

ANT FARM

A SEAMUS MCCREE NOVEL

James M. Jackson



Ant Farm Copyright © 2015 by James M. Jackson. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, including internet usage, without permission from Wolf's Echo Press, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Edition

Trade Paperback Edition: May 2015

Cover Design by Karen Phillips

Wolf's Echo Press

PO Box 54

Amasa, MI 49903

www.WolfsEchoPress.com

This is a work of fiction. Any references to real places, real people, real organizations, or historical events are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, organizations, places, or events are the product of the author's imagination.

ISBN-13 Trade Paperback:

978-1-943166-00-8

ISBN-13 e-book:

978-1-943166-18-3

Library of Congress Control Number:

2015908178

Printed in the United States of America

10987654

DEDICATION

*To the Cincinnati Writers Project,
for all you've done and continue to do to advance writing.*

Sample

ONE

I FLICKED ON THE PORCH light and discovered grief standing in front of my door. In a dead-flat voice my visitor said, “Seamus, I’m glad I caught you.” Skyler Weaver’s hollow eyes sucked me into her pain and silenced my response.

“I was at church,” she continued. “A music committee meeting—and figured since you were on my way home, I’d see if you were in.” Her gaze flicked down to her hands clasped at her waist and then back to my face. The corners of her lips curled in an attempted smile that died. “Well, you’re not exactly on my way home, but . . .” She shrugged.

I ushered her through the foyer and into my library. She walked with leaden steps to the fireplace and examined the cherry mantel and Rookwood tile. “It’s beautiful. Does it still work?”

She turned around. Now that she was in better light, I was struck by the creases that etched her face. She was a shell of the woman who, at the Sunday service following her fiancé’s murder, had leaned heavily on the minister as the two stood on the chancel. Gripping the microphone, tears streaking her face, she’d asked us to keep her and Samuel Presser’s family in our thoughts after the senseless tragedy. During the summer I had let the memory slip away, and in her presence I felt guilty.

“All six fireplaces were designed for coal,” I said, “but none work. Would you like a tour?” I remembered belatedly my duties as host. “Or something to drink?”

“I love these big old Cincinnati Victorians.” She slid into the rocking chair, her back to the stained glass window. “But it’s late . . .”

I moved the antique Hitchcock chair to face her and sat down. I didn’t know Skyler well. She sang soprano in the St. John’s Unitarian Universalist Church choir and sat in front of me at rehearsals. I’d seen her at church functions and choir parties, but since I was old enough to be her father, our social paths didn’t otherwise cross. Was she an emissary to ask me to join the music committee? I lined up my excuses.

“I can see you’re wondering why I’m here.” Deep breath. “I’m not

satisfied with the police investigation. I want to hire you to investigate Samuel's murder. You come highly recommended."

My stomach clenched knowing I would have to disappoint her. "Oh, Skyler, I am so sorry for your loss, but I'm afraid someone's misinformed you about what I do."

Her gunmetal-gray eyes locked onto mine. "I've talked to a number of people this week. I know you can help."

With each word she spoke, my distress increased. "Skyler, you need a licensed private investigator. I'm just an analyst for Criminal Investigation Group. Besides, that's not how CIG works. I wish I could help, but you have to find someone qualified."

She rocked hard, causing a fault in the ancient rocker to click in protest. Several seconds later, she stopped and leaned toward me. "Look at me, Seamus. I'm a wreck. I can't sleep. I've lost twenty pounds, and I jump at the slightest noise."

I plucked a tissue from the box on the side table and handed it to her. Now that she mentioned it, I noticed that her print blouse with flowers in the Georgia O'Keefe style hung off her shoulders, and she'd cinched in her black dress slacks so tightly their fabric gathered at her waist. She dabbed away the tears welling in her eyes.

"It's been two months since Samuel was murdered. The police say they haven't given up, but I know they have. They've got new killings every week." She sprang from the chair and paced. "They're overworked and can only do so much. I know that. I need a miracle, and people tell me you and your CIG sometimes find them. Even the head of homicide, Lieutenant Hastings, confirmed that your work last year unraveled a frame-up where they had charged the wrong person. I know you can do it . . . if you *want* to help me . . ."

Hoping to ease my discomfort, I stood. No help. "Skyler, it's not my CIG. I work for them. I don't do independent work." I caught myself pressing on my forehead with both hands, trying to smooth the furrow lines. I dropped my hands to my sides.

She bunched the tissue in her hand. "You've got pull. You can get CIG to help—if you want to."

"It's just not that simple. Maybe Lieutenant Hastings failed to mention that CIG only works on cases where we've been invited by the local police. That's our whole *modus operandi*: we provide additional resources to police departments who don't have the expertise or are understaffed or—"

Her breath erupted in short steam-engine bursts. Feeling trapped in the midst of a lecture, I bumbled on. “They’re often cold cases—years after the crime. We—”

She whirled to face me, hands turning white on her hips. “Shay-mus Mac-Cree,” she pronounced each syllable with emphasis. “You remind me of Samuel, and not just because you both have dark, curly hair. You spew mountains of information—all accurate—but you don’t answer the question. So, I’ll rephrase it. How much would it cost to hire you and CIG to investigate Samuel’s death? I don’t care whether the police cooperate or not. I need to know why he was murdered.”

Her mournful eyes reminded me of the confusion, and pain, and searing need I had felt to bring meaning to my father’s death. Besides, if the police were stumped—*because* the police were stumped—I was intrigued.

“Let me do this,” I said. “I’ll call Lieutenant Hastings tomorrow and see if I can find out anything.”

“And you’ll talk with CIG?”

I tried once more to smooth my brow with the heels of my hands. Why hadn’t I just said no? “Unless the Cincinnati police invite CIG to assist, there’s nothing I can do. They’re not my rules, they’re CIG’s rules. I promise I’ll call Hastings. But you need to promise me you’ll look for a licensed investigator. Maybe Hastings can recommend one.”

We closed by shaking hands as proper dealmakers do. I should have read the small print.

Two

THE NEXT MORNING I WOKE at six o'clock, as usual. Before I lost courage, I called Lt. Hastings and left a voice message: nothing urgent, but would she give me a call? The gray overcast sky and smell of humidity convinced me to run early, before the sun converted all outdoors into a sauna. I still had a month and a half before a planned marathon, which meant three more weeks of hard work before I began tapering off.

My route around the Clifton Gaslight District took me past areas of historic late-nineteenth-century mansions, turn-of-the-century Victorians like mine, 1920s bungalows, and a scattering of more modern houses. Robins whistled the day in from shade trees and dewed lawns. Running time was thinking time—in this case about Skyler and her fiancé, Samuel Presser.

Why had someone killed him? Skyler had inserted that question under my skin and, like a splinter, it shot a brief twinge up my nerves each time I touched it. Why had I offered to talk to the Cincinnati police? I wasn't sure of my motives, but the mix certainly included not wanting to disappoint Skyler, innate curiosity, the challenge of figuring out something no one else had—and I wouldn't mind seeing Lt. Hastings again. If I hadn't been running already, the thought of her would have increased my heart rate.

The whoop of a police siren startled me into the air.

"Don't you know you're supposed to run on the left side of the road?"

Speak of the devil. Even with my back to her, I recognized Lt. Hastings' voice. I trotted to the passenger side of the unmarked police car. "You scared the bejesus out of me," I said. "I run on the right because it's better for my broken foot."

"Come again?"

Between pants I responded. "Broke my arch playing soccer. Years ago. Killed my pro career in the first year. Never completely healed. It's more comfortable to run on the right." *Why was I telling her all this stuff?*

"You say so. I've been following you for several blocks. Even though I

know you're only six foot two, your head was way up in the clouds. You left a message?"

"And you drove all over Clifton to find me?"

"I was heading to Northside and stopped by your house. I happened to see you crossing Ludlow and followed. What'd you want?"

"Long story." I had no clue how to approach this, so I delayed. "How about I buy you lunch sometime in the next few days?"

"That's big of you. Why do I sense an ulterior motive?"

"Me? Ulterior motive? My calendar says in big red letters that it's Law Enforcement Appreciation Week. I want to do my civic duty."

"Just a minute while I put my waders on." A grin crept over her face. "I've got a meeting at city hall later this morning. Would ten till noon at the Rock Bottom on Fountain Square do?"

"Sure you don't want to make it eleven fifty-two to give yourself extra time?"

"What's this crap? I thought it was cop appreciation week."

MY GARAGE DOOR STUCK PARTWAY up. A hip check rattled it loose. I needed to do something about that track, but no one had ever accused me of being handy. I chose my 1992 Infiniti G20 and parked in a downtown underground lot.

Fountain Square was busy despite August's broiling sun. Young male office workers with rolled-up sleeves and opened collars roosted around the fountain like a flock of pigeons. I walked to the upper section and found a shady spot where I could observe the lower level while waiting for Hastings.

Considering Cincinnati is six hundred miles from the nearest ocean, the girl-watching was excellent. A wash of ponytails, taut bodies in tank tops, and long exposed legs in short skirts flooded the plaza, swirling around the preening males. If I concentrated, I could smell the massed pheromones.

Lt. Hastings appeared on schedule, her own long legs eating up the distance. I hustled to the Rock Bottom in time to hold the door open for her. A blast of air-conditioning hit me like a cold compress, raising goosebumps along my arms. We joined the line waiting for booths.

"Did you take a time management course?" I asked. "And that's why we're meeting at an odd time? Do people keep appointments better?"

“Interesting theory, but no. The captain must have decided I needed to do penance for something and gave me the marvelous opportunity to join Councilman Braun and some of his supporters and listen to their wonderful ideas on how to reduce murder in Cincinnati. The meeting was supposed to end at eleven thirty. I gave them ten minutes’ grace, so that’s eleven forty. Good thing. They were going strong on time, but not so much on content when I had to excuse myself to meet you. It takes ten minutes to walk here from city hall, so that meant meeting at eleven fifty.”

The hostess grabbed menus and motioned us to follow her through the noise by the bar and past the redolent smells of the kitchen before showing us a table. It really was law enforcement appreciation week, at least concerning my appreciation of the swing of Hastings’ hips as I followed her. The hostess handed us menus and took our drink orders—soda for the on-duty Hastings and a draft beer for me.

“You’ve got me here,” Hastings said. “What do you want?”

“Presser murder.” As though my words had pulled an electrical plug, her eyes went from sparkling to flat. “Can you tell me how it’s going?”

She leaned back in the booth, studying me. “You know I’m not supposed to say anything more than what we release to the media, but I figure I can trust you.” The sparkle in her eyes reappeared. “Although, since I know you’re a sneaky bastard, I just added you to the list of suspects. Where were you on the night of—?”

The waitress interrupted, bringing beverages and taking orders.

“I read about it at the time,” I said. “It’s been a while and I don’t remember many details.”

“Our release said Presser was stabbed. We didn’t say there were two wounds. First in the back, second, the fatal one, in his chest.”

“Who discovered the body?”

“His assistant at TransOhio Life couldn’t reach him all day. One of his friends, Matthew Yeung, swung by Presser’s apartment on his way home to make sure everything was okay. It wasn’t. Presser’s car was parked outside, but no one answered when Yeung tried the bell. Side door was locked, but the basement door was ajar. According to dispatch, he called 911 at exactly eighteen twenty-three on the seventh of June, 2007. Stayed outside until a unit got there. They found Presser on the kitchen floor—killed the night before.”

She took a long pull on the soda straw. “Forensics has been useless. The

murder weapon is a stiletto—a pro’s weapon. Amateurs go for macho pig stickers. Far as we can tell, Presser was one clean kid.”

“Possible motives?”

“Not a one. Zip. Nada. No drugs. No gambling. No kiddie porn. No debt. Nothing interesting at all. Nothing stolen from his place. You looking to collect the ten grand Presser’s employer put up? Got a lead?”

“Sorry. With the cost of my kid’s college, I wish I could. So you got nothing?”

“We’ve interviewed everyone. All we get is, ‘How could this happen to such a nice guy?’”

The waitress brought our burgers and fries.

“Smells delicious,” I said. “Speaking of which, do I detect a new fragrance you’re wearing? Lilac?”

She finished doctoring her burger with ketchup. “Interesting you should notice.” She reached over and patted my hand. “Thanks. It is.”

Her eyes seemed to smile and my heart went into pitter-patter mode. I quickly took a large bite of my burger and savored the juices. What was I thinking, flirting with Lt. Hastings? Well, I knew what I was thinking, but it was hardly wise. I finished chewing and plunged in. “Presser’s fiancée, Skyler Weaver, sings with me in church choir. She wants CIG to investigate the murder.”

Hastings motioned like a traffic cop for me to proceed.

“She needs closure. Not knowing why her fiancé was killed is eating her up. I know that pain. I told her I’d ask if CPD would consider having us help.”

She leaned back into the bench, absentmindedly shoving french fries into her mouth.

“I told her how unlikely it was you guys would want to use us.”

Before leaning forward, she deliberately took a bite of the burger, ate more fries, slurped her cola. “First I get Braun telling me how to prevent murders. Now I have you telling me how to solve them. Pretty bold move, Seamus, inviting me to lunch to tell me I’m not doing my job. If this were two years ago, I’d thank you for the lunch and take this story to the guys and they’d all laugh their rocks off at the joke. No bleeping way we’d let you guys take over.”

I choked on my food. “Bleeping?”

Hastings shrugged. “My nephew is two. Couple weeks ago he and a

neighbor kid were playing with his toy cars. The other kid's car is blocking his and he yells, 'Hey, you fuckin' asshole, get outta my way.' My sister gave me one of those *significant* looks."

"Oops."

"So I'm trying to clean up my act. Anyway, we're getting more than a murder a week and the backlog keeps growing. We've got so much darn work. No way we can get it all done. If you guys are interested in helping out with a case, and if it were just me, I'd say darn straight, let's do it."

I tried to look neutral. "But?"

"Yeah, but I got the captain and he has the lieutenant colonel and he has the chief and he has the city manager and she has the city council. You hear what I'm saying?"

"Thanks for asking, but no thanks?"

Eyes a-twinkle, she said, "You know what the captain gave me for Christmas last year?"

"Didn't know he was so generous."

"Only for special people, I guess. He hand-delivered an exquisitely wrapped box. Had high-class silver paper with ribbon so tight I had to cut it off. Inside, written in calligraphy on parchment, was the word 'Think.'"

Her sly smile worked at the corners of her mouth and I burst out laughing. Three preppies in the next booth glanced over. "He wants you to think *inside* the box. I didn't realize the captain had such ingenuity."

"Yes sir, he's a bright boy, and the message came through loud and clear. If I want to remain in homicide and not join the motor pool, I need to be a little more conventional."

At least I can tell Skyler I tried.

"But they're never going to keep me inside any old box, no matter how fancy the wrapping." She flashed a wide smile. "I will have to start with the captain. Maybe I lay it off as one of Braun's suggestions—nah, he'd never believe anything half-sane came from him. Has Rand already approved this?"

"Really? You'll ask?" I matched her smile, felt tension release from my shoulders, and raised my beer in salute. Then I thought about her question. I hadn't even contemplated asking Robert Rand, the founder and boss of CIG. Neck tension returned in spades.

"I doubt the captain'll say yes," she said. "Let alone the big bosses. It's a good experiment—why *not* bring in some assistance? We use the feds, and

hell, Councilman Braun wants to privatize all the city services—this could be just the beginning.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

She hadn’t waited for my answer about notifying Rand, meaning I didn’t have to fess up or lie. I wasn’t sure whether she was pursuing this because she thought it was the right thing, or because it gave her a chance to yank on the donkey’s tail, even if she did get kicked in the teeth.

“But don’t hold your breath. Even assuming the captain agrees, you know how decisions go. If God had had to work with city bureaucracy to create the world, it still wouldn’t be finished.”

Hastings left while I settled the check. I felt good that I had something positive to tell Skyler and left a generous tip. Walking to the parking garage, I checked my cell phone for messages. One—from my son, who never calls.

“Hey, Dad,” the message said. “Call my cell phone STAT. I tried you at home first. Call ASAP.”

I hit the “Return Call” button and listened to a computer voice. The party at this number is not available. Please leave a message after the beep.

“Paddy, everything okay? You’ve got me a bit worried. I’m heading home, but I’ll keep my cell phone on.”

What’s going on with Paddy?

THREE

THE AUGUST SUN WAS BAKING bricks from the clay in my front yard. Only the weeds were green, but my lawn had plenty of them. The month-old asphalt patches in my driveway smelled fresh and grabbed my shoes with each step, letting go with soft sucking sounds.

On the wraparound front porch, I kicked off my shoes to avoid tracking in tar. I hurried inside to escape the heat, feeling good about my decision to run early. I checked the bottoms of the shoes—clean. After dropping my keys on the kitchen counter, I hit the “Play” button on the answering machine, wondering what Paddy had been calling about.

You have one message. First message.

“Seamus McCree, this is Robert Rand. Please call me at your convenience concerning a situation of which I have recently become aware. Thank you.”

Good grief. Hastings must have called Rand to see if the offer was legitimate before talking to her captain. Why hadn’t I thought to call Rand and get his approval? *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* I grabbed pen and paper and dialed my boss’s number. “Robert, this is Seamus. I’m sorry I didn’t call you earlier.”

“Perfectly all right.” He spoke in tones I associated with private northeastern schools and Ivy League colleges. “Are you cognizant of the Memorial Day picnic disaster in Chillicothe?”

With relief I crumpled into a chair, my execution stayed. I smiled at *cognizant* and wondered if he knew about the pool among CIG employees for the first person to catch him using a contraction. Probably.

“I recall the story on NPR.”

Thirty-seven had died in Chillicothe. Roughly a hundred and fifty hospitalized. The picnic, in a park overlooking the Scioto River, was the annual outing of union retirees of Chillicothe Machine Company.

“The public story,” Rand said, “is that the botulism came from the green beans. They did not report that the potato salad was also contaminated.”

“So murder,” I said.

“Correct. According to Ross County’s Sheriff Lyons, the picnic occurred outside the Chillicothe city limits, which is why the sheriff’s department is leading the investigation. They know what was done, but not why or by whom. They have requested our assistance in trying to determine a financial motive. I know you have been hankering to get into the field. I thought this might be a good match to test whether you like it. Interested?”

“Sounds like a puzzler, and Chillicothe isn’t far from here.”

“Do I understand that as agreement to undertake this assignment? Your contact at the sheriff’s office will be Detective Albert Wright. Once you two talk, let me know what resources you will require. Questions?”

“Our standard contract, I assume? Have we ever worked with them?”

“This is our debut. The sheriff is an elected official, which may be the impetus. Wright heads their task force on corporate crime. That is the mechanism they are using to contract with us.” A short pause. “Anything else?”

“See any land mines?”

A quick laugh. “No, I do not anticipate any, but who knows what you might find on your path. Remember, our function is to assist. You will be deputized, but that has more to do with liability than anything else. I look forward to your report. And Seamus? Thank you.”

“Before we finish,” I said, “there’s something else I need to talk with you about.”

“Pray tell?”

In a one-breath burst, I told him about Skyler Weaver and how Lt. Hastings had surprised me by agreeing to meet before I had a chance to pass it by him. When I came up for air, his only comment was that he would await contact from the Cincinnati Police Department before considering the issue further. I figured he thought the chances were too small to waste his time over. I apologized again, thanked him, and signed off.

Because I was one of two people in the world without call waiting—I never understood the reason to put on hold someone I wanted to talk with in order to answer a call from someone I might not want to talk with—I checked to make sure Paddy hadn’t called while I was on the phone with Rand. He hadn’t. I considered calling him again, but that wouldn’t accomplish anything. Paddy knew how to check his voicemail. Instead I called Wright.

“Detective Wright.” His voice rumbled, low and gravelly. Abraded vocal cords from twenty years of cigarette smoke? I introduced myself.

“Shay-mus?” he said. “That’s how you pronounce it?”

“I thought about changing it to Bob, but I never got around to it.”

I had hoped for a chuckle. Instead I sensed anger in his statement: “Tell me what you’re gonna do to help me.”

Having CIG’s help was clearly not Wright’s idea. “Until we talk,” I said, “I honestly don’t know. How about I drive up from Cincinnati tomorrow? Whenever’s good. We can discuss your case and how CIG might assist.”

He gave me directions to a diner called Sue’s Home Cooking, where he agreed to meet me for breakfast. He wanted to “get it out of the way” before he started his workday.

I had between now and tomorrow morning to worry about how I could disarm land mine number one without blowing up myself or CIG in the process.

I checked voicemail: still nothing from Paddy.

THE UNIQUE CLATTER OF PADDY’S Civic pulling into my driveway clued me in that my nineteen-year-old son was visiting from New Jersey, where he was spending the summer with his mother. Once out of the car, he closed his eyes and rolled his shoulders, stretching muscles and showing off his well-developed pecs. We’re the same height and had weighed the same 185 pounds until he traded soccer for crew. Rowing added fifteen pounds and filled out his lithe frame with muscle.

“This is a surprise,” I said, rushing out to meet him. “You look great.” We embraced in a quick squeeze with multiple back slaps. Slapping his back was like patting a pommel horse. Never had my muscles felt that strong.

“You don’t look bad yourself . . . for a relic from the Mesozoic era.”

“So now you think I lived with the dinosaurs? I returned your call. I assume it was to tell me you were coming? How long are you here for?”

He shrugged. “Probably until school starts.”

“Really? I don’t have food for you and—we have stores. I can get some. It’s been a while since we’ve had much time together.” I blathered away to cover my concern about why he was here instead of at his mother’s.

Paddy grabbed two plastic bins containing his clothes and personal items. Two kittens tumbled out of the car and followed their pied piper into the house. I brought up the rear with a litter box, food dish, and cat food. In our second trip, we emptied the trunk of his laptop, color printer, scanner, and four speakers—better quality than those in my stereo system—and settled everything into his bedroom on the second floor.

“Who are the kittens? I haven’t heard about them.”

“Just got them. Strays I rescued. Cheech and Chong, although they’re sisters, but what the hey. They’re hilarious. You’ll see.” He stretched, opening his chest and pulling his shoulder blades together. “Anyhow, I wasn’t getting along with Mom, so I figured a change in venue would be better for everyone. I guess I should let her know what I’m doing.”

“She doesn’t know?” My voice reached tenor range.

He shot me a dirty look. “Fine. I’ll call her now.” He stomped up the stairs and into his room.

I poured a glass of merlot, parked in the recliner in the library, and listened to Copland’s “Quiet City.” Paddy and I had graduated from the “What did you do?”—“Nothing,” “Where did you go?”—“Nowhere,” “Who were you with?”—“No one” stage of parenting. The library had been our neutral room then: the room with two chairs facing the same direction; the room where we sought resolution of confrontations caused by teenage angst and a single father’s attempts to cope with it. I hoped it still was.

Cheech or Chong, I didn’t yet know who was who, jumped onto my lap, grabbing my leg with sharp kitten claws to gain purchase. My yelp elicited a lovable purr. Her sandpaper tongue licked my hand. She circled twice before settling on my lap and promptly fell asleep while I ran my hand through her silken black and white fur. Paddy clomped down the stairs fifteen minutes later, grabbed a soda from the refrigerator, and plunked into the other chair.

“Mom says hello and good luck.”

“Will I need the luck?”

“Don’t we all?” Silence.

I’ve found most people loathe even a five-second pause in conversation. I never had that problem and could usually get people to talk using my silence. Paddy knew that trick. I figured he was in charge of this discussion. It might happen today or tonight. It might not happen until tomorrow. I sure hoped he wouldn’t wait until it was too late, as I had with my father.

Over the years, Paddy and I had sized each other up. We knew who could arm wrestle better (him), who had the faster reflexes for slap hands (me), and who was likely to win which card and board games (overall, about even). We knew the exterior traits. We didn't know much else.

He cleared his throat. "I suppose you're wondering what's going on?"

"The question had crossed my mind, but since I have no short-term memory anymore, it didn't leave tracks." I sipped the wine and raised my eyebrows to elicit a laugh.

He smiled. "I needed space. Mom's acting like I'm still a kid."

"Meaning what? I haven't spoken to her in a while."

"She doesn't like me holing up in my room working on computers. She thinks I should be getting out more, being sociable."

"Oh?"

"I lose track of time when I'm doing something interesting. I have a whole community I interact with. People I know from school or here or I've met on the Internet. Anyway, Mom didn't like me becoming nocturnal on her."

"I thought you had a day job."

"They pay me to write computer code. They don't care jack when I do it, as long as I meet my deadlines. I only went to the office to pick up my check. Everything else I did online. You know, I submit work, they send review comments back, we trade test plans, all that stuff. They agreed I didn't have to come in anymore, and I started working at night. You still have decent Internet, right?"

"Yep."

"Pay's great for a summer job. No future in it, though. Only way you make money in tech is to start a company. Anyway . . ." He finished his Pepsi and ran his fingers through curly locks in a gesture I knew well. "That's not the real issue. Mom's seeing some guy and he's a jerk."

We sat there, the Jerk perched on the table between us. I spent the silence wondering if Paddy still harbored hope his mom and I would get back together. I'd told him more than once that would never happen.

"You okay, Dad? You look tired."

"Sorry, thinking. The guy's a jerk?"

"Yeah. So, what are you working on these days? Anything interesting?"

"Last week I would've said not much. Now I have a couple of

possibilities.” He had heard about the botulism murders in Chillicothe. I also told him about the outside chance of working on the Presser murder.

He rolled his neck. “I should get the computer set up and get some work done before I crash. Tomorrow I’ll get a gym membership and stop at the grocery store and pick up some stuff I need for cooking.”

I was about to tell him to take it easy. He had driven ten hours from Jersey and should have dinner and get some rest. Fortunately, I remembered how well I took the same advice at his age, and he’d already told me he was a night owl.

After a rice and veggie dinner, I planned to spend the rest of the evening scouring the Internet for information about the Chillicothe picnic in preparation for meeting Detective Wright. First, I called Skyler Weaver and filled her in on my lunch with Lt. Hastings. She was jubilant and I unsuccessfully tried to convince her that the odds CPD would approve the idea were one in a million.

Paddy joined me in my third-floor study and decided entering “Chillicothe murder” into a browser and reading *Chillicothe Gazette* archives was more fun than writing code.

Again, I found myself biting my tongue.

In addition to the thirty-seven dead, three people were still critical. Paddy and I read silently about botulism, a neuroparalytic disease induced by the organism *Clostridium botulinum*.

“Why botulism?” Paddy asked. “Why not arsenic or rat poison? Seems like they’d be more effective.”

We read about death rates. Before 1950, about 60 percent of those with food-borne botulism died. Now only 5 to 10 percent did, although because of the advanced age of the victims, the rate had been higher in Chillicothe.

“Got to be a reason,” I said.

“Jeez, that’s enlightening.”

I let it pass. The victims ranged from seventeen, a kid who had worked for the caterer, to eighty-seven, the oldest person at the picnic. The kid was younger than Paddy. I couldn’t imagine how his parents must feel.

“Hey, Dad. Looks like you’re second string on this. Feds took this puppy over for a while, but they decided it wasn’t terrorism and dropped it two weeks ago.”

“I prefer to think they finally decided to play the first string. You know when the going gets tough, the—”

“Tough get going. I heard that somewhere. Doesn’t look like much else’s here. I should too—get going on work, that is.” He walked out the door, calling over his shoulder, “Why would someone want to kill a bunch of old people?”

Sample

FOUR

IN GEORGIA, THE MOONLESS NIGHT painted the landscape a uniform dark. With night-vision goggles, he had little need for moon or stars. The landscaped evergreens provided ample protection to scout the grounds. For more than two hours he had perched in the pine nearest the main building, observing so quietly a screech owl joined him in the tree. No security guards patrolled outside. How many penguins were in there? A hundred? Probably more. At ten grand a head, he was well into seven digits.

The last light in the building had blinked out shortly past midnight, leaving only the faint red glow of exit signs leaking from stairwell windows. Thirty minutes earlier, a doe had grazed on bushes close to the main building and hadn't triggered any motion sensor lights. Time to explore.

He slipped through the night to the back door. Using his body as a shield, he illuminated the lock with a penlight. A simple cylinder. He extinguished the light and selected a pick from his case. The nearby air-conditioning units running full blast drowned out any sound he made entering the basement.

As the cooler interior air with its hint of mold hit him, he realized how uncomfortable it had been outside in the heat. While waiting and watching, he had ignored the sweat trickling between his shoulder blades. The full-body camouflage was a useful safeguard, but hot. He surveyed the basement and found the furnace room ahead and on the left—precisely matching the building permit records. Besides the special apparatus and a few tools, all he would need on the big night was a stepladder to reach the ductwork.

His reconnoiter in the main building accomplished, he slipped out the door and explored the garage and toolshed until he found where they stored ladders. His smile shone from beneath the brown, green, and black face paint. Softly whistling “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” he melded with the night.