital. In his spare time he also ran a biochemical research company and an electronic research and development firm.

Niles Caulder had indeed been in Los Angeles when L. B. Jefferies had been shot. He had been performing a delicate brain surgery on a patient at the psychiatric hospital.

Ironside gave Brown a sour look, “Unless he hired a hit man, I guess that clears him.”

Eve came into the room. “Chief, the Commissioner would like to see you as soon as possible”

Ironside slapped his hands against his wheelchair’s arms in frustrated anger. “He probably wants a personal update on this flaming case! Making a sweeping gesture at Mark Sanger. “Okay, Mark let’s go see his highness McMillan.”

Sgt. Enright ushered Ironside into Commissioner McMillan’s office. McMillan was not behind his desk but rather sat in one of the visitor’s chairs. Next to him sat a man in his mid-forties with vibrant red hair and with a full beard. Ironside noted that his suit cost more than Ironside made in a month. The man’s wheelchair was also one of the new lightweight and very expensive jobs.

McMillan rose when Ironside entered the room and met Ironside as he walked into the room. Shaking Ironside’s hand, he said, “Glad you could get here so promptly Chief. I would like you to meet Dr. Niles Caulder.”

Caulder turned to see Ironside and nodded in his direction, giving him a slight smile. Caulder must have noted the narrowing of Ironside’s eyes, because his smile broadened.

“No, Chief Ironside I have not returned to the scene of the crime. Having read about Jeff’s murder I came here as soon as possible. His grandson is his only living relative and I wanted to help with the funeral arrangements, rather than have his grandson be burdened with them at such a young age. Jeff had been in a bit of a financial bind since his wife and daughter were killed and I wanted to make certain that his grandson was able to continue schooling. When I called upon Stewart he told me you were investigating Jeff’s murder.” Caulder smiled a bit, “It does not take much deductive skill to realize that one of the leads would be Jeff’s current work and those people featured in it.”

“I take it from your casual use of his name that you were acquainted with Mr. Jefferies and knew about his book.”

“Indeed I have known Jeff for several years. He was actually the one who called me when Cliff Steele was injured in his racing accident. Jeff had been snapping pix for Motor Trend. Because of my work in trying to mainstream the disfigured, what many people refer to as freaks, it was I that suggested to Jeff that he make his next book about so called handicapped men who have, despite their ailments, made a great contribution to society.”

“So you called me up here just to tell me you were great friends with Mr. Jefferies and had no part in his murder?”

Caulder smiled grimly. “I had no fear that I would be a suspect if you did your research thoroughly. From what Stewart has told me, I was performing surgery when poor Jeff was shot. No, rather I came to point you in what I believe is the correct direction. Although he did not personally pull the trigger, I am certain that the man calling himself Dr. Everett Scott is the man responsible for L. B. Jefferies’ murder. If you question him properly, I am certain you will get a confession from him and be able to wrap this case up, forthwith.”

“Could you provide a current address for him, my research team was unable to find one.” Ironside asked with sarcasm.

Caulder smiled broadly, yet his eyes burned with cold anger. “Indeed, I can. He is presently in the custody of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in New York City. I could tell you why but it really would not be suitable for me to do your *entire* job, now would it.”

Noting the sudden tension in the air Commissioner McMillan jumped up. “If you do not mind, Chief, I would like you to fly to New York and see if you can’t get this thing tied up. Of course you can bill the department for expenses.”

Ironside glared at Caulder once more before backing his wheelchair up and starting to spin around towards the door. “I will get right on it Commissioner.”

Outside the Commissioner’s office Ironside Mark Sanger took hold of the handles on Ironside’s wheelchair.

“So what is he like, the world famous Dr. Caulder?”

At Ironside’s questioning glare, Sanger laughed and said, “No, I was not listening in at the door way, Sgt. Enright told me Caulder was in there. “

“He’s a phony. He may not be guilty of this murder but he is a phony just the same. There is definitely something hinky about him.” Ironside twisted his head and said, “Did Enright also tell you that we were going to New York?”

Surprised, Sanger shook his head but smiled, “The Big Apple,”

“Strictly business. We will need to back a few bags and book ourselves on the next convenient flight to New York. Even if Caulder’s lead does not pan out, at least the other suspects live in New York. ”

It took a few days of legal wrangling after Ironside and Sanger had arrived in New York for Ironside to finally get to see Dr. Everett Scott. No one would tell Ironside why Scott was in custody or why he had not been deported.

He was able to talk to Scott at in an interview room at the New York State INS detention center. Seeing the shrunken frail old man sitting in an institutional wheelchair dressed in prison grays and steel framed glasses and was a bit of shock. Ironside had half expected to see the man from the photograph, a scholarly man who favored tweed suits and deerstalker hats.

After two minutes of conversation, Ironside had a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. Even if he got a confession, he doubted that it would hold up in court. Scott was as crazy as a bedbug.

From the outset Scott had asked if Ironside was one of the aliens coming after him for revenge.

While Dr. Everett Scott chain-smoked cigarettes Ironside quickly read through the small file that the INS had provided him. Dr. Everett Scott had been a renowned scientist and had worked on the

development of hydrogen bomb. He had left that to become a college science instructor. Tiring of that after a few years he had been part of Project Bluebook. Ironside knew from an earlier case that this was the project that investigated Unidentified Flying Objects.

As Ironside was reading Scott's file he noticed one odd thing, Scott smoked his cigarettes in the European manner of holding the cigarette by its bottom with his fingertips, rather than the American way of holding it between two fingers. Ironside did not know if Everett was just mannered and pretentious or if this held a deeper significance. Scott's file did not reveal why he was in custody.

Putting together several threads of information, gained mostly by observation, Ironside formed a tentative theory that might provoke Scott into revealing more information.

"I can understand that you are frightened and angry, this deportation is tantamount to a death sentence, isn't it? Even if you are acquitted of war crimes, you will no longer have the protection of the United States government, so no matter where you live, you will be a target for your former allies... and of course the aliens." Ironside added the later with a bit of a sarcastic smile.

"It is quite alright that you do not believe me about the aliens, but I know they are out there. Among Us." Scott answered testily, as Ironside had guessed the slightest trace of a Germanic accent had crept into Scott's clipped Oxfordian English.

"Do we know them as... Jews?" Ironside asked. His face was a flat dispassionate mask, so that Scott could not fathom if he was being absolutely serious or not.

"You mock me, sir. I am not one that considers the Jew to be a subhuman creature. I was a member of the Party out of necessity, a fact that I hope to prove before the World Court. I was never a true Nazi, a true Jew hater."

"How does that sentiment jibe with how you treated them?" Ironside asked. Although he had no true idea of Dr. Scott real identity or the nature of his war crimes, he was taking an educated guess.

Dr. Scott leaned forward against the table, slamming his fist against the table, "If anything, I saved lives or at least delayed death. Those I chose to work for the project would have otherwise been gassed or shot."

"You are a real humanitarian aren't you? Using slave labor to build weapons to help group of racist murderers conquer the world."

Scott's face went blank with shock. His eyes went downcast, and he softly said, "I was just following orders. If I had not I would have been killed. If I had not used those people, others would have. They would have been just as dead."

"And that justification lets you sleep at night and justifies your lack of guilt or remorse?"

Scott gripped the arms of his wheelchair so tightly that his hands went pale white.

"You know nothing of how I have suffered for those days!"

“That is some temper you have there, Dr. Scott. Still angry at the man who discovered your nasty secrets?” Still angry enough to kill him? Or have him killed? What better alibi could you have than being shut away in this detention center? Was it one of your ex Nazi cronies or an American criminal you hired for the job?”

Scott was taken aback with what looked like true befuddlement to Ironside.

“What in the name of God are you going on about?”

‘Your vengeance upon L. B. Jefferies- it was one of his photographs that put you in this predicament was it not?’

“Ja.” Scott answered slowly still evidently puzzled. Enlightenment dawned on Scott’s face. “Gott im Himmel, L.B. Jefferies is dead? How? Why?”

“One of the answers to both questions is that he was shot point blank in the chest by a police special. The motive we believe is someone trying to cover up some information or vengeance, or possibly both.” Ironside fixed Scott with an implacable gaze.

“Ach, I see now.” Scott said with a slight smile on his otherwise morose face. He shook his head sadly. “Such a waste. No I had nothing to do with L. B. Jefferies death, I had no wish to see him dead, even though as you say it was one of or I should say a pair of his photographs that expo... that is that lead me to being here. It was not he who .. it was not his fault.”

Pursing his lips, Ironside leaned back in his chair. “Interesting. Dr. Caulder was certain...”

“Caulder !” Scott shouted in a sudden rage. Ironside would have been shocked had he not been half expecting it. Still he could not help but start at the vehemence of the outburst.

Scott blue eyes burned with rage behind his steel rimmed spectacles. “That is a man I would like to see dead. Unfortunately that... did not happen.”

“Caulder was certain you had killed Jefferies.” Ironside insisted.

More calmly but with bitterness, Scott waved that notion aside, “Bah, he knows better, he is just turning the screws to my torture.” Scott snuffed out a cigarette and lit another. “He would not mind seeing me convicted for this crime, knowing I am innocent. Caulder is a cold-hearted manipulator. By my heart’s blood I wish he had died! He blames me for the attempt on his life and so exposed me... after covering his own bloody trail,”

“You said before that I slept well at night and that I felt no remorse. That is not true. Every night I see the faces of the children and mothers laboring to their deaths I thought that when the rocket facility was bombed and I was crippled that God’s justice had struck us down. Yet I lived and was once again force to repeat this insidious work. When the Allies rescued me after the war and brought me to America I thought this was the way to redeem myself. Von Braun, Rudolph and others were brought to the United States despite the fact that they were all ardent Nazi’s. Their records were expunged and they were given great work to do, to help man explore space.”

“I knew that I, a rather low level chemical engineer would never be offered a chance like that however it came as quite a shock to me when I was offered exile in the United States under the so

called Operation Overcast. I soon realized that they had mistaken me for one of the major scientists at Peenemunde, a Dr. Merkwuerdigichliebe. My sponsor was Niles Caulder who at the time had not been crippled. It became apparent to me that he knew that I was not Dr. Merkwuerdigichliebe and held this deception over my head. Instead of helping with the space program I was attached to teams creating atomic weaponry. I am not a physicist nor am I genius. This I know but I rose rather quickly in prominence due to the information that Caulder fed me. His plan was to get me close to the President so I could advise him on nuclear policy.”

“The President’s Atoms for Peace and Domino Theory policies came from or were influenced by me, or rather by Caulder using me as his mouthpiece. Even before Caulder was confined to a wheelchair he always preferred to work behind the scenes and have other people do this dirty work. My downfall came during the Berlin Crisis when tensions between the White House and Kremlin ran intense. Caulder’s advice was to bluff the Russians into giving up East Berlin by threatening nuclear retaliation. It may have worked had not an insane Air Force General sent a squadron of bombers into Russian Airspace. All but one of them received the recall codes but entered Russian airspace and had to be shot down by Russian pilots with Eisenhower’s permission.

“Caulder’s advice, as filtered through me, had been for Eisenhower to call the Russian’s bluff. I believe now that Caulder intended for the United States to not only prove the falsity of Russian missile superiority but also to launch a first strike at them to destroy the Soviet Union.

“After this event, Dr. Merkwuerdigichliebe was no longer in favor. In retaliation for having his plans thwarted, Caulder revealed that I was not Dr. Merkwuerdigichliebe. I fled into hiding under an assumed name, Dr. Everett Scott, which is an Anglicization of my real name Eberhard Von Schott. I became a science instructor at a Midwestern College.

A few years after my assumption of the Scott identity, I was nearly exposed and so left my teaching position. It was through an odd set of circumstances too complex to relate that I became involved with Project Blue Book and discovered a nest of Aliens living among us, using humans for bizarre sexual experiments.

L. B. Jefferies had learned of the work I had done with UFO investigation and thought I would be a sort of human interest, a crippled crank I know, for his book. I was going to refuse but then thought it might be suspicious if I did refuse and so agreed to be in the book. I had changed my appearance from that of Dr. Merkwuerdigichliebe and no longer pretended to have an artificial arm, so I thought I would be safe. I had not realized that Caulder was also a subject. He recognized me despite my changed physical appearance and gave my true name and war history to the War Crimes Commission. He blamed me for his the recent assassination attempt against him and his agents.”

“You mean his patients?”

Scott’s lips curled in a mirthless smile and he took a final drag on the last of his cigarettes. “If you want to call them that, yes. I had no connection with Zahl, never had heard of him, until Caulder accused me of knowing him.”

“Who is Zahl?” Ironside said slightly confused. Scott had been lucid until he started talking about aliens and assassination attempts.

“It does not matter. Rest assured that I had nothing to do with Jefferies’ death. I rather doubt that Caulder did either. He just took this as an opportunity to add coals to my fire.”

Ironside sighed and shook his in disgust. He wheeled away from the table and shouted. “I am done in here.” When the door opened, he turned back to Scott, “Guilt and lack of sleep are not punishment enough for your lack of moral courage; you chose to let others die so that you could live.”

“My protestation would have changed nothing!” Scott protest.

“Perhaps not, but you will never know will you? Consider your life and ask, was it really worth it?”

Meeting Mark Sanger outside the interview room. “Let’s get the hell out of here, I have already wasted enough flaming time.”

“Where to Chief?” Sanger asked taking hold of the wheelchair’s handles.

“The nearest bar, I need to wash a sour taste out my mouth.”

There were three other people in the New York area that were prospective subjects for Jefferies book. Ironside however was beginning to feel that his line of investigation was flawed. However he was determined to see it out before trying another tact. Tenacity often won out. Ironside took a bit of pleasure in informing McMillan that Caulder’s lead had not panned out and that they would need to stay in New York for a few days longer.

Ironside decided to tackle Sir Wilfred Ainsley next simply because he lived closer to their hotel.

Sir Wilfred Ainsley was a bookstore owner specializing in rare books. He greeted Ironside warmly as if they were long lost friends. Despite his being dressed in a brown cardigan, brown slacks and brown loafers, Ironside had no trouble picturing Sir Wilfred wearing a black business suit, bowler and umbrella like the stereotypical Englishman.

Sir Wilfred was distinguished and charming, remaining so even after Ironside told him that he was not there to purchase a book.

Sir Wilfred looked generally shocked when Ironside told him that L. B. Jefferies had been murdered. Ironside immediately became alert when Sir Wilfred began asking very pertinent and probing questions about the investigation. Ironside deflected most of the questions with some of his own.

Sir Wilfred invited Ironside to his study at the rear of the store for some coffee. The study was a large well furnished room with a large dining table, two opposing leather sofas, a small stove and refrigerator.

“I host bridge, cribbage and chess clubs here, it helps bring in customers and it let’s me socialize without leaving the premises.”

Ironside noticed a small boy about six years laying on one of the sofas, he was engrossed in a book.

“Marcus Loftmore!” Sir Wilfred’s voice cracked in the tone of a correcting parent.

The boy looked up from the book he was reading and jerked away from hit as if it were red hot.

“May I have it please?” Sir Wilfred asked holding his hand out. The boy walked over to him with a hangdog expression and placed a slim folio sized book into Sir Wilfred’s hands.

“Thank you sir, now why don’t you go into the backyard and play kick the can or something.”

“Kick the can!”, the boy said contemptuously.

“Play ball then or what ever it is young boys do these days.” With a smile he added, "Just don’t bring the building down around us.”

After the boy went out with in a rather sullen manner, Sir Wilfred smiled indulgently. “My godson, Mark Loftmore, he is a good lad but his parents are going through a rough patch and he spends too much time with me and his grandfather. We aren’t exactly able to keep up with him, especially when he is rather advanced for his age.” He placed the folio on the dining table. Ironside noted that Marcus Loftmore had been looking at a rare collection of lithographs of Gauguin’s paintings.

After preparing coffee for Ironside and himself, Sir Wilfred ‘s warm brown eyes looked directly into Ironside’s, “I could try and run a game on you and tell you I was interested in the details of L. B. Jefferies murder because I am a mystery buff, however you are perceptive enough to know I was not being entirely truthful. The fact is that unusual murders used to be in my line.”

“Scotland Yard”

“Not quite, not officially anyway. I had a sort of roving commission sort of like Dennis Nayland Smith and Sir John Weymouth-Smythe. The latter was my mentor, not that I expect you have ever heard of him.”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“You are certain that the person who shot Jefferies was in a wheelchair.”

“Not entirely. It is just his last words “like us”, and the forensic evidence of the bullets having entered his chest straight on without any angle that would have suggested that the shooter stood above him or shot up at him, so they seem to have been even with him”.

“Yet they did not shoot him until he awakened. So murder may have not been the first intention. However if they did come up to his apartment in a wheelchair that might explain how the killer was able to come and go without being noticed. People were used to seeing a man in a wheelchair enter and exit Jefferies apartment. It may also explain how they removed both the murder weapon and the papers with which they absconded without being noticed. As you well know, you can hide a lot in the areas under the chair.” Sir Wilfred said the latter with a twinkle in his eyes.

Jefferies added, “I have a personal reason for wishing Jefferies killer brought to justice, since I knew Jefferies slightly. I worked with him on a surveillance mission at the end of the war. “

“In Vienna?”

“No, it was before he was in Vienna.”

“Do you think that may have been why he was killed?”

“It is a possibility, there are rumors that Odessa is still active and that the Butcher Mengele is still alive. Unfortunately I cannot give you details, since it is still classified by both our Governments. Sipping his coffee, Sir Wilfred said with a slight smile. “I will say that Jefferies photos proved, despite what the Nazis and Reds claimed, that the search for a deranged, bloodthirsty portrait painter did not end in Berlin Bunker. However my good friend Trevor Bruttonholm told me that particular hunt did end in 1958. One cannot discount the possibility of delayed revenge, but on the whole, I think you are on the right track. Jefferies murder had to do with his upcoming book. However I know I had no reason to kill him and cannot fathom that Damien did either. I do not know the other person at all, Dr. Xavier so I cannot vouch for him one way or the other.”

“Damien Harmon? You know him?”

“Indeed one of my regular chess and bridge players. We share an interest in rare and obscure books. It was I who suggested Damien for Jefferies book. Although Damien is a very private man, he agreed readily. If you were planning on seeing him I can save you a trip.”

Ironside smiled slightly, “While you seem like a trustworthy soul, Sir Wilfred, I cannot in good conscience take your word for his innocence.”

Sir Wilfred barked a laugh. “I did not mean that, although I can see how you might. I meant I could ring him up and have him come on down here. I was going to have him come around sometime this week anyway, a book he had been inquiring about showed up.”

Ironside strained to hear as Sir Wilfred called Damien Harmon. He told Harmon that the *Kultes de Haib* by Gabriel Helsing Von Ritter was now in. Sir Wilfred told Ironside that he had not apprised Harmon of Ironside’s presence, since Ironside probably wanted to catch him off guard.

While they waited for Harmon to arrive Ironside and Sir Wilfred played several games of chess.

Barring physical evidence linking anyone to the crime, Ironside had to rely on his instincts as an investigator and his judgment of human character. So far although all of the people in this case were hiding more than they let on, this was quite usual for most people. None of Ironside’s instincts cried out that these people were the killer. Although Ironside sensed that Niles Caulder had the capacity to commit cold-blooded murder, there was no evidence to link him to Jefferies. Quincy Harker and Sir Wilfred had also given off the sense that they would kill for protection or in combat; he did not get the sense that they would commit murder.

However when Damien Harmon rolled into the shop, Ironside knew that this was a man filled with anger, who given the right motivation would not flinch from killing or ordering it done. Harmon was a physically fit man in his mid-sixties with a mane of white hair. Like Caulder he was dressed in

an expensive business suit. A large shaven skulled man in his late twenties accompanied Harmon. He was either of Hispanic or Puerto Rican descent.

Harmon's eyes darted to Sir Wilfred and then to Ironside. The gray eyes became flinty; moreover there was not a glimmer of guilt or flash of shock flitting across Harmon's face. He smiled with wry amusement and wheeled towards Ironside, extending his hand.

"Robert T. Ironside, it is a pleasure to meet you. I expect you are investigating the Jefferies murder." Harmon smiled and said, "Well, I am not going to confess to doing it or having it done. You could have called to ascertain my whereabouts during the time of the shooting."

"I wanted to meet you in person anyway."

"To size me up no doubt, to see what type of person I was. To see if I could murder or have murder done" Harmon said with a slight smile.

Ironside answered with a slight smile of his own, "Something like that, yes."

"I can also have the movements of my bodyguard Mr. Sanchez verified." Harmon snapped.

"Yes, that will be useful. However we both know that a man of your connections, who has worked with police, doubtless has connection with both sides of the law who would not be averse to moonlighting.

"Ah," Harmon's smile broadened but his eyes grew colder, "So you have decided that I could indeed have murder done."

"Given the correct justification, yes, I think you could. However my gut also says given your background that you would not willingly work with criminals or murder for profit or selfish gain. According to my sources you sustained your injuries while seeking out and trying to stop criminal activities. You were a civilian attached to the police department but not an officer of the law, in effect you were practicing vigilantism."

"Indeed, I was young and foolish, inspired too much by the pulps I daresay. I also paid for my stupidity."

"Yet shortly after you recovered, one by one your attackers were all found dead."

Harmon laughed, "Certainly you do not think I was wheeling all over town exacting justice. Don't you think I learned my lesson, don't you think my foolish desire to personally see justice done died when my legs did?"

Ironside's eyes burned into Harmon's. "My desire for justice did not die when my legs died, if anything it intensified."

"Very well I admit to that, and like you I sublimated my desire for personal involvement by aiding the police. It is not as satisfying but it is better than nothing."

“Did you?” Ironside asked, his eyes boring into Harmon’s. “According to the information by associated gathered on you, you have had at least four bodyguards over the years, all were like Mr. Sanchez, large strong men.”

“As you can see I am not a small man and so need a strong person to lift me into my bed or my bath. If you are implying anything about my sexuality I must say I resent that line of questioning.”

“Please do not try to deflect the line of questioning. We are both too experienced at this to play games. Of the other three men who worked for you two died violently and one disappeared.”

Harmon did not seem fazed by Ironside’s information. “Yes, one of the hazards of being associated with me is that the criminals that I help the police often target my associates, falsely believing that it will bring down less heat on their heads.”

“I see,” Ironside answered slowly. Harmon was either telling the truth or had thoroughly prepared himself in case he was one day questioned about this aspect of his life. “My associates did not do this because I did not think to have it done, but I wonder what would happen if we were to go over the cases you worked on with the police and examined those suspects who despite your efforts were never charged, never convicted or served light sentences. I wonder how many crippling injuries, disappearances, mysterious deaths or sudden arrests on other charges would appear among them.”

Harmon’s eyes flickered once and he shrugged, “I never really thought to examine the books for such a statistical probability. It is something I will have to look into. However criminals live in a violent, lawless world, there are myriad reasons why those people who got off or got off light would end up as you say. However what has this do L. B. Jefferies?”

Ironside leaned forward, “There was one slight possibility that I had not even thought to explore because on the face of it, it seemed absurd. However what if L. B. Jefferies was not the upright citizen that he seemed to be. What if he used his camera for illicit purposes? What if the accident that killed his wife, daughter and son in law was not an accident?”

“So if L. B. Jefferies was a blackmailer and a murderer to boot, who was never suspected or even charged with the crimes, you suspect that someone with a streak of vigilantism might have had him killed. Harmon said in a flat neutral voice.

“And stole the books as a red herring!” chimed in Sir Wilfred, his brown eyes dancing with merriment.

Harmon stroked his chin thoughtfully. “It is an interesting theory. How do you think it pans out?”

Ironside’s face flashed momentarily into a grimace. “Unfortunately it does not. Unless Jefferies was a singularly inept blackmailer and murderer who was unable to profit from his crimes. He had few assets; most went to maintain his apartment and to help pay for his grandson’s education. There is the possibility that he was killed rather than being paid by his prospective blackmail victim but I discount that. It seems unlikely that he would be suddenly taken to blackmailing, not as long as he had been a photographer and had been photographing public events. Had he been the type, he most likely would have been extorting people for years. Plus, he had is own innate sense of morality and justice that

motivated him to trap a murderer when he was immobilized. I cannot see a man like that being a blackmailer.”

“So I am innocent then?” Harmon asked with a slight smile.

Ironside’s eyes went cold and his face was set in a mask of disapproval. “Of Jefferies’ murder at least. Unfortunately New York is not in my jurisdiction and knowing the blue wall as I do, I doubt if the New York Police Department would believe my theories about any extracurricular activities you might have. However, I do intend to keep my eyes and ears open about your involvement with the police department from now on.”

Ironside thrust his hand out to Sir Wilfred “Sir Wilfred, it has been a distinct pleasure. I sincerely wish I had more time to browse through your shop.”

Ironside began wheeling himself out of Sir Wilfred’s bookshop, Just before he shut the door behind him, he heard Sir Wilfred say, “... old man, might be a jolly good time to retire and...”

The last ‘suspect’ lived in New Salem in lower New York state. Ironside had Mark Sanger rent a special van and drive down the next morning, billing everything to the expense account that McMillan had provided. McMillan was generous when carrying out his own investigations yet often begrudged other investigators their expenses.

It was late morning when the van pulled up to the Xavier School for Gifted Youngsters. Ironside noticed immediately that they had probably made the long drive for nothing.

“Damn and blast, why in the hell didn’t anyone know about this?” Mark Sanger reminded the Ironside that it was his idea to drive up there unannounced.

Ironside gave Sanger a baleful glare. He told him that they might as well look around. Maybe there was a caretaker or something that could tell them Xavier’s current whereabouts.

The gate to the school was padlocked; many of the windows were boarded up. The building had sustained a great deal of damage either from an explosion or fire. The once manicured lawns were a riot of weeds and growth. No one was around and from the look of it no one had been around for years.

Sanger drove Ironside into New Salem proper where they went into a diner for some lunch. While they were eating Ironside told the waitress he was looking for Dr. Charles Xavier. The poor girl nearly dropped her order book.

“Dr. Xavier is gone.”

“And good riddance to him and his freaks!” shouted one of the other patrons, a grizzled old timer with long stringy gray hair and several days worth of grey stubble. He was dressed in a duster, flannel shirt and jeans and well-worn boots. He seemed to be a permanent fixture at the diner.

“Now you hush Mr. Trask. Dr. Xavier was a good man, almost a saint.”

“He was a crippled crank who ran a loony bin and brought all sorts of trouble to this town.”

“What sorts of trouble?” Ironsides asked his interest piqued.

“Oh, all sorts of nuts with a mad on for him. Former patients of his, I guess whom he had screwed up or failed to cure.”

“I am afraid I don’t understand, I thought he was the headmaster of a prep school”.

Trask laughed spraying coffee on the counter and down his grizzled chin. He wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand. “You mean because of the school for gifted youngsters bit?” At Ironside’s nod, Trask said, “Well you know how they now call ‘tards special kids now? Same thing. Gifted youngsters was a nice way of saying mentally whacked out freaks. And I mean freaks, like the kind you used to be able to see at a circus for a quarter”

“He had this one kid there with a bone disease that made his shoulder blades stretch out from his back like a pair of little wings. His mother had convinced this dumb kid that he was an angel and the loony kid was always trying to fly. Had to be watched all the time ‘cause otherwise he would jump off of buildings. He was convinced that he had just had to find the right altitude to take off. There was also this big ugly sucker that looked like a monkey boy”. Trask barked a laugh, “A monkey boy with coke bottle glasses. Speaking of glasses. Hey Misty, you remember that kid with the red sunglasses?”

Misty nodded absently, patently ignoring Trask. Trask turned to Ironside. “He had this kid there who was legally blind, that is he could see some shapes and stuff like that. He had been this hotshot athlete or something and got hurt in an accident or something. Anyway losing his sight freaked him out and he would go into these destructive rages, tearing up anything in his path. He claimed that his eyes hurt and made him crazy with pain. So this quack doctor convinced this kid, probably by using shock therapy or hypnotism, that if he wore these special glasses the pain would go away. That worked pretty good.” Trask laughed, “But all you had to do however was snatch them glasses off the kids face and he would go berserk.”

Ironside eyes flickered at Trask. “I’ll bet it was pretty amusing no matter how times you did that, eh?”

“There was also that snow boy,” one of the other patrons said but quickly returned to his meal after Misty glared at him.

“Yeah he had some kind of gland thing that made him get sudden fevers so he had to be iced down. The school had a snow making machine to cool him off. Then there was the girl... she was probably the worst of any of them. She looked normal and was a real red headed beaut... but she was schizo. A pyro, who they think was the one that blew up the school.”

“Can anyone tell me where Xavier is now?”

Trask snorted, “Probably hell.”

Misty shot him a dirty look. “In Heaven, that man was a saint.”

“Are you telling me Xavier is dead?” Ironside thought perhaps this was not a wasted trip after all.

Both Trask and Misty looked at him with surprise. Trask started to speak but Misty waved him to silence.

“We thought you knew that. Dr. Xavier died a couple of year ago when one of his patients attacked him. He was a slightly retarded boy whose parents had kept him shut up in his basement. They had convinced him that he was a radioactive monster from the center of the Earth. He stayed in the basement of the School because he was more comfortable. He had that angoraphobia. Dr. Xavier tried to get him to go outside. One day the boy snapped and attacked Dr. Xavier. While Xavier and a couple of the other patients were fighting the boy off, the girl decided that the only way to save the school from the monster was to blow it up. She caused the school’s boiler to blow up. Xavier was buried in the rubble. “

“And so ends one of society’s great experiments!” Trask remarked sarcastically.

Ironside put down his coffee. “My coffee has a sour taste to it. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Mark Sanger did make any comment but took Ironside out of the diner as quickly as possible. Sanger was familiar enough with the Chief’s mood to know that Ironside was frustrated and angry; all the leads in the investigation were drying up. The long road trip to a truly dead lead was doubly frustrating. Listening to that jackass in the diner had not helped matters.

Ironside was silent for most of the trip back to New York. He initiated a conversation about baseball something that both he and Sanger had a mutual interest in. Sanger knew that even though the Chief was talking baseball his mind was churning over all the facts and evidence in the case, trying to see if he had missed anything. Sanger also mulled over the facts of the case in his mind.

“Stop the van!” Ironside shouted. Sanger slammed on the breaks, looking around to see if he had nearly hit someone or something. Ironside rolled down his window. “Longstreet! Mike Longstreet!” He bellowed. Sanger saw a man with a white German Shepard dog suddenly stop and turn around. Sanger was amazed that the man had had heard Ironside’s bellow above the New York street noise considering the fact that he was nearly a block away. The man and his dog unerringly walked straight to the van.

The man was a casually dressed, tall handsome blond man in his mid-thirties. Despite the gloom of dusk, he wore dark sunglasses. He stood before Ironside’s window and cocked his head slightly.

“It has been a while hasn’t it Bob. What brings you to the Big Apple?”

Mark Sanger would have been shocked had he not known that Longstreet was one of the very few people who called Chief Robert T. Ironside, Bob.

“Join us for dinner and I will tell you all about it. I could use a fresh perspective.”

“Your expense account?” Longstreet asked with a wide grin. “My client is on a tight budget.”

“My expense account it is.” Ironside answered with a small smile. “Do you want us drop you somewhere? “

“Actually I was on my way to get something to eat. So if you are hungry, we can go get something right now.”

Ironside agreed. Longstreet felt around on the side of the van until he found the doors latch. He opened the door. “Up Pax!” The German Shepard jumped inside the van. Longstreet felt his way inside and sat in one of the passenger seats.

“A little far from the Crescent City, aren’t you Mike?”

“Yes, my client thought a fresh face would help in his investigation. Coincidentally, my client practices law in your city.”

“So what brings you to New York then?”

“Well he just recently moved to San Francisco. This case I am working on is one of his cases still pending from New York. He is defending a man named Tommy Raymond who is accused of burning down his apartment building. The thing is that this apartment building was owned by a slumlord named Fisk. Fisk’s buildings had the nasty habit of catching fire when the city was verge of condemning them. I had previously investigated a couple of fires for one of the insurance companies with whom Fisk had taken out policies. The lawyer, Murdock had been impressed with my investigation and had hired me to investigate some of the other fires whom we believe to be the work of a professional arsonist named Lyons. We also had heard of each other because of our mutual condition.”

“Murdock,” Ironside murmured. “I have heard of him. He is a very successful defense attorney,” Ironside said, making defense attorney should like an expletive. “I really don’t see how you, as an ex-cop can work for someone who gets criminals back on the street.”

Longstreet smiled and said, “Things don’t always look like they see, Bob. Take it from me. Justice is blind after all.”

Ironside was about to retort, when he realized that Longstreet was kidding him about using sighted talk in front of him. “Ha Ha” he said and decided to let the matter drop, realizing that Longstreet might need to take any work he could get. He asked Ironside’s opinion about the case he was investigating.

After their dinner at a steakhouse, Longstreet had patiently listened to Ironside’s story of the Jefferies investigation.

After Ironside had finished Longstreet had sat quietly and pondered, while Ironside enjoyed a rare cigar. Ironside would have found Longstreet’s unwavering stare unnerving if he had not known that Longstreet was blind.

Longstreet absently patted his dog while he thought about what Ironside had told him. “I think that you are correct that book is the crux of the matter. However it may be that you are approaching it from the wrong angle.”

“How so?”

“Maybe it had nothing to do with what Jefferies knew or even what someone thought he knew. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the people who were going to be in the book but someone who was not.”

“I am a flaming idiot! Jealousy as a motive! Someone might have been angry that they were not included in the book and so killed Jefferies. Yes, it is a stupid reason, but people are often murdered for stupid reasons.”

Longstreet grinned, “Now all you have to do is compile a list of people in wheelchair who were not going to be in the book.”

Ironside groaned. “Merciful God, I wish we could get a break in his case.”

As if in answer to Ironside’s prayer, a break in the case did happen on the following day. While Mark Sanger was packing for their return to San Francisco, Ironside received a call from Ed Brown.

“Don’t get on the plane just yet Chief, we have had some good luck. They found the gun. It had been thrown in some bushes in Precita Park.. Some kid had gone down into the bushes to get a ball and found the gun. The ballistics were a match for the slugs taken out of Jefferies.”

“That is good news but why are you telling me to stay here.”

“The gun’s serial number was traced to a gun shop here in SF. It was bought by either a black youth or a Chicano youth, the gun owner was not certain. He also forgot to fill out the proper paper work.”

“Let me guess, the gun buyer paid him twice as much as the gun was worth to forget about that pesky paper work.”

“Three times as much actually. The gun was bought with a corporate credit card belonging to Stark International. The card was issue to Anthony Howard Stark.”

“Contact Stark International to see if the card was stolen.”

“You can’t believe that Stark is involved” Brown asked. Ironside was not certain but he thought Brown was smiling on the other end.

“Because he is a renowned scientist, businessman and philanthropist? I agree it is unlikely.”

“What if I was to tell you that Stark International has been going down the tubes fast and Tony Stark along with it? No one knows if his behavior is what is causing the company to fail or if its failure is causing his downfall. He has been behaving erratically, drinking heavily and alienating everyone around him.”

“Well, that makes it a bit more likely I guess.”

“Get this, Stark International never reported the card as lost and a couple of plane tickets to New York were purchased with it the day after the gun was purchased. Tony Stark was in San

Francisco the night Jefferies was shot. He was supposed to give a speech at Golden Gate University. He never showed because of illness. Get this, there have been rumors of late that Stark has been seen in a wheelchair.”

Ironside hung up the phone and stared at the receiver for a moment. Sighing he bit the bullet and called Stewart McMillan. He had to convince McMillan that he did not consider Stark a suspect but needed a discreet personal interview with Stark to clear up some questions.

McMillan reluctantly agreed to see if he could get Ironside an interview with the great man.

Mark Sanger rounded up some coffee for Ironside and himself while Ironside waited for McMillan to call back. Forty-five minutes after Ironside had called him Stewart McMillan called back sounding very exasperated. Stark had agreed to meet with Ironside so long as Ironside would bring him a couple bottles of Cutty Sark and promised to keep Stark International’s involvement in the situation out of news. Ironside had been willing to travel to Stark International’s Long Island headquarters but Stark invited him over to his penthouse apartment.

One of the things that Ironside wanted to know is why a billionaire like Stark needed someone to pick him up liquor.

After room service had delivered the liquor to Ironside’s room, Sanger and he departed for Stark’s apartment. The doorman looked disapprovingly at Ironside and Sanger when they told him that they had an appointment with Tony Stark. The doorman called inside to the lobby desk to confirm this. After several minutes the lobby called back and told the doorman to let them in.

The interior lobby was a spacious marbled expanse, on one side was a small pool and fountain on the other side were two brass-coated elevators. In the center was a large round desk of highly polished cherry wood where sat a stern looking woman of about forty years of age dressed in a yellow pants suit. Her look was also one of stern disapproval.

“Take the left elevator to level P, this will put you in Mr. Stark’s foyer.”

Ironside and Sanger exited the elevator into a small hallway covered with rich red shag carpet, velvet walls and crystal chandeliers. One the wall hung several paintings, all portraits. There was a large photograph of Anthony Howard Stark, which Ironside recognized as being the one most often used by newspapers and magazines when they ran stories about Stark and the one used in Stark Industries advertisements. In this photograph Stark was about twenty-five years old with tousled yet well groomed black hair and a Clark Gable moustache. Dressed in a black three-piece suit, he grinned at the camera as if the world were his oyster.

As Ironside and Sanger approached a double door, the doors swung inward.

Considering what Ed Brown had told him Ironside was expecting some differences in Stark. Ironside was however shocked at how much of change had taken place.

While it is true that the wheelchair that Stark sat in and the leather slippers and silk robe that he wore were among the best that money could buy they were also soiled, stained and torn. It looked as though Stark had rolled around in dirt and food; and then been attacked by hungry rats. Stark did not look any better, his once carefully barbered black hair was gray-shot as well as being long, stiff and

uncombed. His signature moustache was still there, however it was nearly invisible, lost amidst several days worth of iron gray stubble.

Stark sat next to a table cluttered with empty and partially empty containers of Chinese take-out, television dinners and fast food restaurant bags and wrappers. The table was next to a window and Stark stared out the window. In the distance, Ironside saw a factory complex, which he believed was Stark International's Queens facility.

The smell arising from the room was almost sickening; a combination of rotting food, Stark's body odor and the strong, almost intoxicating smell of liquor. Stark's face was bloated and his eyes yellowish and bloodshot. Stark was drunk and had been drunk for a long time.

This was a far cry from the dashing young man who had been known as America's playboy. A man as famous for his romantic affairs as for his inventive genius and business acumen.

His eyes lit up when he saw the bottles of Cutty Sark in Ironside's lap. He licked dry and chapped lips, and rasped, "Can I have the Sark?"

Ironside thought it ironic that this man who was so desperate for a drink that he trembled was once nicknamed the Iron Man.

"In a moment, after we conclude our business. It should not take long. In case Stewart McMillan failed to fill you in on the particulars. L.B. Jefferies, renowned photographer was shot in his apartment on 4, 1972. A few days later he succumbed to his wounds and died. According to our sources you were in San Francisco and supposed give a speech the night that Jefferies was killed, however you failed to show due to illness."

Tony Stark gave a dry chuckle. "I must be really drunk or you must be insane. Do you see what I am sitting in?" Stark waved hands at the chair. "How could I possibly have killed Jefferies?"

"We have reason to believe that Jefferies was indeed shot by person in a wheelchair. Did you know Jefferies?"

"You must know that I did, otherwise you would not be here."

"What was the nature of your relationship?"

"As you know Jefferies was the photographer that did the photo spread in Life Magazine when we opened the Long Island plant. He was also the one who shot the photograph of me that everyone uses."

At Ironside's unfathomable gaze Stark blinked blearily. "You saw it out in hall." Stark's face suddenly got hard. This is about his wife isn't it? That was years ago, it was all water under the bridge as far as I was concerned."

"What about his wife. Are you talking about her death?"

Stark looked shocked. "No, was she killed as well?"

“She died a couple of years ago in the same car accident that put Jefferies in a wheelchair.”

“Then no, it was... stupid. Jefferies punched me in the face and I belted him in the gut back in 59. I guess. He found out I had...been with his wife.” At Ironside’s eyes flickering, Stark quickly added. “This was before they had even met. Lisa was a socialite, a debutante. Well, I dated her for a while. I... may have promised her to marry her, after I changed my mind, she was angry because I had “ruined” her. Hell, Sam Wainwright told me he had already nailed her.” Stark said the last part almost defensively, continuing in a defensive vein he said jabbing his finger at Ironside “If you think that I killed Jefferies because he socked me eleven years that is a little thin don’t you think.”

“So do you have an alibi for that night?”

“No, Stark admitted as he took a pull at his glass and made a face. “God I cannot believe I paid a hundred bucks for this rotgut. No, I admit that I drank more than I should have and missed the lecture. As matter I blacked out and cannot remember anything that night. However just because I knew Jefferies and once had a falling out with him, does not mean that I killed him in a drunken rage.”

“As I said we believe that the person who shot Jefferies was in a wheelchair. We also believe that this person had a more immediate motivation to kill him. Jefferies was working on a book profiling men in wheelchairs who had made a great contribution to society, called Wheels of Progress. We believe that this book was the motive for killing Jefferies. Either Jefferies had discovered some dark secret about one of the men he was profiling or else this person was upset because he had been left out of the book.”

“Those are pretty stupid reasons if you ask me. So what has this to do with me?”

“Well, your condition is not generally known. In fact I must admit I did not know you were confined to a wheelchair until today. Perhaps Jefferies found out about it and want to profile you in the book.”

“First of all I am not confined to the wheelchair.” Stark stood up and took a few wavering steps away from the wheelchair. Ironside noticed that he became flushed and nearly fell over. Stark quickly plopped back down in the wheelchair. “While it is not a national secret, I do try to keep it out of the news because Stark International is already in the toilet.”

Once again Stark took Ironside’s expressionless face as an inquiring one.

“Its this damned war, Stark International has become the target for protestors and terrorists like the Black Panthers, Weather Underground and the so called Brotherhood against Evil Munitions. They have caused millions in property damage and lost production. The commies are going to kill me and my business!”

Ironside suddenly remembered how Stark had acquired the Iron Man sobriquet. Even as a youth Stark had been a firebrand anti-communist. While opening up a Stark International factory in West Berlin he had made a speech praising the all the efforts to wipe out communism, praising the Korean War and the Viet Nam conflict.

Ironside could see Stark standing before a crowd, on a sunny day in 1962 in Berlin, near the wall.

“Mark my words the so-called Iron Curtain and its manifest symbol, the Berlin Wall will crumble with in a generation. All my life I have been around metal works, and I know that when something is poorly forged, it will eventually break. Although it may look solid, sound and perfectly fashioned, it is intrinsically flawed and that flaw will make it crack. Metal must be tested to discover the flaws. This Iron Curtain must be tested. We must be like the forge’s hammer and seek out the flaws in the Iron Curtain. The Iron Curtain will crack and splinter and be rent asunder when men of iron will, iron conviction and iron morals continue to struggle against the flawed communist empire”

“How exactly are the communists going to kill you?” Ironside asked.

Stark blinked in confusion.

“You said that the communists were going to kill you and your business.”

Stark drained his glass and held it out to Ironside. When Ironside made no move to pour Stark a glass, Stark glared at him, when that failed to work his mouth quirked on one side. “Very well it does not really much anyway. Back in early ‘62, I was testing a new landmine for the United States army. It went off prematurely and shrapnel entered my chest, lodging in and near my heart. It has gradually been working its way into my heart and now it is destroying my heart. I have an extremely rare blood type so an operation is out of the question. Sometimes not even wealth can buy your health.”

Ironside understood now that some of the bloat came from his heart condition rather than just the drinking.

“So that is why you had us bring you the whisky. Your doctor had informed the staff here that giving you liquor was ill advised in your condition. So you have been relying on delivery boys to deliver you food and with an abundant tip, also bring you a bottle or two of liquor.”

“You are a detective after all,” Stark said with a sarcastic laugh. His laugh turned into a racking cough that made him winded and flush. His face paled shortly after that and he clutched at his chest.

Stark’s coughing fit reminded Ironside of L. B. Jefferies last moments. He shook his head in self-recrimination. Stark’s charismatic personality had momentarily derailed his interrogation.

“Putting aside the idea that you may have shot Jefferies because you did not want your condition known, let’s look at it from the other angle. Perhaps you were upset that he purposely excluded you from the book.”

Stark up ended his glass over his mouth; letting the last few drops of whisky fall into his mouth. While doing so he gazed at Ironside with an expression of amused disbelief.

“Now if I wanted to keep my condition a secret why would I want to be in the book and if Jefferies knew about my condition why would he exclude me?”

“You could have wanted to be in the book because you know that the confinement might be for the rest of your life. You may have wanted this to be added to your legacy of greatness, that even in your final days you were still an influential man. Or to be more cynical you may have known that it is inevitable that your condition will become known and you may have wanted to offset this with the

positive publicity that the book would have generated. As to why Jefferies would have rejected you, I can think of several reasons. You achieved everything prior to being confined to a wheelchair, since your confinement is not mandatory it may have not fit Jefferies criteria and finally you gave me another reason, the conflict between Jefferies and yourself over his wife.”

“Still pretty thin motive, isn’t it”

“Motives don’t have to be compelling, many murders- most murders are committed over the smallest of slights, the most asinine of reasons. Of course, if all I had were a *possible* motive I would not even be talking to you right now. There is of course the other, more damning evidence.”

Stark looked both amused and shocked at the same time. Leaning back in his chair, he made a basket of his hands and twiddled his thumbs. In as nonchalant manner as possible, he asked, “Such as?”

“The murder weapon. L. B. Jefferies was shot with a thirty-eight caliber police special purchased in San Francisco the day before he was shot. The gun was purchased with a corporate credit card assigned to Stark International. The cardholder’s name is Anthony Howard Stark.”

“You realize that it will be a simple matter to track to purchases afterwards to see when it was stolen and pinpoint who possibly stole it.”

“The purchases made after the gun purchase were two plane tickets from San Francisco to New York, a rented limo from the LaGuardia airport and a purchase of four bottles of Cutty Sark from Sal’s Liquor Emporium. Normally I would have thought that you would fly in one of your company jets and take your own limo, yet a bit of research turned up the fact that your company jets, your limos and much of the assets of Stark International are tied up in a financial morass. So you did in fact fly on a commercial jet, you did rent a limo from LaGuardia airport and you did stop at Sal’s Liquor Emporium did you not?”

Stark’s face had flushed when Ironside had told him about the plane tickets; it had paled when he heard about the limo and the liquor store.

“That conniving witch!” Stark spat. His bloodshot eyes were filled with pain and sadness. “There is indeed nothing worse than a woman scorned Chief Ironside. She set me up.”
“Who?”

“My personal assistant, Pepper Potts.”

“I supposed she was also one of the women to whom you also promised marriage that never materialized.” Ironside remarked dryly.

“Well, yes, I told her that when the time was right we would marry but of course made certain that it was never the right time. She even had a fling with my ex-chauffeur thinking to make me jealous. She was angry when I was relieved. I did not want to think about it before, but it was shortly after I told her about my condition that everything began to go wrong with the business. Pepper must have been working with someone to destroy me completely before I died. I trusted her because she was the only one who cared enough to help me with ...my medicine.”

“You mean to help you get the liquor that is speeding your way to the grave, don’t you?” Ironside said fixing Stark with pointed stare. “Speaking of which. A bargain is a bargain. Here’s your poison.” Ironside said sitting the two bottles of Cutty Sark on the table.”

Stark tore the seal and with a shaky hand, poured himself a full tumbler, nearly spilling it all over the table.

Stark took a great swallow. “I don’t know how she did it. Maybe she made me shoot Jefferies when I was passed out or at least place me at the scene of the crime.”

“That is a possibility we will have to explore. You wouldn’t happen to know the present whereabouts of Miss Potts, would you?”

Stark shook his head slowly. “No, we had a big fight the night after we returned from New York. She walked out and I haven’t heard from her since. In retrospect, I think she picked the fight so that she had a valid excuse for leaving. I don’t know where she went; probably not back to her ex-husband. Maybe she went back home.” Stark’s face went rigid. “Dammit! That is probably it. I hired her away from Wainwright. She may have gone back to him and is working with that SOB to bring me down!”

“Is this the Sam Wainwright you mentioned earlier? Would that be the plastics mogul?”

“Plastics, synthetics. Yes, that is the no-good so and so.”

“Aren’t they also based in New York?”

“Yes, at Pepper’s home town, Wainwright Hills. Look for her there. It’s near Elmira and Seneca Falls.”

“We shall. Of course you must realize that you are still a suspect. At the moment we just have your word against hers. The physical evidence against you is still compelling.”

Stark looked momentarily stunned as if he had thought that he had been cleared. He raise his glass sarcastically “Well, I guess I will drink to your success.”

Ironside nodded for Mark Sanger to wheel him out of Stark’s presence. As they were leaving Ironside turned back, “Although you probably won’t listen since you seem eager to drink yourself to death, but even if she is convicted of murdering Jefferies, she still wins, because you have already destroyed yourself.”

Stark shrugged and put the glass to his mouth.

As Ironside was exiting, Stark called out, “Oh, by the way, although Pepper uses the name Potts now, she was born Potter. She might be going by that.”

Once they were inside the elevator Mark Sanger asked, “You think he was made to shoot Jefferies while in a drunken stupor, Chief?” Sanger asked once they were on the elevator.

Ironside looked at the ceiling of the elevator and said nothing. Sanger believed that Ironside was ignoring him as he sometimes did when deep in thought.

Once they were outside of the apartment building, Ironside shook his head. “No, Mark I do not think that Stark was made to shoot Jefferies. Did you notice how badly his hands shook? Part of that may be from his alcohol addiction but some of it is from his health condition. The shots to Jefferies were well grouped in his chest, had it been Stark shooting the bullets would have been all over the place.”

“Maybe his hands steady when he drinks, like Kit Sheleen,”

“You watch too much flaming television!” Ironside snarled as he leaned back and scowled and Mark Sanger. Sanger grinned after Ironside’s gaze turned aside.

Upon returning to their hotel room, Ironside made arrangements to catch a chartered flight from LaGuardia Airport to Finger Lakes Regional Airport. He also booked a room at the Wainwright Hills Holiday Inn. They finally checked out of their hotel room and drove to LaGuardia where their chartered plane was on standby.

The flight was mercifully short if bumpier than Ironside would have liked. Ironside was not looking forward to landing because of the irritation he always felt when riding in a vehicle not specifically designed for wheelchairs. There were no such cars available near Wainwright Hills. Mark Sanger had to lift and position Chief Ironside into the passenger seat of the rented Buick Riviera.

Ironside was still silently and no so silently fuming as they drove up the Wainwright Hills. He had half expected Wainwright Hills to be a small town but instead it was a small city, a factory city. Ironside could see the entirety of the city as they drove down from the highway that led from Mount Bedford into the city proper. One whole central section of the city and a few other sections were comprised of large factory complexes surrounded by small businesses and residences. Ironside could almost see how the first factory had built satellite installations that quickly become the focal points for new business and residential construction until each of the satellite installations had become surrounded by a new neighborhood. Most of the construction seemed fairly new, less than thirty years old at any rate, from what he could guess from the style and construction material.

Ironside had Sanger driver to the Holiday Inn and check them in. Ironside planned to eat dinner and get a feel for the town before trying to see if Virginia Potter was in Wainwright Hills. He was afraid that if she was indeed guilty that if she found out someone was looking for her, she might flee.

Although there were several fast-food places in Wainwright Hills there only seemed to be a few actual restaurants. Ironside chose Martini’s Ristorante over Nick’s Bar and Grill.

As was often the case when Ironside was out in public most people in the restaurant surreptitiously looked at Ironside studiously avoiding making eye contact with him, as if his condition were contagious. Ironside was going to use an old trick of making someone run into or trip over his wheelchair to start a conversation when he noticed the old man come into restaurant. He was a short spry man in dressed in a black suit and tie. Ironside judged his age to be seventy or so. The hostess immediately seated the elderly man and a waitress shot over to his booth. This booth was at the back of the restaurant where the man would be undisturbed but apparently so he could watch the restaurant.

At first Ironside thought that this might be Wainwright Fall's version of a Mafia Don but he noticed that he was alone and that none of the people seemed to fear him. However he was served a cup of espresso and a plate of linguini bolognese almost immediately. As he ate his meal, Ironside watched the elderly man. When the man had finished his meal, the chef came out to pick up the old man's plate. The Chef and the old man chatted for a while, laughing and joking quietly. The Chef kissed the old man on his cheek and went back into the kitchen.

The old man sat watching the restaurant and sipping espresso. When he saw Ironside looking at him he smiled and nodded.

Ironside had Mark Sanger ask Mr. Martini if he would join Ironside for a glass or two of Chianti.

The elderly man looked surprised at the offer but followed Sanger to Ironside's table and in a thick Italian accent asked Ironside if they were acquainted.

Ironside answered no, but he wanted to meet the man who had created such a wonderful place to eat.

Pleased, Mr. Martini sat down, waving a hostess over. He ordered a bottle of Chianti from her.

"How did you know this was my restaurant?"

"I saw you looking at how the meals were served, at how diners reacted to their meals and to their service. I have seen that expression a man's face many times before, it is the face of a proud parent. The Chef is your son?"

"Grandson," Martini said with a smile. His eyes smile faltered a bit and his eyes clouded when he said, "My son was too smart to become a restaurateur. No, he had to make lots of money and be the big shot. Poppa, I can make more six months working for Wainwright than I can in the restaurant in six years, he tells me. So he works in the factory and becomes a executive for Wainwright. Always with the rushing, always with the work." Martini shook his head and his eyes teared up. "Dead at age thirty-six. Heart problems, from the rushing his Doctor tell me"

Martin smiled sadly "It was long ago, ten year now."

"From the date of most of the construction around here, I would guess that the factories are responsible for most of the town's growth."

"Si, after the war, the plastics became a big thing and factory grew and the town grew until not much is left of the old one. Everyone wants to work at the big factory. Well almost everyone. My grandson and his sisters all want to work in Granpa's restaurant; it is not the shame for them. They don't have the big ideas to be big shots like that Sam Wainwright. Mr. Big"

"You know Wainwright?"

"I know him." Martini said flatly. "When I buy my first house there is a big party. Mr. Wainwright drives up in his big fancy car and his fancy women and blows his horn while my friend Mr. George Bailey is making a speech and giving me a bottle of wine. Mr. Sam Wainwright was not

there to see Martini however and so did not say congratulations or even hello to me. All the times he come in this restaurant, he jokes and laughs with his friends making the big noise and scaring away customers, his tips do not make up for lost business. All the time with the hee haw, like the jackass.”

Ironside sipped his wine and smiled slightly as he said, “I can see how you would not want to turn away his business since he seems to own most of the city.”

“Yes, he likes to put his name on everything.” Smiling sourly, even the town. “I do not know what is worse Pottersville or Wainwright Hills.”

Ironside’s felt an electric tingle in his back. “Excuse me, did you say Pottersville?”

"Si, from the old man Potter. I heard he tried to own the town and change its name and may have done it if he had not gone to the hoosagow.”

Martini shook his head sadly. “My good friend, Mr. Bailey he fought every day against that Mr. Potter, keeping the town out of that no good mean man hand’s only to have his friend take away his town. When Mr. Potter went to jail, Sam Wainwright bought up all of Potter’s businesses. Poor Mr. Bailey, he left town the day this town became Wainwright Hills.”

“Why did Potter go to jail?”

Martini looked guarded and then smiled, softly. “It’s been too long. I do not remember. Ask over at the Bedford Falls Sentinel. Mr. Bailey’s daughter she runs it now. Maybe she talk to you, it is down the street a few blocks.”

“Why Bedford Falls?”

“Scusi,”

“Why the paper named the Bedford Falls Sentinel?”

“Ah, I see. Before Sam Wainwright put his name on it, this town used to be called Bedford Falls. I liked it a lot more then. Now it is too big and there are too many people.” Martini stood up “Scusi me, Mr. Ironside, I am old and the wine has made me tired.”

Ironside thank Martini for his company. He asked Mark to push him back to the Holiday Inn, having decided to pay a visit to the Bedford Falls Sentinel in the morning.

Ironside discovered that the Bedford Falls Sentinel was a small two-story brick building with an ornate iron façade. The Bedford Falls Sentinel banner was part of the ironmongery. Mark Sanger went inside first and checked out the buildings interior. Inside the front door was a small lobby area consisted of upholstered chairs and old style glass and chrome stanchion ashtrays on a green carpet. The lobby ended at a paneled wooden wall with one window of pebbled glass that said in black paint advertisements and announcements. There was a small counter below this window. On the counter was a small bell. Next to this was a small ivory placard that read “ring me for service”. A few feet away from the glass window was a pebbled glass door that said Employees Only.

Ironside knocked on the wooden doorframe. He heard a woman’s voice shout, “Come in!”

Ironside opened the door and Mark Sanger pushed him inside. Beyond the door was large office filled with six or seven wooden desks and chairs. All but three of the desks were empty and all were unoccupied save for one. Sitting at the desk nearest the window was a young blonde woman in her late twenties typing on a Remington typewriter from the thirties or forties and talking on the phone at the same time. Seeing Ironside she paused visibly but motioned him closer.

Mark Sanger pushed Robert Ironside next to the woman desk. Ironside felt a moment of unease when he saw that the woman wore a tie-dye shirt and old weathered jeans. He hoped he would not have to listen to a bunch of anti-capitalism, anti-war or anti-business rhetoric while asking her about the town.

He noticed something that made him pause; the woman had a picture of L. B. Jefferies on her desk.

The woman smiled at Ironside while continuing to listen to the phone and type. She hung up the phone.

“Sorry about that I was getting the details of a local news event, a surprise inspection of Wainwright Plastics by health inspectors who found no evidence of toxicity in the waste pouring out of the Wainwright factories. The fish just died on their own I guess.” The woman said to Ironside with barely controlled anger. Calmly herself she extended her hand towards him. “I apologize; again I should be more objective. What can I do for you Chief Ironside?”

Noting Ironside’s stiffened face, the woman laughed. “I went to college in San Francisco in the mid-sixties, I recognized you as soon as you came through the door. Mr. Martini told me that a man in a wheelchair might becoming to see me but I had no idea that it would be you. I am probably the only person in Bedford Falls that knows who you are. My name is Susan Bailey; I am the owner, editor and most of the staff of the Bedford Falls Sentinel.

Ironside noted that the young woman apparently refused to call the town by its current appellation.

“I am working on a missing persons case that has lead us here. Mr. Martini seems to think you are a good source of local information.”

“Who are you looking for?”

“Before we start discussing the specifics of the case, I have to tell you that for now everything must be off the record, at least until the person is found.”

Susan Bailey’s blue eyes bore into his. “Sounds like this missing person does not want to be found?”

“I also have some questions that are only tangential to the case but have piqued my interest. In my conversation with Mr. Martini last night he mentioned that a man named Potter had once tried to own this town but had gone to jail. After Potter had gone to jail Sam Wainwright had taken over for Potter. Was there any relationship between Potter and Wainwright?”

Susan Bailey shook her head, “No, Potter did not have any relatives to speak around here nor did he have any friendships. He was known as the meanest man in Bedford Falls and from what I know that was a pretty accurate assessment.”

Susan Bailey stood up and went over to a file cabinet against the wall. She pulled out a file and returned to her desk.

“Henry J. Potter 1878 to 1960. Born Bedford Falls, New York also died here. Attended Harvard University for three years but failed to graduate. Incidentally, Henry F. Potter was not his birth name; that was Peter Potter Jr. His father was a traveling dentist, nicknamed Painless Potter. He apparently acquired that nickname because he was one of the first dentists to use some form of anesthetic in their practice. Potter senior was also a gunfighter of some repute and it was supposedly his deadly accuracy that gave his victims a painless death. There are rumors that he used his own pain reliever for recreational purposes. Potter senior was shot to death in Death Valley in 1897, his reputation as a gunfighter may have been overstated or he may have been under the influence of his pain reliever. The shooter was a man named McTeague, a former dentist whom Potter had taught the trade. McTeague had fallen on hard times and blamed Potter for his misfortunes.

“Potter senior had always told his son that he had a gold mine. Once his father was dead, Potter junior went out west to claim it. As it turns out there really was a gold mine, although a very small one. With a newly acquired fortune and a wife in tow, Peter Potter Junior returned to Bedford Falls. He wisely believed that a small town was a better place to start his own empire than in a large city. His wife, Torchy, reminded several people of Potter’s mother which may have been one of the reasons he married her. Torchy did not have many redeeming qualities according to gossip, she had been a dancehall girl and possibly a rustler or highwayman. Among the businesses that the Potters opened was a nightclub that Torchy Potter managed. It was not long before there was trouble. Potter’s eyes were turned by one of the club hostesses. Torchy was not amused; she shot Peter Potter in the back and left town with most of their cash.

“Peter Potter was paralyzed from the waist down and never the same again. While he had always been vain and patronizing, he had also been personable. After the “accident” that was no longer the case, he became cruel, vindictive and petty. Since Junior had been an endearment used by his wife he forbade anyone to ever use it again, going so far as to change his name so that he would no longer be a junior. Borrowing against his properties he bought land and tried to invest in the new tool and machinery works but the owners would not take him on as a partner. Potter instead put up tenements for the factory workers and became Bedford Falls resident slumlord. He parlayed his wealth from the rents into other ventures. In the twenties during prohibition, he was Bedford Falls' resident bootlegger and had several blind pig establishments. He owned pool halls, dance halls, taverns, diners and a burlesque theatre. Always on the look out for an opportunity he would leverage a profitable business away from the owner by hook or by crook. For example when the tool and machinery works became overextended, Potter lent them money and when he had control of the factory, promptly closed it, putting half the town out of work.

“My grandfather was one of the few men in this town who directly opposed Henry Potter. He and his brother used their inheritance to found the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan as a means of offering people an alternative to living in one of Potter’s tenement houses. Potter hated my grandfather, my great-uncle and most especially my father. Potter had managed to gain a seat on the Board of Directors of the Building and Loan. When my grandfather died suddenly Potter wanted to shutter the place because that was all that stood in opposition to him gaining control of the town. My

father reluctantly took his father's place to keep the Bailey Brother's Building and Loan open and keep Bedford Falls out of Potter's grasp.

"During the Depression, Potter used the financial panics to buy the bank, the taxi company, and several other businesses for next to nothing. Although the Building and Loan nearly went under it stood firm.

"Then in December 1945, Henry Potter made his most blatant move against my father, and one that ultimately backfired. My uncle Harry was a war hero and was awarded a medal by President Truman. My great uncle Billy was in the bank depositing the receipts for the day. He saw Potter in the bank and boasted about my Uncle Harry showing him the newspaper with the story about my Uncle. Uncle Billy threw the paper into Potter's lap.

"When Billy went to make the deposit he could not find the money. My Uncle Billy was a good soul but frankly he was a scatterbrain and he became worse as he became older. He could not remember what he had done with the money.

"To make a long story short, Billy had wrapped the deposit in the newspaper and so when he had thrown the newspaper in Potter's lap, he had also thrown the money into Potter's lap. Potter kept the money. My father looked high and low for the money but could not find it. He even went to ask Potter for a small loan but Potter laughed in his face and called the police.

"When they heard about my father's problem, his friends, including the Sam Wainwright ponied up to pay off the missing money.

"That would have been the end of the story but after drinking too much New Year's cheer Billy suddenly remembered where he had misplaced the money and who was the last person to have talked to when he had it. Perhaps if Potter had not really cheated off the town by trying to have my father thrown in jail, things might have been different. My father was also in no mood to be forgiving and he had friends on the police force. A search warrant was issued and the missing money was found in Potter's safe.

"Since Potter owned the bank and was a board member of the Building and Loan, he was arraigned on various charges of embezzlement and diversion of funds. The district attorney argued that even if Billy Bailey had accidentally put the money in Potter's lap, Potter was well aware of that Billy was making a deposit and as an officer of the bank should have made certain that the money was correctly deposited. As a member of the Board of the Building and Loan, Potter had received monies he knew were part of the assets of that institution and had taken those monies for his own gain.

"Normally a jury might have felt some sympathy for an old man in a wheelchair but knowing Potter as they did, they felt none. He was tried, convicted and sent to jail where everyone expected him to die.

"Despite being a rotten person, Henry Potter was also vital to the economic well being of Bedford Falls. Once he went into jail his various businesses were closed and this had a serious negative economic impact on the town. My father once again called on his friend, Sam Wainwright and convinced him that this would be a good investment. He expected Sam to be an absentee power broker for the various businesses; this did not turn out as expected.

“My father railed to realize that beneath his hail good fellow exterior Sam Wainwright harbored a great deal of resentment against my father. No matter how rich he had become, everyone thought of Sam as something of a joke whereas everyone respected my father. Sam also resented my father because it had been my father’s idea to make plastics out of soybeans; this idea formed the basis of the Wainwright Plastics empire. It had also and been my father’s idea to refurbish the local old machinery and tool works into a plastic factory rather than build a new factory near Rochester. The source of the greatest resentment that Sam Wainwright had for my father was my mother. My mother had dated Sam Wainwright when they were in college but she always been in love with my father. Sam Wainwright may have pretended not to care, but he cared very deeply and was devastated that my mother had preferred my father to him.

“Once Sam Wainwright had the opportunity however he set out to make himself the most popular man in Bedford Falls and possibly to try and win my mother back... although that was never going to happen. Wainwright soon controlled even more of Bedford Falls than Potter ever had, mainly because he had a more gregarious and generous personality, it never seemed like his idea to name things after him.

“When my father began to realize what was happening, he fought against Sam Wainwright tooth and nail. However it was one thing to get the town motivated against a cantankerous old coot it was quite another to get people to question the motives of a generous, happy go lucky man. People began to question my father’ sanity, bringing up Clarence the Angel.

“Clarence the Angel?” Ironside asked, wondering if he had heard correctly.

“That Christmas night when my father thought all was lost, after Potter had called the police on him he had gone to Martinis and drank enough to steel himself for what he thought he had to do to save the family from scandal. He was going to jump in the river and drown. He fell into the river and was pulled out by an old man. While shaking off the effects of the near freezing and the copious amounts of booze, my father had a vision of what the world would have been like without him. He saw Bedford Falls as Pottersville, a place filled with sin and corruption. When told this story to us children, he told us he thought the old man who had rescued him was an angel. Of course we repeated this story to our friends and the story grew. So whenever my father would talk against Sam Wainwright somebody would always bring up Clarence the Angel, and make knowing asides about my father.”

Privately Ironside thought that Bailey believed, despite all evidence to the contrary, that this Clarence truly was an angel. He knew of several people who had hallucinations while under extreme stress or emotional trauma and were convinced that these hallucinations were real. His cousin Stephen Martin had been an unfortunate victim of this syndrome. Caught in the great Tokyo Earthquake and Tsunami of 1954, Martin had become convinced that a giant lizard had caused all of the damage. His insistence on investigating the giant lizard story had ruined Stephen’s career as a journalist.

“On the day that Sam Wainwright succeeded in making the town his personal fiefdom, my father left never to return. I came back a couple of years ago to take up the quixotic fight against Sam Wainwright and hope to bring back Bedford Falls. Unlike my father I use journalism as my weapon of choice.”

Ironside thought that might explain the picture of L. B. Jefferies. Pointing to the photo, he said, “Is that why you have his photo, because his work inspired you?”

Susan Bailey nodded, “Yes, that is why I do what I do.” There was a sudden warmth and softness in her eyes that made Ironside feel uncomfortable. He wondered if it were possible that Jefferies and this young woman had some form of relationship.

“I am not certain if you heard or not but, he passed away.”

Susan Bailey looked puzzled. “Yes, I know, he died two years ago.”

It was Ironside’s turn to be confused, “No, he died last week. I am certain because I was in his room when he died.”

“Just who do you think that is?” Her eyes became hooded and she looked at him as if he were a lunatic.

“L.B. Jefferies, the photojournalist”

Susan Bailey laughed softly, shaking her head. “No, that is a picture of my father, George Bailey. I know who you are talking about however because Jefferies came here once in late 1962, to do a photo spread on Wainwright Industries. I was not here at the time but I heard all about it. Lots of people thought he was my father returning. Jefferies was my father’s cousin, his father’s sister’s son. Susan Bailey smiled, Jefferies used to tell all his society friends that his name was Lord Byron Jefferies but really it was Lincoln Bailey Jefferies.”

“Do you know of any connection between Stark International and Wainwright Industries or any connection of Potter to either of these two companies?”

“Two of the town’s factories are joint ventures between Stark International and Wainwright Industries and both factories once had Old man Potter on the board of directors of both for a short time. Rumor has it that he was instrumental in brokering the deal between Stark and Wainwright. Some say it was also Potter that caused the feud that later rose up between the two men.”

“How long was he in jail?”

“Only five years but considering his health and age, everyone expected that he would die in prison, but he was too mean to die. After five years he turned up in Bedford Falls, like the proverbial bad penny. Most of his fortune had been eaten up by the closing of his various businesses and by some rather hefty fines levied against him when his various irregular business practices were brought to light. However he mortgaged against his one remaining business, a couple of pool halls and bought property outside of Bedford Falls, realizing that the way the town had been laid out that when Wainwright Industries needed to expand it would have to do so outside of the town. After three years he sold his properties to Wainwright industries and managed to wangle a part interest in the outlying facilities. He probably intended to parlay that into another fortune but it never manifested.”

“The name Pepper Potts has popped up in the course of the investigation. Do you know anything about her?”

Susan Bailey leaned back in her chair and regarded Ironside with a thoughtful look, her lips pursed in a half smile. She looked up at the ceiling and sighed as if struggling with whether to divulge the information to Ironside or not.

“Pepper Potts or as her birth certificate names her, Virginia Potter was the unfortunate victim of one of Bedford Fall’s most notorious scandals. It was THE SCANDAL for years. Virginia’s mother was Violet Bick. Violet was a party girl, you know the type, a pretty young thing who is not quite a prostitute but is not above taking gifts from the men who share her bed. In the winter of 1945, Violet’s long time party girl lifestyle had serious consequences. She found herself in a family way. Failing to get any sort of money from the father of the child to be, Violet visited my father, who was a long time friend and former schoolmate. She told him that she needed to money to start somewhere else. He gladly lent it to her. This was only hours before Uncle Billy lost the Building and Loan funds. When my father visited Mr. Potter to ask for a loan to cover the missing funds, Potter knew about my father’s discussion with Violet and his lending of money to her. My father would wonder later on, how Potter knew about his conversation with Violet.”

“As it turns out Henry F. Potter was the father of Violet Bick’s child. How it happened is anybody’s guess. Most believe that Violet either just did not think beyond her next good time or else thought she could get a sugar daddy to set her up for life. She was not getting any younger. Far from being a sugar daddy, Potter threatened to have Violet arrested for prostitution and other crimes if she so much as opened her mouth about seeing him. He held this threat over her head and extorted sexual favors from her until she became pregnant. He wanted her to get an abortion but refused to pay for it.

“When Violet saw how the townspeople had rallied to my father when he was in trouble, she decided not to have an abortion, she also decided to remain in town, giving back my father the money he had loaned her. Henry F. Potter might have made trouble for Violet had he not had legal troubles of his own.

Violet was wrong about the townspeople rallying to her defense however, like many an unwed mother in the 1940’s she became the object of gossip and derision. People avoided her as if she were one an untouchable. With a child to raise, Violet’s party time ended and she had to find steady, gainful employment. My father arranged for her to get a job at Wainwright Plastics on the assembly line. Publicly she gave Virginia the last name of Potts rather than her own name or Potters name.” Susan Bailey gave a small laugh and said, “I must say she was singularly unimaginative.

“Perhaps she wanted to avoid the scandalous taint of the Potter name but pick something close enough to it so that she could later make claims against Potter’s estate.” Ironside interjected.

Susan laughed louder, “You did not know Violet, she never planned that far ahead. While he was in prison, Henry F. Potter evidently thought a lot about his legacy and the fact that he would have no heirs. When he left prison and returned to Bedford Falls, he made Violet Bick an offer, he would adopt and raise Virginia as his own daughter, Violet would then be free to once again pursue her life of sin. When Violet refused, Potter began a legal campaign to take her child away from her, citing her as an unfit mother. Despite using character assassination, bribery and terror tactics, it seemed all but certain that the court was going to rule in favor of Violet Bick, due to my father’s support of her. Violet died of a sudden brain embolism before the verdict came in and Henry F. Potter acquired the legal custody of Virginia Potts thereafter known as Virginia Potter.”

“From what I understand, and mind you this is all hearsay so take it all with a grain of salt. Potter tried to mold Virginia into a slick, manipulative businessperson like himself. Unfortunately for his plans, she took more after her mother and less of him, although she was not stupid; her looks far outshone her brains. Having failed to mold her in his image, he used her to try and rebuild his fortune.

“Among his many flaws, Sam Wainwright has a weakness for beautiful women. Potter used this to weakness by having Virginia vamp Wainwright. Wainwright was shocked to discover that not only was Virginia under age but she was the daughter of Henry F. Potter, a man who despite his imprisonment still wielded some influence, enough influence to keep Wainwright from quashing this story should it come out. Wainwright was extorted into giving Potter access to his company, both professionally and personally. Despite her tender age of fourteen, Virginia Potter became Wainwright’s personal assistant. Wainwright truly was taken with the girl and Potter began influencing him through Virginia, the sweet nothings whispered in Sam Wainwright’s ears, encouraging him to destroy Bedford Falls may have come out of Virginia’s oh so pouty lips but originated from the withered, dried up husk of misanthropy known as Henry F. Potter.

“It was through Virginia’s influence that Wainwright and Tony Stark became limited business partners. Henry Potter arranged for the meeting between Wainwright and Stark, and Virginia charmed Tony Stark. Although Potter did not confide anyone, from talking to various associates and employees of Wainwright, Stark and Potter, I was able to piece things together, although I have no hard evidence, hence the story remains unpublished. Potter arranged the limited partnership and then began to manipulate things, via Virginia’s access to both Stark and Wainwright so that it appeared that both Stark and Wainwright were using their joint ventures as an initial foray to take over the other’s company. Potter planned to use their proxy fights to gain control of one or both of these mega corporations.

“However besotted with Virginia Sam Wainwright might have been, he was not so blind that he could not see that Potter intended to profit from the conflict between Stark and Wainwright and Sam Wainwright was not about to let Henry F. Potter take over his corporation. Wainwright knew that Potter had borrowed against his various business interests to go liquid and have ready assets so he could pounce when either one of the corporations began to fall in the market. Wainwright through his contacts quietly bought all of Potter’s loans and called him on them. Stunned at being outmaneuvered by a man he considered an empty headed dilettante, Henry F. Potter died of heart attack.

“Sam Wainwright acquired all of Potter’s remaining businesses. Virginia was also taken by surprise, her father certain of his victory over one or both of these corporate magnates had made no provision for her. Virginia remained Wainwright’s personal assistant for another year. Sam Wainwright divorced his second wife and married almost immediately. Only the bride was not the long suffering Virginia Potter but rather a Massachusetts debutante named Veronica Mantle, the girl was only a year or so older than Pepper.

“Virginia has been nicknamed Pepper for so long that very few people call her Virginia. Pepper jumped ship as it were and went to work for Wainwright’s rival Tony Stark, as his personal assistant. Shortly after that Stark International began to slowly and systematically take-over various companies owned and operated by Wainwright Industries usually indirectly through third or fourth parties. Wainwright woke up one day and discovered that his worldwide empire had been winnowed down to the properties in this town. I imagine Stark will set his cap for these next.” Susan Bailey shook her head and smiled, “At least Stark has more of a reputation as a humanitarian, perhaps I can persuade him to change the towns name back.”

“I would not count on it, Stark is in bad health and so is his company. I have a couple more questions and then I will be out of your way. I suppose that Pepper hated Potter for fighting with her mother and then dying and leaving her penniless.”

Susan Bailey shook her head sadly. “Publicly, yes that is the perception that she cultivate. Even while he was alive she claimed to hate living with him and to hate him for killing her mother. In this way she distanced herself from Potter and also gain sympathy from those who disliked Potter. But as we would learn to our chagrin, privately, it was quite the opposite actually. I suppose that if she had been a little older she would have realized the truth but Potter managed to convince Pepper that Violet had refused to let Virginia see him because he had been put in prison. Framed by the Bailey family. Although he was a miser, Potter lavished her with gifts and toys, buying her love. She loved her daddy and lapped up his warped outlook on life and amoral philosophy as if it were mother’s milk and became his willing partner in corruption. She blamed Wainwright and Stark for Potter’s sudden misfortune and death but like her father when he joined the board of Bailey Brothers Building and Loan, was not about to let her feelings stand in the way of monetary opportunity.”

“You sound surprisingly angry about a young woman you claim not to have much contact with.”

Susan Bailey gave him a look that shot daggers and then smiled grimly. “Most of what we found out about Pepper’s involvement with Wainwright and Stark surfaced much later. At the time she appeared to be an ordinary teenager, a member of the cheerleading squad and my younger brother’s girlfriend. Turns out that was a means to an end as well, she gained inside information about my father’s efforts to stop Wainwright and Potter’s take over the town and circumvent them. Potter also encouraged her to date my brother with the express purpose of eventually breaking his heart, which she did on the night on the night of his high school graduation by telling him in exacting, sordid detail about her involvement with Sam Wainwright. I never had much contact with her but my family did.

“Once Potter had died and his holdings had reverted back to Wainwright, Virginia stayed on as Wainwright’s personal assistant for a few more years. In 1961 Wainwright abruptly divorced his second wife and almost immediately remarried. The bride was not Virginia Potter but the young debutant from Boston I mentioned earlier. Rumor had it that San Wainwright offered to continue his relationship with Virginia but Virginia was not too pleased by that arrangement. Shortly after Wainwright’s engagement was announced Virginia jumped ship and took a job at Start International, eventually moving up to be Tony Stark’s executive assistant. It was shortly after Virginia joined Stark International that Stark began to slowly but surely acquire Wainwright holdings until Sam Wainwright realized that all that remained of his far-flung empire were the holdings in New York and around Bedford Falls. However that is the last I heard about her.”

“Have you heard anything about her returning to ...” Ironside was about to refer to Wainwright Hills but stopped himself from doing so to prevent Susan Bailey from being offended, “to Bedford Falls?”

Susan shook her head, “No, I haven’t heard anything like that. If you do let me know, it could be an interesting story for the paper.” Glancing at her watch, she said, “Was there anything else Chief Ironside, I really have to get back to work.”

Ironside realized that she was keeping something from him but also knew that pushing her for an answering might make her intransigent.

“No, thank you for your time Miss Bailey,” he pushed his chair away from the desk and began to roll out of the room. Mark Sanger quickly moved to take up the handles of the chair.

Ironside was nearly out of the room when Susan Bailey, called out “Chief, if Virginia is in town, there is one person who might know it, my brother Ernie. Even after all these years she still has her hooks in him.”

“Where can I find him?”

“At police headquarters, he is Wainwright’s puppet Chief of Police.” A flash of bitterness tinged with sadness swept over Susan Bailey’s face.

Ironside found Chief Ernie Bailey to be a typical politically appointed police official right down to eschewing business suits for dress uniforms as their everyday attire. At least Stewart McMillan attempted to fit in with his rank and file. Bailey’s desk was clean and immaculate as was his office, proving to Ironside’s satisfaction at least; that he did not do any real police work.

After exchanging pleasantries, Ironside decided to be blunt and end this meeting as quickly as possible.

“Mr. Bailey, I am looking for a woman named Virginia Potter who my sources say was born in this town. Have you seen her in the last few days?”

Chief Ernie Bailey looked startled, “Pepper? No, I haven’t seen Pepper for years. Why would she come here?”

Bailey’s phone rang and he answered it. A look of panic and shock came onto his face.

“We will have to cut this short Chief Ironside, I have an emergency.”

“What happened if you don’t mind my asking?”

A tragic accident, Veronica Wainwright was riding in the quarterly equestrian event that the Wainwright’s sponsor. Her horse went crazy and began bucking, finally throwing and trampling her. When Sam Wainwright tried to stop the horse he was also knocked down and trampled. I need to get the hospital.”

Chief Bailey stood up and shook Ironside’s hand and began walking briskly towards the door. Mark Sanger pushed Ironside after him.

Ironside had Mark take them to their hotel. Ironside made a few calls to his staff in San Francisco. He bit the bullet and also called Stewart Macmillan to request that some of his industrialist and financier friends do a little careful investigating for him and send the results to Eve.

Two hours later, after Ironside and Sanger had eaten a late lunch, he and Sanger picked up their messages from the desk clerk. Eve had coordinated the information that Ironside had requested. Ironside told Sanger that the research confirmed what he had suspected however a short trip to the riding stables where Mrs. Wainwright kept her horses was in order before Ironside could be certain of his suspicions.

The grooms and stable hands at the riding stables stated that Mrs. Wainwright was a superlative rider who had never had an accident prior the one she had the day before. The horse trainer told Ironside that Mrs. Wainwright's tumble was not an accident. The horse had been doped up with a stimulant and a sharp barb had been placed under Mrs. Wainwright's saddle. Already jittery the horse had gone into a frenzy from the pain and tried to buck Mrs. Wainwright off the saddle.

There were too many people milling around the horses on the day of the event for anyone to have seen anyone do anything untoward to Mrs. Wainwright's horse.

Ironside felt that a visit to the hospital where Wainwright and his wife were being held would finally wrap this case up.

Wainwright had used his wealth and influence to have he and his wife put into the same room. Only her long black hair and the shape of her figure under the thick hospital blankets gave any indication of Mrs. Wainwright's identity she was swathed in bandages on her face and hands. Tubes ran from her face and arms and what little of her face was exposed was discolored and swollen.

Although Sam Wainwright was lion of industry and a renowned fashion plate like every hospital patient, he was hard pressed to keep his dignity in a hospital gown and simply appeared to be a tired, portly, balding man in his mid-sixties. Wainwright had sustained injuries to his legs, left arm, face and throat. Awake he gazed at Ironside with some puzzlement. His one visitor, Chief of Police Bailey whispered in Wainwright's ear. Wainwright motioned Ironside closer.

According to everything Ironside had heard, Wainwright was known for his loud, braying voice usually filled with mocking jocularly. However he now spoke in a low, raspy whisper.

“Wasn't an accident?”

Ironside gazed at Chief Bailey and quirked his mouth, “As Chief Bailey's investigation will no doubt uncover, the horse had been mistreated with the express purpose of throwing your wife.”

“Who?”

Ironside cocked an eyebrow quizzically. “Hasn't Chief Bailey told you? One of your chickens coming home to roost, Virginia Potter.”

One of the nurses had come into the room to give Mrs. Wainwright a shot. She gave everyone in the room a quick professional smile and then measured out the correct dosage for the shot.

“Pepper !” Wainwright exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. “What is she doing here?”

“Attempting murder!” Ironside barked as his hand shot out and grasped the wrist of the nurse who was about to press the hypodermic needle into Mrs. Wainwright intravenous tubing. Years of rolling his chair about had given Ironside a steely grip. Squeezing hard, he made the girl drop the hypodermic and fall to her knees. Ironside had noted out of the corner of his eye that the nurse had hesitated for a fraction of a second when Wainwright had mentioned the name Pepper.

The “nurse” lost her balance and fell on her backside, dislodging her hat and the blonde wig to which it had been attached. Vibrant red hair was peeked out from when the wig had slipped off. Virginia Potts had raked Ironside’s hand with the nails of her other hand.

Mark Sanger had quickly moved to take hold of her in a half nelson, preventing her from doing any more damage to Chief Ironside and preventing her from fleeing. Her full lips were pressed into a thin line of rage and her blue eyes burned hatred at Ironside.

Ironside shot an angry glare Chief Ernie Bailey who stood transfixed like a rookie cop at a gangland massacre. He shouted, “Do you have handcuffs, Chief or do we have to tie her up with bandages!”

Chief Bailey jerked as if slapped and hurried over to where Sanger held Virginia. Bailey had a bit of trouble opening the cuffs. With an exasperated grunt, Ironside ripped the handcuffs out of Bailey’s hand and with a practiced hand snapped the aluminum circlets about her wrists.

Ironside urged Bailey to take her out of the room with a curt wave of his hand.

As they were leaving, Same Wainwright asked, in a soft, barely heard whisper, “Why, Pepper”

Virginia Potts shook her head in amazement and gave a sharp, harsh laugh. “Hee Haw! You really are a jackass Sam!”

Ironside and Mark Sanger followed Chief Bailey and his prisoner to the Wainwright Hills Courthouse. Chief Bailey had a fruitless afternoon of questioning Virginia Potter. She either answered his questions with a string of expletives or refused to answer questions without her attorney. Her attorney was located in Los Angeles and would be arriving by plane on the following morning. When Ironside was told the name of her lawyer, who was a nationally famous criminal defense attorney, he punched the arm of his wheelchair “Flaming hell that showboating shyster! That conniving louse Mason is liable to get her off scott free!”

Sanger parked Ironside’s chair outside of Virginia Potter’s holding cell. Ironside asked to talk to Virginia Potter in an unofficial capacity. Chief Bailey was reluctant to agree until Ironside asked if The Bedford Falls Sentinel would like the story of how the Chief of Police nearly let his major suspect escape because they once dated. He gave Ironside all the time he wanted but would only let her talk to her from outside her cell.

Virginia Potter lay on her bunk, glaring at him. Her nurse’s outfit had been replaced by the dull gray prison jumpsuit. Her brilliant red hair was a vibrant splash of color in the otherwise drab, gray room.

“You know you should not be all that upset you nearly got away with it.” Ironside said with mock sympathy. “A good portion of your plan will come to fruition while you are rotting in jail. Stark will probably be ruined and he will probably die from the drinking or heart trouble. There is a good chance that Wainwright will also lose a substantial fortune and it is even money that his wife will die. I can understand why you felt compelled to ruin Stark and Wainwright being a woman scorned by both of those two men. And who knows, perhaps they did deserve something of what they had coming to them.”

“You think you have it all figured out, huh?” she asked with a sarcastic smile, yet Ironside noted the curiosity glimmering in her eyes.

“Most of it, yes. This was all part of an elaborate scheme several years in the making to regain your family fortune, that is the Potter fortune and also grind your father’s enemies into dust as it were. Wainwright was a big target because he took advantage of your father’s sudden reverses in fortune. While your father was in jail for embezzlement, Sam Wainwright acquired much of the former Potter financial empire and added it his own. When he was released from prison your father worked his way into Wainwright’s good graces by playing on Sam’s jealousy of George Bailey with the express purpose of getting back what had been his. Despite giving your father a second chance, Wainwright still kept your father at arm’s length having known your father. Despite being unable to gain control of his former holdings, he still schemed to get his hands on them and add in Wainwright’s fortune as a bonus. That is where you came in the picture.”

Ironside gave Pepper Potter a knowing glance. “Perhaps your role was innocent at first but let’s be honest, you were never as innocent or blameless as you let on. While Sam may have enjoyed your company, he did not see you as a matrimonial asset, probably because of your father and possibly because of your illegitimate origins. However like many men in his position, he wanted children, so he threw you over for somebody else. Your father was dead by this time so you needed another financial player if you were to realize your goals. Your father had brokered the deal with Tony Stark and Sam Wainwright to build some jointly owned factories. He probably did this with the eye to set the two magnates against one another and to use their conflict to destabilize both corporations so that they would be vulnerable to takeovers. Although he succeeded in setting the two men against one another, Henry Potter never had a chance to capitalize on it, so it was up to you do so. Furthermore you now had the added incentive to destroy Wainwright for his treatment of you.

“You caught Stark’s attention and became his personal assistant. You used your inside knowledge of Wainwright Industries and your influence with Tony Stark to have Stark International begin a slow conquest of Wainwright Industries. As with Wainwright, Stark did not find your charms beguiling enough to marry so when he became sick you moved to devalue Stark International by framing Tony Stark for murder and also making his physical condition general knowledge. Stark believed that you came to Wainwright Hills to try and get back in Sam Wainwright’s good graces. I think it was to get revenge on the woman that replaced you in Sam Wainwright’s affections and to emotionally wound Wainwright by killing her. That he was also hurt in the accident was unintentional. According to my sources you have lined up a third party to take over Stark International and most of what remains of Wainwright Industries. It was undoubtedly with some irony that you diverted funds from Stark to build up a faltering company named Stark-Fujikawa with the eventual goal of using it to leverage out Tony Stark and then take over Wainwright Plastics.

Ironside allowed himself a small smile as Virginia Potter stared at him with utter disbelief. With her red hair and wide staring eyes, her expression reminded him a bit of Little Orphan Annie. He continued.

“I’ll admit the wheelchair angle threw us for a while. We knew from ballistics and forensics that the shooter was the same height as Jefferies and from the angle of the shots the shooter was sitting down. There were two sets of wheel track marks on the carpeting but with different tread marks so evidence pointed to a person in a wheelchair. The stolen papers and pictures of Jefferies’ latest project gave you a good red herring and sent us chasing after somebody who needed to be in a wheelchair, rather than someone who used the wheelchair as another misleading clue. You set Stark up fairly well.

“You made certain that Stark objected to being in Jefferies project, that he was in San Francisco and that he could not provide an airtight alibi for the time of Jefferies’ shooting. You also had the gun used in the shooting purchased with a Stark International credit card issue to Anthony Howard Stark and bribed the gun shop owner to run the purchase through without a check. You paid somebody to purchase the gun for you and so not only removed yourself from direct connection to the gun but also made it appear as though Stark had bought the gun through an intermediary. I imagine you hid the purchase of the wheelchair you used among the various specialized wheelchairs that Stark bought. On the night of the murder you waited until dark and hid your appearance by wearing a fedora and trench coat similar to the one that Jefferies often wore. In this disguise you wheeled yourself to Jefferies apartment and gained access to his apartment. Apparently Jefferies had a habit of some odd hours so this played to your advantage. Once inside you began to locate all the materials you could about Jefferies new book and stuffed it in a compartment underneath the chair.

“Since the point of your visit was to frame Stark and since the bullets were grouped in his chest so precisely, I believe that once you had gathered all of the material relating to the new book, you calmly waited with a loaded pistol in your hand for Jefferies to emerge from his bedroom after making enough noise to rouse him from his sleep. Once he rolled out into the living room you placed three shots in him and quickly left using the wheelchair until you were out of his building. In an alley you got up from the wheelchair and pushed it a few blocks from Jefferies apartment. You carefully burned the evidence from Jefferies room, leaving enough to provide the murder investigators with a trail that would lead to Stark. And you may have gotten away with it had you not also murdered an innocent man.”

Ironside paused and gripped the arms of his wheelchair. “Playing Devil’s advocate for a second, you know you did not have to kill Jefferies, an attempted murder would have ruined Stark just as well and we might not have been inclined to investigate it quite as vigorously. Mind you I certainly do not condone your actions but 10 years for attempted homicide would certainly have been better than life behind bars and an innocent man would be dead.

“I know that Stark and Wainwright both used you, and they both had a history with your father so I could understand you wanting to ruin them or even to see them dead but what did you have against an innocent such as L. B. Jefferies. Was he only a cat’s-paw in your frame of Tony Stark?”

Pepper Potter glared at Ironside with icy blue eyes, finally she spoke with a soft, contralto voice in the modulated, melodious tones of an executive secretary. Only her clipped, icy manner and her burning eyes gave an indication of the inferno of rage that swirled within her soul.

“You seem to feel that Jefferies was a good man, nothing could be further from the truth. I had to grow up in this town that granted sainthood to a warped, twisted and venal man. St. George who slew the evil dragon! She spat. “However the reality it much more tawdry. George Bailey was a man whose greatest achievement was not only bankrupting the town’s greatest philanthropist but also sending a crippled old man to jail in the process. Through his own hard work my father became wealthy and used his wealth to make a sleepy New England village into a vibrant 20th century metropolis. When he provided basic housing for low-income people and he was called slumlord or worse. During the Depression he used his fortune to rescue the important businesses and utilities of town from going under and for this he was called an opportunist by the envious ones. All the Baileys were worried about was saving was their precious Building and Loan and the rest of the town could go hang. Yet because my father did not have a ready smile or a glad hand he was hated, especially by the suckers who panicked and sold out when they should have weathered the storm. Bailey was always

jealous that he had not had the financial resources to also make a killing during the depression and so plotted revenge. Finally on that Christmas in 1945 he had his chance and took it.”

Ironside’s eyes must have reflected his ironic amusement at the contradictory elements of Virginia Potter’s statement. However she must have his look meant something else.

“Yes, it is true that that old idiot Billy Bailey tossed the money into my father’s lap and that my father did not *immediately* deposit it for him. And yes, it is true that my father denied any knowledge of the money and in fact was instrumental in putting out a warrant for George Bailey on a charge of embezzlement and malfeasance. As he stated at his trial, he planned to do this *after* the holidays. He wanted to teach the Baileys a hard lesson about taking care of their money; not only for their sake, but for the sake of their investors. My father wished to shock George Bailey out of his complacency so he would see how mentally deficient his uncle had become and so remove him from any position of responsibility at the firm. However my father was practically tarred and feathered and rode of town on a rail when it came time for his trial and his statements about his intentions were dismissed out of hand.

“I will admit that when my father was released from prison he had become embittered and wanted to do two things before he died, he wanted to rebuild his fortune and destroy George Bailey. Had George Bailey been wealthy then he could have killed two birds with one stone, but George Bailey never had had so much as a pot to piss in, so my father had to accumulate a fortune before he could destroy him.”

“Or failing that, he could have someone do it for him,” Ironside said pointedly.

Virginia smiled slightly. “Yes, he could at that. Once my father had learned how much Sam Wainwright secretly resented George Bailey my father worked Wainwright like a virtuoso works a Stradivarius. Wainwright had always thought that Bailey wanted Bedford Falls to remain small because of an out-moded idealism that it was for the good their families. However my father convinced Wainwright that not only was hurting the town by preventing it from expanding into a vibrant, prosperous community but that he was doing so deliberately. George Bailey was a big fish in a small pond and did not have the capability to be anything else. To retain his control of the town, he kept it from growing, hurting the town in the long run and also preventing anyone else’s light to shine. Sure Wainwright had stepped in to save the town after my father’s sudden departure had cause economic chaos but who got all the credit? George Bailey, that who. Sure he liked Wainwright’s support and money but when it came time for Wainwright Industries to grow or wither, George Bailey was one of the first people to try and talk Sam out of expanding the factory here because it would change the town. Wainwright may have owned much of the town but his boss was George Bailey. My father showed Wainwright how, by purchasing crucial and key businesses he could become influential enough to slowly but surely cause the town to grow and thrive.

“As Wainwright’s status in the business community grew, so did his political power and Bailey’s waned. Bailey Park, the original group of homes built by the Bailey Building and Loan was bought out by Wainwright and bulldozed over to become the first satellite factory in Bedford Falls for Wainwright Industries. George Bailey retired from the Building and Loan with assurances from the Board of Directors that it would continue so long as the community needed it. Sam Wainwright was named head of the board and promptly shut down the operation, transferring all open loans to be bank. The building was shuttered and abandoned. My father’s crowning achievement, although working through Wainwright was to have the town renamed. Even if it was renamed to Wainwright Hills rather

than Pottersville, it was still a victory, because this more than anything else broke Bailey's spirit, especially since this had done by one of his best friends. Shortly after that he slunk out of town like a whipped dog.

"I thought I was done with that damned family when they left. At my father's insistence I had become good friends with Bert Bailey and by extension to his sickeningly sweet parents. They gladly accepted my story that old man Potter had driven my mother away and that I hated living with him. It never dawned on that old fool George Bailey that I had been planted in his house to learn what plans he and his friends had to stop the evil Wainwright Potter alliance from ruining the town. Whatever I learned I told my father so that he and Wainwright knew what to expect.

"Yet even after his family had moved away, Bailey could not stay away from his beloved town. While I was working for Wainwright he came back to the town posing as a famous photojournalist."

Virginia Potter's statement surprised Ironside although he only betrayed this by a slight pursing of his lips and almost imperceptible quirk of eyebrows. Yet something of Ironside's surprise must have been visible to Virginia Potter for she gave him a nasty smile and said, "Oh he might have fooled everyone else with his claims to be somebody else but I knew it was him. He had the same way of speaking and the same mannerisms for God's sake! But just like George had always gotten people to believe his side of the story about my father, he managed to fool them into thinking he and this Jefferies person were two different people."

Ironside was a bit surprised by this part of her statement.

"You think I am crazy, don't you?" she accused him angrily as her freckled face crimsoned.

Flaming right I do, Ironside thought but he did not want to offend Virginia Potter before he had gotten all of her tale. He only smiled slightly and said, "I think you might be mistaken but not crazy. L. B. Jefferies career started long before George Bailey left this town."

"I am neither crazy or mistaken. When I heard the strange resemblance between the two men I looked into very carefully. Let me break it down for you. George Bailey disappeared from his town in 1962. By this time his wife was dead and his kids were grown. George had always wanted to travel, that's all he ever talked about. If he hadn't been tied to this town, he would have worked his way around the world. I think that once he left Wainwright Hill, that exactly what he did. Now Jefferies was a world traveling photojournalist with a penchant for being in the hot spots. I would guess that their paths crossed somewhere in the South Pacific, probably in Malaysia. I do not know how it happened but George Bailey became L. B. Jefferies."

Although Ironside kept his face as stoic as possible, Virginia Potter must have noted the glint of amusement in his eyes.

"You still think I am nuts. Well it was about this time that Jefferies was seriously hurt in Malaysia and spent sometime in a Malaysian hospital. After he recovered began to travel less and focus on feature photography rather than action photography. He also began to write as well as shoot pictures. During this time not once did George Bailey ever visit the town, besides the occasional letter, postcard or Christmas card no one heard boo from George Bailey. Two years ago George Bailey supposedly died and it was also two years ago that L. B. Jefferies was in a devastating car accident.

Intrigued despite himself, Ironside said, “Jefferies wife and his daughter died in that accident. Jefferies was married before 1962 so you have to ask why would his wife and daughter go along with the charade? “

“Jefferies' marriage had always been a troubled one. They had many separations, mostly about his work. They lived apart more than they lived together. Perhaps she never knew about the switch but thought the changes in Jefferies and his lapses of memory were the result of his accident. Knowing how moral George was I doubt that he deliberately set out to deceive anyone. It may have been a case of mistaken identity. He was thought to be L. B. Jefferies and was sent to the hospital under that name. Maybe he had lost his memory due to injury and only began to recover it after he had been returned to the United States. Once he had regained his memory however he continued to be L. B. Jefferies because he could no longer stand being George Bailey. After all George Bailey was a failure, the man who had lost Bedford Falls so he probably embraced his new identity.”

“Isn't that all a bit melodramatic? It sounds like something straight from the Prisoner of Zenda.”

“Or the Prince and the Pauper?” she asked pointedly, holding out a hand as if in supplication

“Yes,” Ironside answered wondering what point she was trying to make.

“George Bailey was a huge fan of Mark Twain, at least he was ever since he supposedly met Clarence the Angel.”

Although Ironside was not persuaded by Virginia Potter's deductions, he thought that they were at least getting to the crux of the matter.

“So if you knew L. B. Jefferies was a fraud, why didn't you expose him?”

“Well because as long as he was out of my life and not messing in my family's affairs I did not care. Besides for all intents and purposes George Bailey was dead. I had been undermining Stark International for years and enabling Stark's health problems by encouraging him to drink, especially in times of stress. When he became wheelchair bound I knew I was close to making the whole sorry house of cards corporate structure collapse. I had been in communication with Sam Wainwright wanting him to get in on the kill of Stark International. I told him it was because we were such good old friends” Virginia smiled a cold predatory smile. “Actually I was going to get Wainwright so financially bound to Stark International that when Stark went down so would Wainwright. A cold icy hand gripped my heart when I saw a letter from L. B. Jefferies among Stark's correspondence. I read it and almost laughed aloud. Jefferies had learned about Stark's condition from Sam Wainwright and wondered if he would like to be featured in his upcoming book. That bungling jackass Sam had probably told Jefferies about Stark thinking that Jefferies would write about Stark's condition without having contacted him first. Sam probably thought this would expose Stark's weakness to the world and bring him down faster than I had planned. However as I read the letter I realized that this was the final piece of the puzzle, the key ingredient of my plan to destroy all of my father's enemies.”

“You keep avoiding the question, why did you kill Jefferies, even if you believed him to be George Bailey?”

Virginia Potter frowned as her eyes clouded over for a moment. In a small voice she said. “My plan was to hurt him but not kill him. Stark would be blamed for the attempted murder. However when I started going through material for his new book I became angrier and angrier. He had all this information on these men, some of renown and some who were obscure who had overcome their confinement to a wheelchair to accomplish something spectacular. She paused and said with ever increasing volume and vehemence. Yet there was one individual who was missing, one individual who he should have known to put in that book but because of George’s jealousy, his envy and his spiteful nature was excluded. I realized that the whole idea of the book was to purposely exclude this person; naturally George would include himself but leave out my father. My father had built up Bedford Falls and prevented it from falling into ruin during the Depression. He had saved the town and been hated for it by the rabble.

“I knew then that I had to stop the book from being published, by destroying most of it and by killing George so that he would never have another chance to recreate his work. So I sat and I waited for him to come out of his bedroom. I sat in the dark and waited, seething with rage. When he finally did come out into his living room and I heard his stupid, stammering voice say, Hello. Is someone there? I snapped. I fired right into his chest screaming ‘Why George, Why did you lie about my father? Why George did you lie to everyone!’”

“After I shot him, I left his apartment as quickly as I could. You were right on the money about what happened afterwards. I burned the book but left enough so that it would lead back to Bailey and so to Stark. I also left the gun where it would eventually be found and lead back to Stark. I was going to use the bad publicity generated by the trail of evidence to expose Stark’s ill health, his drunkenness and how badly he had managed his finances. Wainwright Industries make a take over bid and become hopelessly entangled in the morass of the Stark financial mess and begin to have it assets fall into the money pit. However I had to get rid of the one stumbling block that would have prevented Sam Wainwright from following my lead down the path to financial disaster. His darling wife had to go. It is no coincidence that Wainwright's fortunes began rising again after he married that Mantle girl. She has been the brain behind his recent successes.

“Once Stark and Wainwright’s companies were in the toilet, Stark-Fujikawa would have emerged to save them both by taking them both over. Tony Stark and Sam Wainwright would have been effectively removed by their boards when this happened. Stark-Fujikawa was a foundering company based in West Germany that I had bought with diverted Stark International funds. It had been created as part of various German-Japanese partnerships during the Fascist alliance. Hans Stark had been a boy genius like Tony Stark and like Tony Stark his weaknesses did him in. Originally Stark-Fujikawa were supposed to have mass produced a miraculous vehicle Stark claimed to created, a large ship that traversed air, land, water and underwater with equal aplomb. As it turned out the vehicle did not exist except in Han’s Stark’s fevered imagination. To pay the bills while Hans Stark tried to create this vehicle, Stark-Fujikawa produced munitions for the Axis. After the war it had been reduced to making ball bearing and small machine parts. Hans Stark was a morphine addict and a drunk as well and he quickly signed over his company for a few hundred grand.

“So that is the sum of my evil plan for all the good it will do you. I know enough about the law that my confession to you can be dismissed as hearsay, if it is admitted at all.

“That would be true, except for two things” Ironside remarked. “You are not the only one who ever thought of having a hiding place underneath your wheelchair. This conversation has been

recorded on a tape machine. Secondly, since our good Chief of Police Ernie Bailey was unable to entice a confession out of you, I convinced him to temporarily deputize me.”

Virginia Potter looked physically stunned by this revelation. She shook her head and grimaced in a self-recriminating manner. She suddenly laughed mirthlessly. “Well I guess I could always claim insanity since no one will believe that I really killed George Bailey. You still are not convinced.”

“No, I am not and frankly, I think you may have a good shot at an insanity defense.”

Virginia smiled sarcastically and said, “I guess I would rather be thought of crazy than stupid. Good bye Chief Ironside, I have nothing further to say to at this time.” She lay on her bunk and stared at the ceiling.

Ironside realized that she was serious and wheeled back to Chief Bailey’s office. Even though he now knew why she had killed Jefferies, it did not make him feel any better.

Mark Sanger pulled the tape recorder out of Ironside’s chair and presented the tape to Chief Bailey. Ironside and Sanger made certain that duplicates were made and that the correct paper work was in order before they drove out of Wainwright Hills to the airport and returned to San Francisco.

Once he was back in San Francisco Ironside almost immediately began working on the Scorpio case once more and put the Jefferies case out of his mind until a few months later he was deposed by the District Attorney and told he would probably have to testify at Virginia Potter’s trial.

Shortly before the trial was to begin Ironside received a piece of mail from Virginia Potter. It contained a safety deposit key and a slip of paper stating the bank where it could be used. A short note was also enclosed. “I found also found this in L. B. Jefferies apartment. I thought about destroying it but then began to wonder how much I could get from selling it. However since its existence could throw a monkey wrench into my defense I have decided that it should be returned to the owner’s family. Zuzu is Susan. Love and kisses, Pepper.”

Ironside sent Ed Brown and Mark Sanger to open the safety deposit box. Inside was a brown an object wrapped in brown paper. Brown took it to Police Headquarters to have it x-rayed. Inside the package was a book.

Mark Sanger, Ed Brown and Eve Whitefield gathered around as Ironside carefully opened the package. Inside was black leather bound book with gilt lettering *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Ironside opened the flyleaf and a small cellophane bag about two inches square fell out onto his lap. Inside the cellophane bag were several dried white rose petals. A sparse, clear handwriting on the small package read Zuzu’s petals. Written on the title page of the book in a old style cursive hand was, “*Dear George, Remember no man is a failure who has friends. Thanks for the wings! Love Clarence*”

Eve Whitfield asked “What’s that?” referring to the cellophane package of petals”.

“It’s a McGuffin” Ironside said referring to both the book and petals.

Ironside found himself smiling slightly. Either Virginia Potter had truly convinced herself that George Bailey was L. B. Jefferies or she was attempting to launch another scheme by using him. Most probably the latter. He did not know if she planned to have herself acquitted by muddying the waters

around Jefferies' identity or to discredit the Bailey's from behind bars. Possibly both scenarios. Ironside thought over his conversation with her at the jail and realized she had planted enough "clues" for Ironside to start investigating the Jefferies/Bailey connection. Ironside had no doubt that if he did indeed start to investigate this scenario he would find evidence to back it up. Evidence that she had either planted or arranged to be planted. Ironside did not know how she had acquired the book although he doubted that it had been in Jefferies apartment. She may have taken it from the Baileys when she had visited the their household in her youth.

Although Virginia Potter may have thought that Ironside would have been intrigued enough by her clues and the book to start looking into the possibility that L. B. Jefferies had been George Bailey, she could not have known how Jefferies had reacted when he saw Ironside. The fear and shock that Jefferies had exhibited when he had thought Ironside was a man named Thorwald had been too genuine. Ironside had no doubt that her whole Baily was Jefferies story was either wholly made up or a fantasy. Ironside smiled wryly as he admitted to himself Virginia Potter's scheme to get someone to investigate the Bailey/Jefferies connection might have work had Ironside not looked like a wife murderer.

Sanger frowned, "A McGuffin, isn't that one of those old time kid's books."

Sanger's remark roused Ironside from his introspection. "That's a McGuffey! What the flaming hell are they teaching you at college nowadays. A McGuffin is... well, actually I not certain if this is a MacGuffin or a just red herring. Either way, it does not matter. We are done with Miss Potter. Eve, would you please see that this book and package of petals is sent to Miss Susan Bailey, care of the Bedford Falls Sentinel in Wainwright Hills, New York". Ironside handed the book to Eve.

"The Bedford Falls Sentinel in Wainwright Hills?" She asked with puzzled amusement.

Ironside closed his eyes in slight annoyance and shook his head. "It's a long story and it is finished now, so let's leave it at that."