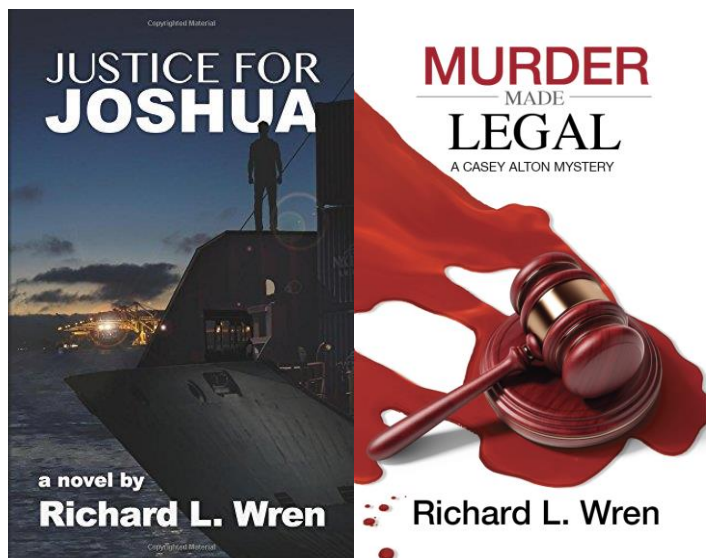


A RICHARD L. WREN MYSTERY-ADVENTURE NOVEL SAMPLER



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Rogan and Casey Alton & Smitty

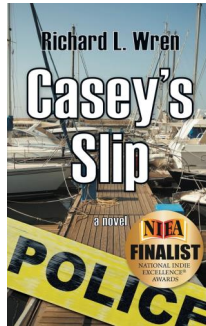
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Also by Richard Wren (and Loyd Auerbach)

Self-Publishing: It Ain't Rocket Science (2015)

Poor Richard Publishers, Lafayette, CA

Introduction

I'd like to introduce you to the characters and stories of my mystery-adventure novels. Two of my novels feature Yosemite Park Ranger (and martial arts master) Joshua Rogan. The other two feature unusual detectives: Casey Alton, a self-proclaimed sailboat bum, and Smitty Smith, former head of a biker gang.

To do this, I've written two new short stories, each featuring my rather atypical crime solvers.

I've also included short excerpts from each of my four novels (four so far, of course – a new Joshua Rogan novel is in the works).

Naturally, I'm doing this to get you to read my novels.

But there's more:

If you go to my website, www.rlwren.com, and sign up for my occasional email newsletter, I'll send you a free PDF of my first novel, CASEY'S SLIP.

Without further ado...

CASEY & SMITTY

GO FISHING

And catch something they don't want.

By Richard L. Wren

To any not familiar with the Casey Alton series

Casey Rogan: Late 20's college drop-out, happy go-lucky gypsy California coast sail boat captain until he's forced to join forces with the leader of the Oakland Devils motorcycle gang forces when they're both accused of the same murder.

Smitty Smith: Aging somewhat reformed leader of the Oakland Devils motorcycle gang with a violent history and an entirely different definition of what's legal and what's not legal than his attorney daughter.

In the first novel, CASEY'S SLIP, the two are thrown together to solve a murder they're wrongly accused of committing.

CASEY & SMITTY GO FISHING

“What the hell was that?” Smitty shouted. They were cruising slowly just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, trolling for salmon. Casey jumped forward and shut off the engine. “Doesn’t sound good, does it?” he answered in the sudden quiet.

They had been trolling for a couple of hours with no luck when suddenly the boat had shuddered, slowed down and a loud knocking sound had started.

“Sounds like it’s from under the boat, give it a rest and start it up again, maybe it’s something that’ll float away.” Smitty suggested.

Casey looked around them at the open sea. They were about two miles offshore and maybe five miles north of the Golden Gate. Not a good place to lose an engine.

“You ever repair a diesel at sea?” he asked Smitty.

“Hell yes,” he replied boisterously. “There ain’t no maritime or motorcycle engine I haven’t repaired, land or sea.”

Casey knew that was an exaggeration but with Smittys lifelong history with motorcycle gangs and ownership of many boats there was probably lots of truth to his bravado.

He waited a few minutes and pressed the starter. The engine caught immediately and sounded sweet but the heavy knocking was still there. He quickly switched off again. “It’s rhythmical and steady and it’s not the engine.” Casey said.

“I think you’re right,” Smitty agreed while lowering himself into the engine compartment. “Give it a quick start again while I’m down here.”

Casey started the engine again then quickly stopped it after just a few revolutions. “Definitely not the engine and not the drive shaft, at least not in here.”

Casey heaved a huge sigh. It was if he had seen this coming from the first knock but had hoped against hope he was wrong. “You mean it’s something underneath and one of us has to dive down to find it and it’s probably not you.”

Smitty smiled a knowing smile, “Yep, I’m much too old to do something like that.”

“Guess I’m stuck. Whatever made me want to be your son-in-law?”

Smitty laughed. “Maybe my bubbling personality?” He paused theatrically. “Or more likely my beautiful daughter?”

Josh ignored him. “We sure as hell can’t use the engine until we find out what kind of damage we’re doing. The only thing I can think of is a bent drive shaft or prop blade.”

Smitty scratched his head. “That’s kinda’ what I was thinking too.”

Casey struggled into a wet suit and lowered himself over the side. Smitty had insisted on lashing a line onto him, “just in case.”

In a short time, Casey popped back up onto the surface. “You’ll never believe it. It’s about two or three feet of nylon line wrapped

tight around the shaft with a float still attached to it. The float's what was banging against the boat."

"Can you cut it loose?"

"That's part of the problem. The heat from the drive shaft melted the nylon and now it's just one big blob of plastic around the shaft, but I think I can cut the float free." With that he freed his belt knife and dove back under.

Smitty was beginning to get worried about how long he was under when a large red and white float popped up to the surface followed by Casey a second later.

"Got it!" he sputtered waving a piece of blue plastic line in his hand. "Somethin' else too."

Smitty used a boat hook to snare the float while Casey clambered aboard. "That the line you had to cut?"

"That's it. I think we snagged the float then the line wrapped around the shaft and we stopped so quick the line didn't snap."

"What about the melted plastic on the shaft? Do the shaft and prop look okay?"

"Think so, give it a try." Smitty pressed the ignition key, the engine roared to life, the knocking sound was gone. Smitty heaved a sigh of relief while Casey took off the wet suit and said, "it didn't look too bad, just a hard, lopsided lump on the drive shaft, not hitting anything. We might take it little easy on the way in, just in case. What do you think?" Casey was purposely deferring to Smitty, after all it was Smitty's boat.

"I think she sounds fine now, not a quiver. What about the line?" he asked pointing to the line Casey had fastened to a cleat along the railing. "You got my curiosity aroused now. Usually the floats attached to a crab pot but I don't see any others around."

Casey said, "Something's not right. What wrapped around the shaft was the extra line tied to the float. I'm pretty sure the float was supposed to stay beneath the water surface and it was just an accident we ran into the floating end of the line."

"I've heard about guys doing that. They get so pissed off at other crab boats ripping off their traps they hide their floats underwater and then find them with a combination GPS and fish finder, could be."

"Yeah but you said this isn't crabbing water here."

Smitty stood up and took a careful look at the shore. "You're right. Actually it's totally illegal to go after crab here."

"So?" Casey strung out.

Smitty slowly responded. "So I wonder what's at the other end of the line." He walked over to the line, grabbed it below where it was cleated and started heaving. "It's coming. Slow and heavy but it's coming," he snorted.

Casey walked over to help him. For a few minutes they heaved together until Smitty secured the line on a cleat and said, "that's too much work, let's put it on a winch."

The winch instantly made a difference. Turning the handle was easy but each full turn only took in about six inches of line. Gradually they made progress until about fifty feet of line was coiled at their feet behind the winch. Casey was the first to see anything.

"It's not a crab pot. Way too big!" he announced.

They took another ten turns on the winch. "It's a chest of some sort." Casey noted.

"Whatever it is it's heavy," Smitty said. "I think if we slide it around to the stern we can use the dinghy hoist to haul it in."

"Hold it." Casey said. "If this is something illegal like drugs maybe we're being watched right now."

Smitty took another turn around the cleat and they both stood to scan the horizon. There were no other boats in sight. "Where're your binocs?" Casey asked. "I want to scan the headlands. Who knows, they could be keeping a watch on the spot from there." He thoroughly swept the headlands jutting out from the mainland and saw nothing suspicious.

They walked the line to the stern, secured it to the dinghy davits and started pulling the chest to the surface. The last twenty or so feet of the line to the chest were replaced with much heavier rope. "Whatever it is they expected to hoist it up again onto something," Smitty said eyeing the much stronger rope.

They carefully hoisted the chest aboard and watched water pouring out of several holes drilled on its lower sides. Somebody had carefully secured a rope harness around the chest so that it had been in no danger of breaking away from its mooring.

"Now what," Casey asked.

"This." Smitty answered and pulling out his knife from its scabbard started slashing the ropes. "Nobody's watching, now's the time."

In a moment the ropes fell away and the chest was totally exposed. It was a green metal chest with thin reinforcing strips of bare metal running around it from top to bottom. It had two hasps holding the lid down, each locked closed with heavy wire. No padlocks.

Smitty deftly untwisted the wires and with a gesture threw the chest lid open dramatically saying, “open sesame,” then stepped forward and looked inside.

“Oh crap,” he mumbled and stepped backwards, “it’s a body.”

Casey shouldered him aside, looked down at the body for a moment and said, “it’s a young girl, really young.”

“Christ, now what?” Smitty said, mostly to himself. He grabbed Casey’s arm and swung him around. “Maybe tie the whole thing up and put it back, nobody knows we were here.” He let go of Casey’s arm and pounded his fist into his hand. “Forget I said that. I suppose we better turn her in, question is where? Sure as hell, not the police.”

Casey immediately agreed to that. Neither he or Smitty wanted anything to do with the police anytime, anywhere. Smitty’s long association with a dangerous local motorcycle club and Casey’s more recent affiliation by marrying Smitty’s daughter were enough to raise the hackles of police. Add to that their recent successful taking down of a corrupt local district attorney and it was understandable why they were persona non grata at most police departments.

Casey took a closer look at the body. “She can’t have been here long and there’re no wounds I can see.”

Smitty cautioned him, “don’t move her, we’ll have enough trouble explaining this without you poking around.”

“Right,” Casey agreed. “But there’s something else in here, underneath her. There has to be, it’s way too heavy.” He closed the lid, replaced the wire fasteners and started retying the binding. Suddenly he snapped his fingers.

“Got it,” he exclaimed. “Get on the horn and call the Coast Guard. Tell them what we found and that we’re heading toward their docks with the chest. We’ll dump it all into the Coast Guard’s hands. With any luck we’ll end up just being a postscript to the whole thing.”

Casey kicked the engine into gear and started back toward the Golden Gate Bridge while Smitty tried to raise the Coast Guard. When he told them they had found a chest with a body in it in the ocean just north of the Gate, the operator immediately ordered them to stay put. Smitty told them it was too late they were already half way to the Coast Guard station but they had the GPS location where they had found the chest.

“We’re sending a boat to meet you.”

Casey wasn’t surprised when shortly thereafter he spotted a small cutter come roaring out of the entrance to the bay. The station was just inside the Golden Gate and the Coast Guard was famous for their quick response time.

The Coast Guard vessel deftly sidled up next to them and in a moment they were side-tied together. An officer came aboard, examined the outside of the chest, declined to re-open it saying that would be a job for their forensic department, heard their story, examined and recorded Smitty’s ownership papers, made copies of their I.D.’s, loaded the chest on their boat and ordered Smitty to follow them to the Coast Guard dock.

At the dock two young seamen handed mooring lines to Casey and courteously asked them to remain with the boat. They watched as the chest was unloaded and taken into a sterile looking white building. An hour went by. Smitty was about ready to raise some hell when a delegation of two officers and 4 enlisted men strode purposely toward them. Smitty eyed them dubiously.

“Would both of you step off your boat please?”

“What the hell?” Smitty blustered.

“I’m sorry sir, but there was something in the chest beside the girl’s body which requires that we search your boat. It’s for your own protection.”

Casey’s mind immediately jumped to the thought of something radioactive. He grabbed Smitty’s arm, “C’mon, we don’t have anything to hide.”

Three of the seamen and one of the officers were on the boat for over a half hour. Casey and Smitty watched them from ashore. It was if they were looking for something specific. Something not too large judging by where they looked as they conducted a thorough bow to stern search. The officer was the last to disembark and he gave a “thank you, sir” and a smart salute to Smitty as he walked by.

Smitty reached out and grabbed his arm. “Hold it,” he barked. “What the fuck’s going on?”

The officer said, “Sir, all I can tell you is that there was contraband in the chest and we needed to make sure that none had been removed before you handed the chest over and you’re free to go.” He shook his arm free and walked away.

Smitty was livid. “They got a lot of nerve. We coulda’ left that poor girl there and nobody’d be the wiser and that’s the thanks we get. Screw them.”

Casey calmed him down. “Relax, Smitty. We did the right thing and now we’re out of it, that’s what we wanted right? Let’s get outa’ here and head for home.”

The fired the engine up, cast off and headed for the Brooklyn basin harbor on the Oakland side of the bay. An hour later the boat was securely berthed and they were on their way to Smitty’s home high in the Oakland hills. On the way they discussed whether or not they should mention finding the chest and the body to Josie.

Casey laughed, “We’ve only been married a few months but she’s been your daughter for years, you think you can keep a secret from her?”

Smitty joined him. “Okay. We tell her, but no one else, right?”

As Smitty coasted to a stop in his driveway he said, “some of the guy’s are here,” pointing to four motorcycles clustered in front of the garage door.

“Down in the basement guzzling up all your beer,” I bet.”

“And what else is new?” Smitty agreed.

At the front door their agreement to share the day’s happenings quickly became moot. Josie was waiting with a message.

“What in hell have you two been up to? I got a real threatening message a few minutes ago, what’s going on?”

Smitty answered. “It’s a long story, what was the message?”

Josie led them into the kitchen where coffee was ready. "It was kind of long and garbled so I took notes. He said something about watching you two fishing and that he'd been using a telescope from the headland to track you and that whatever you thought you had found it was theirs and they wanted it back and were willing to kill to get it and you're supposed to meet them tonight at eleven at your boat dock." She said it all in one breath without stopping. "So what's this all about?" She added.

Smitty looked perplexed. "How'd they find me? Who are these people?"

Josie answered. "Oh yeah. He said he'd copied your registration number from the boat and pulled some strings to find you."

"That must have been one strong telescope." Casey observed.

"All right you two, quit stalling. What's going on?"

They brought Josey up to date quickly. She then applied her background as an attorney and experience in the district attorney's office to their problem.

"Amazingly, you two miscreants made the right decision by going to the Coast Guard so your skirts are clean there. Did the Coast Guard say anything about the body?"

"No but we knew there was something else in the chest because it was so heavy. We didn't move the body to look."

Josey made a decision. "As your attorney I need to contact the Coast Guard and tell them about the phone call."

After a short discussion, Smitty reluctantly agreed. "But for Christ's sake, keep the police out of it," was his final summation.

Once she explained she was an attorney representing the boat owner that had found the chest and why she was calling she was asked to wait and put on hold for a short time then a series of clicks and a voice.

"This is commander John Lucich of the CGIS. You say you got a phone call demanding the chest you found?" The voice was deep and commanding.

"My clients did, yes." Josie replied. She put a hand over the phone and whispered to Smitty, "CGIS?"

"Coast Guard Investigative Service," he whispered back.

"Did they leave a phone number or any way to contact them?" The officer asked.

"No but they threatened that they were ready to kill to get the chest."

"So they think your clients still have it."

"Obviously, and my clients want some protection."

"Hold on for a moment?" he asked. Shortly he came back, "Where are you?" Josie told him where there home was. "All three of you?" he asked.

When she told him that was the case he issued an order to her, "all three of you stay where you are. I'm bringing a contingent with me, we'll be there within a half-hour. We need to catch this group and

I think we need your help to do it. In the mean-time take any phone calls you get and if it's them agree to anything they say, got it?"

Josey was skeptical. "A half hour from Sausalito?"

"Your call was transferred to me here at Coast Guard Island, just across from where your client's boat is moored." He hung up.

"I never heard of the CGIS," Casey said.

"Been around forever." Smitty told him. "They can operate like a police force anywhere the Coast Guard is authorized to go, anywhere in the world."

"But this seems like a criminal case to me," Josie interrupted.

"They're authorized." Smitty shrugged, then added. "Good hands to be in, I think."

In less than a half hour two sedans pulled up in front of Smitty's house. Evidently the officer's research hadn't been complete enough to include Smitty's background and his face registered surprise at the number of motorcycles in the driveway at this upscale neighborhood.

Two officers emerged from the first car, introduced themselves and suggested they move into the house. Four enlisted men stayed inside the second car.

Casey recognized the three bars on the sleeve of the commander and confronted him.

"Commander, we're sure as hell not happy about you ordering us to stay put. We found a crate at sea, turned it over to the Coast Guard and expected that to be the end of it. So what the hell is the threat we're getting all about?"

The commander didn't waste any time. "First things first, the group that contacted you is very dangerous as you can surmise by the fact they killed the young girl you found. They're what's left of an underground group that the FBI has been tracking for over two years. Because of what you found we think we can catch them, but we need your help."

Josie raised her voice. "I don't think we're interested in helping, it sounds dangerous and you have lots of help available."

Smitty added, "I don't see why they are so interested in the case or the body of the young girl. That doesn't make sense to me."

The commander held up his hand like a traffic cop. "There's more. I think the officer that searched your boat said something about contraband?"

"But he didn't find anything." Casey interjected.

"And that's why we let you go. That would have been the end of it except for the phone call you got. What we were looking for was gold ingots. We found out they stole this gold from a mint supply store in Seattle, Washington so they could travel anywhere in the world. More precisely, highly negotiable gold bars. That's what we were looking for. We found close to three hundred, ten-ounce gold bars in the bottom of the case, worth over four million dollars and wanted to make sure you hadn't walked off with any."

Casey made a quick calculation. "That's almost two hundred pounds, I wondered why the case seemed so heavy."

Josey was more concerned about the young girl. "But what about the girl? Do you know who she is?"

“Not yet. We’re running fingerprints on her now. “Our medical examiner said she might have been suffocated but he wasn’t yet sure.” The commander seemed almost callous in his brevity.

“It’s the money they desperately want and they think you have it so we want to set a trap and we need you to do it.”

“I thought as much.” Smitty said, throwing his arms up in the air. “You probably want us to agree to meet them and try to trap them somehow.”

“That’s correct,” the commander told them. “But we need to trap them in the act, as it were. They either have to take the gold or the chest physically into their possession for us to arrest them. That means you have to meet them and act as if you’re taking their threat very seriously when you let them take the chest.”

Josey objected strenuously. “I don’t like it. These guys already killed that young girl, who’s to say they don’t just haul off and kill my husband and my dad?”

“A couple of things. We assume they’ve already determined the case isn’t on the boat, that would have been the first thing they did, so they need you two alive.” He pointed at Casey and Smitty. Beyond that we already have your boat completely surrounded so you’ll be completely safe.”

Casey pointed out a flaw in their plan. “How can you trap them with the case when the actual case is not there?”

“Ah, but it is. You see you’re just as greedy as they are. Once you found the gold in the bottom of the chest you got rid of the body and hid the chest on your friend’s tugboat.”

“You mean Andy’s tug?”

“Exactly. You meet them, reluctantly divulge the chest’s whereabouts and lead them to it. When they check the contents, we got them! The important thing is you must convince them they need you to get to the chest.”

Smitty, who was often on his friend’s tug said, “that’d be pretty easy to do.”

Josey shot him a dirty look. “It still sounds awfully dangerous they’ll probably have guns.”

“Not as many as we have, besides there’s a reward for information leading to their capture. I think it’s around forty thousand dollars.”

Casey and Smitty looked at each other for a grinning second, then simultaneously nodded. “We’ll do it,” Smitty said.

Josey shook her head in disbelief.

“Good,” the commander said. “here’s the plan. You drive down there about ten thirty, we’ll have two armed men concealed in the back seat. Get on the boat and wait. We’ll have plenty of men there but you won’t see them. Act afraid, play up to their sense of control and do what they ask. Make up a story about how you got rid of the body and found the gold. Be willing to just get out from under. We’ll have night vision glasses on you the full time. The chest’s suspended under water from the stern davit. We thought the thugs would buy that coming from you and it keeps everybody on deck in full view. They’ll need you to retrieve it.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Smitty offered.

“Then what?” Casey demanded.

“The moment they touch the chest searchlight will light them up and a dozen or more guns will be trained on them. Men will appear as if by magic surrounding them and you two will drop to the deck. It’ll all be over in a second.”

“What about the gold, is it really there?”

“Absolutely. We need to catch them with it. As soon as they’re cuffed you will be free to go with our thanks.”

“And maybe a reward.” Smitty added.

The commander repeated the instructions, left two armed sailors with them and left.

The two sailors were somewhat startled to see four middle aged, burly bikers emerge from the basement rooms when Smitty asked, “it’s going on six, who’s for Chinese?”

After introductions were made and explanations were given for the uniformed sailor’s holstered guns, Chinese food was sent for. The sailors helped wash the dishes and talked about their homes until it was time to leave.

Smitty parked his car as close as he could get and he and Casey walked down the ramp to the boat. The two sailors quietly got out and hid themselves behind a nearby building. Except for the lapping of the water against the boats it was very quiet. Casey glanced at his watch, a half-hour to go.

Across the ramp and two boats down he could see Andy’s tug faintly visible in the moonlight. As eleven approached Casey began to think they should be armed. It seemed more and more dangerous waiting unarmed to meet dangerous killers by arrangement at a deserted harbor.

“Why did we agree to this dumb idea?” he whispered to Smitty.

A few moments later a car quietly coasted up beside Smitty’s. Smitty poked Casey’s arm and pointed. They both watched the car for several minutes until both of the cars doors opened and two men got out. Casey noted that the dome light had not gone on when the doors opened and he reasoned they were being very careful. One of the men turned a flashlight on and inspected the inside of Smitty’s car. They then stood silently listening until one of them abruptly shone his flashlight on Casey and Smitty. It was a strong light and succeeded in blinding both of them so they couldn’t watch the men approach. One of them stayed on the dock with the flashlight while the other boarded and jammed a gun in Smitty’s back.

“Where is it?” he demanded.

Casey was worried about the gun and volunteered, “it’s not on the boat.” Quick as a flash the man palmed the gun in his hand and swung it hard across Casey’s temple. “I asked you where it is, not where is ain’t,” he snarled. He jabbed the gun back into Smitty’s back and Casey heard the unmistakable sound of a revolver being cocked from the dock.

Smitty and Casey both put their hands up in the air, acting as submissive as they could. “Right over there.” Smitty said, pointing at the tug. “It’s all there,” he added. Smitty stole a glance at Casey. His forehead was bleeding profusely.

The gunman jammed his gun harder into Smitty’s back. “So you opened it?” he spat.

Casey needed to take control of the moment. He blurted out, “We got rid of the body, she’s deep in the middle of the bay.”

“Son of a bitch,” the one on the dock exclaimed.

“Go on,” the one on the boat said accompanied by another prod from the gun.

Casey had a story ready. “We took her out and wrapped her up in a blanket then decided to take her to the Coast Guard station but on the way we noticed the wrapped packages in the bottom. When we saw what was inside we decided to wait a couple of days and see what happened, maybe we could keep the gold. So we weighed her body down and put her back in the sea where we found her.”

They guy with the gun asked the other, “what d’ya think?”

Without a moment’s hesitation he answered. “Makes sense to me, let’s get the crate and get the hell out of here.”

Once more the gun jabbed hard. “Take us,” he commanded.

The rest went like clock-work except when Smitty was pistol whipped by the guy with the gun because the davit jammed and he grew impatient. Casey expected the Coast Guard to jump out of hiding to protect Smitty but nothing happened. When the case came dripping out of the water the men dragged it aboard and rushed to get at its insides.

In a few minutes the top was opened and they had boxed gold in their hands. At that exact moment searchlights flashed on, commands to freeze were heard, one of the men ran for the dock and the other dove into the water. The two sailors from Smitty’s car were waiting at the head of the dock, guns drawn, and that one was captured. When the one that dove into the water came up and found he was surrounded by Coast Guard boats and sailors, he turned on his back and surrendered. Not a shot was fired. A Coast Guard cutter

pulled up, searchlights ablaze, and tied up to the tugboat. The two men were handcuffed and together with the chest were offloaded onto the cutter. A dozen armed men appeared out of the darkness and jumped aboard.

Casey and Smitty sat on their boat and watched the Coast Guard quickly and efficiently wrap up the operation. Just as the cutter was casting off its lines, the commander and his two sailors came down the dock.

Casey stopped them. "Is that it? It's all over?"

The commander reached over and shook hands with each of them. "It went well didn't it. We got both men and retrieved all the gold without a shot being fired."

"But what about the girl, what about her?"

"There's still no identification. There's no record of her fingerprints on file anywhere and she doesn't fit the description of any missing person. Unless those two admit something it looks like she'll never be identified."

"So unless they confess, she remains a nobody?"

"It's a shame but you're right. By the way, for a number of reasons this whole operation remains a secret. It will not be publicized and it probably won't come to trial."

"Which means you don't want us talking about it either I guess." Smitty asked.

"Can we rely on you for that?"

"Anything for the Coast Guard." Smitty replied.

The commander started to leave then turned back. “Oh, I almost forgot. About the reward. It totals over forty-five thousand but I’m afraid you won’t get it. It seems that your daughter’s firm is listed as an associate at the Martinez District Attorney’s office and you two are listed as her employees and as such you’re ineligible for any reward.” With that he swung aboard the cutter and it pulled away, leaving Smitty and Casey speechless.

After several minutes of silence during which they absorbed what they had just heard, Smitty turned to Casey and with a perplexed look on his face said,

“No trial, no identification for the dead girl and no reward, what the hell just happened?

Casey absorbed the question for a minute then rose to his feet and stepped over to the dock as Smitty looked at the caked blood on his forehead.

“Nothing. That’s what happened, Smitty. Absolutely nothing.”

THE END.

YELLOWSTONE JUSTICE

A Joshua Rogan Adventure Short Story

Richard L. Wren

To those not familiar with the Joshua Rogan adventures:

Joshua Rogan: World champion Karate, Ninja and Parkour expert and a walking lethal weapon, doubles as a married Yosemite Park Ranger to avoid unwanted publicity. He spends his spare time with the remaining Native American Indians in the valley, absorbing their forest survival, tracking and fighting techniques. He's continuously confronted with dangerous situation that only he can solve.

YELLOWSTONE JUSTICE

PROLOGUE

“David, are you okay?”

David replied in an eleven-year-old voice tired of being constantly reminded about the right way to do things. “Yeah Dad, I found a low branch and dug a deep hole, just like you said.”

David, along with his mom and his dad were on the second day of a long planned, back to nature, camping trip in the wilderness section of Yellowstone National Park. David’s dad was a stickler for protecting the environment. He gave David specific instructions on how to relieve him-self in the wilds without leaving a trace for others to find.

“Find a low branch or log low enough to sit on and small enough so that you can extend your ass far enough to clear the log. Then dig a hole deep enough to completely bury your poop and when you’re done, cover it up”

Usually David’s dad would never use the words ass or poop to his son, but on a camping trip this far from civilization, it seemed appropriate.

It took David so long to find an appropriate log he worried about accidentally filling his pants. Just in time he found the right log, dug a hole, pulled a comic book out of his hip pocket, dropped his pants and sat down. He was barely able to see his parents through the brush. They were starting a fire for their evening meal.

He planned on dragging this business out long enough so that he could get out of some of the unpacking chores. Deeply engrossed as

only a preteen could be in his book, he was only vaguely aware of the sounds his parents were making. A few minutes went by and suddenly the undercurrent of sound from his parents stopped.

He looked up and was startled to see that a ragged and dirty looking, heavily bearded man had silently materialized at the edge of the campground. He was just standing there silently staring at his parents. His Mom and Dad straightened up, his mom holding a frying pan in her hands, and were staring back at the man in astonishment.

After a moment the man called out to his parents, “any chance of getting some canned food from you guys?”

His parents were obviously unhappy with the intrusion of someone looking so disreputable. They were silent for a moment while the man slowly approached them. When he spoke his voice was low and gravelly. “I could use some of your food.”

His dad spoke. “Gee, I’m sorry but we just barely have enough to survive ourselves for the next few days.”

The man continued to advance toward them and in a more demanding voice asked again. “I bet you got plenty of food, you just don’t wanna’ share it.”

David’s dad, without taking his eyes off the approaching and menacing man, backed up and reached behind him for an axe leaning against a rock and in a conciliatory voice said, “be reasonable. We deliberately just packed enough food for a few days and we can’t share anything.” As he spoke he took another step backwards while at the same time blindly groping for the axe.

David was riveted to the spot. He was sitting on a log, pants around his ankles, fearful for his parents and feeling absolutely helpless.

Without warning the man sprang forward, grabbed a short log from the fire and smashed it hard across his dad's head. His dad slowly crumpled to the ground. The man whirled and without pause did the same thing to David's mom. Both parents were down, out of David's site, behind the tent.

The man then started loudly ranting and raving about "fucking parasites, won't share nothin' with nobody I'll show them," as he grabbed the axe and started chopping at the fallen pair.

David couldn't move. He couldn't cry out. He was paralyzed by what he was seeing and fearing for his own safety. He could only imagine the horror that was being visited on his parent's bodies by the axe wielding crazy intruder. He couldn't stop himself from throwing up even though he was afraid the retching sound would be heard by the killer.

After a few minutes of wielding the axe, the sounds of which would be indelibly etched into David's ears the rest of his life, the man twirled the axe over his head and threw it into the woods. David scrunched down as low as he could, hoping not to be noticed.

Furiously mumbling to himself, the man emptied one of their backpacks of gear and filled it with canned and dried food. When he came out from behind the tent David saw that his pants, up to his knees, were covered with blood. It was all David could do to keep from vomiting.

Still mumbling and swearing to himself, the man hoisted the heavy knapsack to his shoulders and, without a backward glance, melted into the woods.

David waited for what must have been more than a half hour before he was able to pull himself together and approach the campground, still fearful the madman might return.

It took a tremendous amount of courage to peek behind the tent and David immediately threw up again and wished he hadn't looked. His worst fears were realized, both his parents dead with their heads smashed by the repeated axe blows. He cried out in agony and fell to his knees crying.

Motivated by fear that the madman might return he knew he needed to leave quickly. He didn't have time to faint. His only safety was to get away from this site and find help. With a maturity he didn't know he had, he packed his own knapsack with a few candy bars and took off running, trying to see the trail they had taken to this spot through his tears, trying to block the picture of his parent's bloody bodies from his memory.

CHAPTER 1.

Josh glanced around the familiar room while he waited for the Superintendent. He noted the large picture of the Super posed with the President of the United States and, grinning to himself, decided that there was probably a similar presidential picture in each and every park superintendent office in the United States. The Superintendent delighted in pointing out that he was considerably taller than President Obama as he proudly showed off the picture to visitors. And why not, there weren't that many superintendents of federal parks in the country, and certainly Yosemite ranked right up there with the best and most famous. Josh had no complaints about his boss. He deeply admired Superintendent Browning. Josh's wife Fern thought the super was handsome in a retired football player kind of way. She thought of him as a large cuddly Teddy Bear, but she had never seen him mad. Josh knew better. He had seen him light into other rangers with a vengeance.

All the Super had told him was that Yellowstone HQ was interested in borrowing him for a special assignment and that he was to report to the Super's office immediately.

A special assignment. That would have to relate to one of his special talents. Some of which he had been born with such as a superb physique and an ultra-high IQ. The rest he had acquired by himself. Now at age twenty-seven he was a retired world champion in any number of Chinese and Japanese martial arts. Since retiring from that stage to become a Yosemite Park Ranger he had spent more than a year learning Indian tracking and fighting lore to the point that the Indians eventually accepted him at least as an equal, some said their

better. Joshua had only one real weakness, his abhorrence of publicity.

He was just back from a dangerous assignment that had started in Yosemite but ended in San Francisco. The superintendent had described his adventure as starting in the backwoods of Yosemite and ending in the back alleys of San Francisco's Chinatown. Both Josh and his wife Fern had almost been killed in that assignment. Now Josh was looking forward to spending quiet time with his wife and new baby. Fern was expecting him to stay home.

At the same time, he couldn't deny that the challenge of using his unique talents intrigued him. He decided it wouldn't do any harm to play along for a while, particularly since the superintendent thought it was so important. It was out of character for him to allow one of his officers to be borrowed.

The door opened behind him and the Super strode in carrying a sheaf of papers. Josh studied his boss's face in the morning light and for the noticed how his eyes weren't quite meeting Josh's. His normally smiling face was unnaturally stiff and serious.

"All right, I'll bite. What's the problem in Yellowstone?"

The superintendent replied tersely. "The problem's a wild man."

"Sounds like a normal police problem to me."

"Not this one. The man's been living in a wilderness section of the park for a few years, but now he's become a terrible problem."

"How so?"

“Well it’s quite complicated. It seems that the man’s a real backwoods survivalist kind of person. Nobody really knows who he is even though the rangers have occasionally cut across his trail and knew he was there. He was just a man that had reverted to nature and was living like a wild animal but bothering nobody, until recently.”

“What changed?”

“What I’m told is that the man might be a special forces veteran based on the ability he’s shown to survive in the wilderness. They’ve known about him but considered him harmless. The man had very little contact with anyone except once in a while he would break into someone’s cabin and steal some clothes or food. Even then he’d leave a freshly killed rabbit or some freshly chopped wood or something as if he was paying or bartering. The only complaints were from people who thought their privacy had been violated, nothing really serious.”

Josh still couldn’t see why they needed him. “But something changed?”

“You could say that. In the last two months the man’s gone berserk. First he ransacked a cabin and then deliberately set fire to the place. He didn’t try to conceal that he’d set fire to it, just built a big bonfire inside the house and let it go. They theorize that he got mad because there wasn’t any food or clothing in the cabin.

After that it escalated. A few days ago he tried to get some food from a family of campers and ended up killing the couple and mutilating their bodies when they wouldn’t cooperate. We got the story from their son who witnessed the whole thing.”

“Good God, is he okay?”

“That’s hard to say. He’s a tough kid but that’s a hell of a lot for an eleven-year-old to go through.”

“Jesus.” Josh was silent for a moment as he visualized the boy’s torment. “So I gather they haven’t been able to find the murderer?”

“That’s it. Yellowstone’s wilderness area is three times the size of Rhode Island and they have no idea where the man holes up. The rangers spent the last few days sitting on the story and trying to track and find him with no luck at all. He’s just too good for them. One of our rangers has a broken leg because the man set out an old bear trap, then led them into it. Another one of their boys has a concussion from a fall into a pit the man had dug. He’s playing with them. That’s where you come in. When Yellowstone read what the local Indians said about your tracking abilities they thought maybe you could track him before he murders anyone else.”

“But why me? There must be a lot of Indian trackers in the Yellowstone area.”

“All of the Indians that have the ability to track are too old for the job and unfortunately their skills are not being taught to the younger generation. They think the only chance they have of catching him is to have someone at least as savvy as he is in the wilderness area.”

The superintendent stood up, paced back and forth and ended up standing in front of Josh. He loomed over Josh by several inches.

At six feet one, Josh wasn’t overly tall or impressive. He had a thick head of brown hair and blue/grey piercing eyes with heavy dark eyebrows. His complexion was dark although a lot of that could be tan as he spent so much time outside. His face was thin, almost hawkish

with an upturned mouth that gave his face a happy look. Piece by piece he looked average but put them all together and there was something commanding about his presence.

“Josh I don’t want you to take this request. I think it’s too dangerous. This fella’s proven he’s a killer. I told them so and that I couldn’t spare you. They said you were their only hope. I don’t believe that. I think they’re just scared that the story will drive the tourists away. Besides I don’t believe all that crap about you being a one-man army.”

“You’re probably right. Did you say he’s been living in the forest for several years and they can’t catch him?” In spite of himself, Josh was intrigued, but there was his and his family’s life to consider.

“They just began to try to catch him in earnest in the last few weeks but he’s eluded them for years.”

The superintendent sat back in his chair, crossed his arms and waited as Joshua mused. It was the supe’s way of saying, “the ball’s in your court.” He knew Joshua was unique. He remembered that Josh had disobeyed his direct orders numerous times when he had judged the situation too dangerous for Joshua to attempt but Joshua had proved him wrong. As a result, he had a growing respect for Josh’s intelligence and abilities. Also he was the only person in the valley who knew of Josh’s legendary background.

Josh sat silent for a full minute. Mostly he was concerned for his wife and new baby. Leaving them for even a week would take some explaining. He knew Fern could handle most anything. Before they had met and married she had lived alone in the Alaska wilderness through two winters.

Finally, he spoke, “If I even considered it I’d want to do it on my own terms.”

Unspoken between them was the understanding that the statement was Josh’s way of saying he would do it.

CHAPTER 2

The Superintendent pointed him to a large atlas sitting opened on the corner of his desk. It was open to the Yellowstone page. The wilderness area that the Superintendent had mentioned was in the Northeast corner of the park and looked to be very large. The caption said it extended over 2 million square acres and was heavily forested. It ranged from valleys to peaks, from heavily timbered to no trees at all at higher elevations. Being way north the weather was unpredictable with snow flurries possible any time of the year.

“Terms? What do you mean.”

“Show me where the murder occurred.”

The superintendent pointed to a spot on the left center of the map.

“About thirty miles from West Yellowstone? Josh looked up at the superintendent questioningly.

“That’s my understanding, yes.”

Josh silently studied the map for another minute then spoke.

“By myself. No back-up and or communications. It has to be entirely my way.”

The Superintendent studied him for a minute. He had been superintendent for years and knew Josh’s reputation with the Yosemite Indians. With his innate abilities he had quickly mastered their lore and soon earned their acceptance as a complete equal in his ability to track and elude in the forest. Some even acknowledged he was their superior. .

“You want to go after him Indian style, one on one?”

“Yes sir.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? After all he’s a proven murderer and he must be very much at home in that wilderness.”

“I think it’s the only way to catch him.” Josh succinctly replied.

The superintendent realized that Josh had already made up his mind. With a sigh of reluctance, he asked, “What will you need from us, camping equipment?”

“No sir, that’s the last thing I need. I need several Ninja items from the nearest martial arts store. I think it’s in Fresno.”

“Call them right now, explain what you need and then give me the phone. I’ll get whatever you need by this afternoon.”

“I take it Yellowstone’s expecting me and is in a hurry?”

“You got it. What else do you need?”

“A helicopter flyover of the area before anything else.”

“And what else?”

“Nothing, that’s it.”

“What about equipment like tents, sleeping bags and clothing?”

“None of those. I’m convinced that the only way anyone’s ever going to catch this guy is to beat him at his own game. I’m going to track him as an Indian would. I’ll move like an Indian, camp like an Indian, hunt and eat like an Indian and most importantly, track like an

Indian. Otherwise, he'll elude me the same way he eluded the other rangers. The few other things I'll need I can pick up in Yellowstone."

"Okay, you're the boss. How soon can you leave?"

"How do I get there?"

"They're going to fly you. We'll chopper you out to Fresno. They'll have a department plane waiting for you. We'll make sure your martial arts stuff will be on the plane."

"They're really serious about this, aren't they?"

"They really are. And they've already talked about giving you a chopper flyover, so consider it done. Can you leave this afternoon? How much packing do you have to do?"

"Yes and practically none." Josh answered.

Within an hour Josh had explained the situation the Fern, received her reluctant backing and was packed, on a helicopter and on his way out of the valley on route to the Fresno airport. There, he was driven directly across the field and to a waiting small jet. He was handed a wrapped package as he boarded.

He gave a thumbs-up to the pilot and they took off. "About an hour and a half," the pilot offered. Josh opened the package and described the contents to the curious pilot, who remarked, "That's gonna' be real educational. Nobody's ever put Indian and Ninja warfare together before."

Josh shook his head. "It's just part of what I demanded if I accepted the assignment. I told them that I needed to get there as soon as possible if I was going to have any chance of tracking the guy. I also told them I needed a quick fly over to get the lie of the land."

As the pilot flared for a landing at West Yellowstone he directed Josh's attention to a far corner of the small landing field. "There's the chopper. They're directing me to taxi straight there. Looks like someone's in a hurry. Rotors are turning and the pilot's waiting to go."

When he stepped off the plane a rangy looking, six-footer approached Josh with his hand outstretched.

"Josh?"

Josh took his hand and nodded affirmatively.

The man introduced himself. "Larry. Larry Schlader. Chief Ranger."

He brushed by Josh, grabbed the gear bag from the co-pilot turned and led the way to the chopper calling out, "Time's a'wastin' let's go."

Josh studied him as he followed to the chopper. He immediately liked what he saw and heard. The man didn't waste words on needless introductions. He also was a man of action; jumping in him-self and grabbing the bags. No self-aggrandizement there. Josh thought he looked to be in his late forties and extremely fit. Casually dressed in jeans and a denim jacket, he was almost bald with a sharp, deeply tanned intelligent face, he reminded Josh of Yul Brynner.

As the pilot revved up the rotors, Larry introduced him to a second man in the chopper. "Joe. He's the ranger found the site," he yelled as he thrust earphones at them.

Joe was short and swarthy, dressed in full ranger clothing. He leaned over and shook hands with Josh but didn't volunteer any comments.

"If there's enough time I thought we'd circumnavigate the complete area, give you an idea of what you're up against."

"Don't need it." Josh abruptly answered.

Larry looked surprised. "I thought you requested it?"

"Flyover yes but not the whole thing. I want to circle the scene of the killing and then fly a zig zag pattern directly north, north-east from there about fifty miles. That'll do it."

Josh had studied topographical maps of the entire wilderness area and determined to his own satisfaction, considering mountain ranges, unfordable rivers and areas that were crisscrossed with park trails, the most likely direction their quarry must have taken.

"You're sure that's all you want?"

Josh explained his reasoning to Larry. "First of all nobody has any idea where this guy hides out yet his attacks have all been near the south western corner of the wilderness area, right?" Larry shrugged his shoulders in acceptance.

"So we have to narrow down his location possibilities to have any chance of catching him. The whole wilderness area covers over two point two million acres, about the size of three Rhode Islands, impossibly large to find someone in but also impossibly large for one man to cover. He has to be within one or two days of the south west corner of the park."

A grudging, stretched out, “Okaaaay,” from Larry. But why specifically north north-east?”

“It’s the heaviest forested and least tracked area and heads away from civilization.”

Joe tapped his arm and pointed down. “There it is. That’s where the family was killed. See that faint track going south west? That’s the road they took into the campground.”

“Close enough. I’ll have to cast around a lot to pick up anything but he has to have gone in that general direction.”

Larry raised his eyebrows. “You’re planning on tracking him? Pardon my French, but that’s the dumbest damn idea I’ve ever heard.”

Josh realized the reasons that he had been called in hadn’t filtered down to the Chief.

“You don’t think I can trail him?”

Larry shrugged his shoulders at the other ranger. “That’s what I’m saying. You’ll never find him. We need a half dozen choppers and a lot of men, that’s the only way he’ll get caught. Why did they send for you, what makes you so special?”

Josh heard the disapproval in his voice and tried to explain. He needed everyone’s cooperation if he was going to succeed.

“I’ve got a plan plus some experience that’s a little unique. I think it’ll give me a fighting chance to find him and bring him in.”

Sarcastically, “Yeah? What’s that?”

“Simplistically, it’s this. We know where he was a week ago when he murdered that couple and we can probably track him from there.”

“Track him? In the forest? Like an Indian? Hell, not even our Indians here in the valley could do that anymore.”

Josh finished his sandwich and coffee, leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, saying. “We’ll see.”

Larry eyed him for a minute. “Okay, it’s your funeral. In the mean-time we’ve arranged to keep the local mountaineering shop open late so you can get any supplies you need like tents, sleeping bags and so on.”

“Don’t need it.” Josh responded.

The chief ranger hesitated for a moment, “Don’t need what?”

“I don’t need any supplies. Everything I need is in my bag.”

Both rangers glanced at the bag. “You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

CHAPTER 3

“No I’m not. I’m planning on a switch on the old adage, ‘you set a thief to catch a thief.’ This guy knows the Wilderness area like the back of his hand. The area is so huge he could be anywhere. A large manhunt would be useless. Helicopters would never see him. He’d elude you for years. The only way to catch him is to beat him at his own game. I’m going to become him, only better. The best woodsmen in the world were the American Indians. That’s what I’m going to do. Live off the land, blend in with the forest, eat, sleep, travel and think like an Indian. The worst thing I could do is take a lot of gadgets with me and rely on them to catch this guy. They’d be a dead giveaway.”

The chief glanced at Josh’s uniform. “You’ll at least some more rugged clothing and shoes,” he snorted.

“Buckskins.” Josh tersely replied. “And Moccasins.”

“That’s it?” the chief questioned.

Josh paused for a moment. “One thing.”

“The superintendent said to give you anything you want.”

“I need permission to kill wild animals. I may need to kill a deer or a bear to survive. I don’t want to but it may become a matter of life or death for me.”

In his room Josh mentally reviewed how he’d been getting ready for this minute for a long time. Many months before when he first started working at Yosemite, he spent all his off time with the few Yosemite Indians that still remembered and could practice the ancient crafts of their tribes. During the months of tutoring and competition

with the Indians he had gradually, because of the abilities he had been born with, become the better of his teachers. He could out-hunt, out-track and out Indian his Indian teachers.

One of the things he had done was to make a complete buckskin outfit from authentic deer skins that had been tanned in the traditional Indian way using deer brains as a tanning medium. Being in a national park, they were unable to kill their own deer, but quality deerskins were available commercially and the Indians had helped Josh make his own outfit. It was totally authentic, down to being sewn with real back strap sinew. The pants were really leggings and would protect his legs from heavy underbrush. The shirt and jacket were light, supple and warm, just what he would need for days or weeks in the wilderness area. The jacket was hooded and would be of immeasurable value if the weather turned bad. The moccasins were triple soled of heavy deerskin and were almost boots as the leather tops extended up to Josh's knees and then tied tightly. Josh was a perfectionist when it came to his buckskins. They were never washed with soap, never cleaned with a cleaning solution. They had been stream washed and air dried just as the Indians had always done. They did not smell civilized.

On Josh they looked like the clothing the trappers and explorers wore when they opened up the West.

The next morning as he dressed for the wilderness area, he secreted a number of ninja type weapons in the sewn in pockets. Except for a heat reflecting blanket and a tiny flint, they were the only concessions he was making to modern backwoods survival. The weapons consisted of four black colored deadly multi pointed throwing devices called shurikens, a collapsible ninja type cross bow with eight short arrows and a pair of gloves with claws built into them to be used

as a tree climbing tool. The last and perhaps the most important item was a hunting knife he carried in a sheath attached to his utility belt. 'Sharp and heavy, it could double as an axe.

His plan was to start from the tragic campsite and live off the land as the Indians had for centuries as he tracked and found his quarry.

Joe was waiting for him in a Jeep and greeted him with raised eyebrows as he saw how he was dressed. "I guess you really meant what you said last night."

Josh stared at him for a moment, "I usually do," he replied. "Let's go."

A little over an hour later they arrived. Josh was anxious to examine the campsite, on his hands and knees if necessary. "Thanks Joe. You can leave now I need to get to work."

"Are you sure? I can stick around a while if you want."

"I'm sure. Get on your horse and skedaddle, I work better on my own."

The first thing Josh did was to remove his knife from his belt and thread a piece of rawhide through a tiny hole in the handle. He then secured the rawhide to his belt. His knife was indispensable and he could not lose it.

He then located the actual spot where he believed the murders took place. He found signs of various animals at the spot attracted by the spilled blood. Josh wondered if the bodies had been savaged by marauding animals before the rangers had gotten to the spot. He located a tree over a quarter of a mile away that stood almost directly north by north-east, the direction that Josh was sure his quarry had

taken. Using the tree as a marker, he began casting about for signs several yards either side of the imaginary north by north east line.

Josh knew the killer had filled a backpack with canned goods and was carrying a pretty good load. He should leave discernable tracks. He had also been acting irrationally. Josh expected to find food wrappers.

Finally, almost a mile away from the camp site, he found a piece of plastic near a small clearing, a portion of a label for a package of dehydrated meat. It had to be from the campground, something that the murderer had stopped to eat after he was away from the immediate vicinity of the crime. Now certain of the killer's direction he could start trying to make up for lost time.

Josh broke into a lope. Long, distance eating strides at a calculated speed. Fast enough to cover ground but slow enough for him to continue looking for signs. Something Indians can do all day long. Footprints, bent leaves, broken branches, misplaced rocks, scuffed dirt, discarded wrappers, rest spots, human waste spots, all were signs of his quarry's travel.

The signs were not easy to find. Days had passed since the murder. The man was an accomplished woodsman but was carrying an enormous and cumbersome load of packaged food. He couldn't help but brush up against the occasional tree branch leaving it bent in an odd direction or breaking leaves off. Being so heavily loaded his step was heavy and he hadn't able to trod lightly through the underbrush. He was leaving bent over and crushed underbrush, faint but findable. He was not following an established trail.

Josh was mentally calculating as he ran. He estimated that his quarry could not maintain a speed much over about four miles per

hour with the load he was carrying. He wondered, *“Could he maintain that speed for hour after hour?”*

He had originally guessed that the man’s camp had to be within a two or three-day hike from where he had been breaking into homes and now where the murder had taken place. Josh estimated he was traveling at about six miles per hour and knew he could keep that pace up all day. The man’s trail was several days old, no danger of catching up with him unless he reached his hiding place. Josh continued loping at a fast clip thinking about the counsel he had received from the Indians. Nothing can move faster or quieter or faster through heavy woods than a mountain lion. Nothing is deadlier than a stalking mountain lion. Indians tried to think and act like a stalking mountain lion. Totally concentrating on his target yet totally aware of his surroundings at the same time, all senses alert. Joshua did the same.

Suddenly he was immensely glad he was on full alert, immensely glad his senses had not been dulled by several hours of intense concentration. Looking ahead several yards, eyes peeled for anything out of place, he spotted an anomaly. Head high and to the right of the trail, some leaves looked wilted and not quite normal. He stopped and froze in place. A small bush had fallen over and partially obstructed the trail immediately ahead of him.

He carefully stepped away from the faint trail he had been following and made a large circle around the suspicious site. From the far side he could see he had been wise to do so. A large log had been precariously balanced several feet off the ground. It had two vines attached to it. One led to a branch on the tree above it and the other led to the small bush on the trail. Josh immediately knew what it was and was reminded that his quarry might have been in Vietnam. There they were called mace traps based upon the ancient clubs called

maces. The Cong used large balls of cement attached to ropes and arranged them so when a wire was tripped the mace would swing down at head level and kill or maim the enemy. Here the objective had been the same, kill or maim anyone following the killer with the heavy log. Josh was wise to the technique as Indians had been using the same trap against large animals such as bears and sometimes other Indians for generations.

Josh carefully dismantled the trap, impressed by the ingenuity his quarry had shown. If he hadn't been alerted by the leaves having withered after several days of exposure, it might have succeeded. He decided that discovering the trap called for re-thinking his plan.

"Does he know someone's on his trail or is he being ordinarily careful? Or is he paranoid about any trail? Maybe there're lots of traps like this one he's set over a period of time. They told me one Ranger had fallen into a trap and severely wounded. Maybe he's reverted to being in Vietnam and thinks he's eluding the enemy." Josh re-examined the leaves closely. *"No more than a few days ago at most,"* he concluded. *"So on the face of it he set this one on the way back from the murder scene and it's probably just a preventive measure. There's no way he knows I'm on his trail. But I better be even more attentive."*

One way to avoid traps such as the last one was to stay off the faint trail he was following. Josh now adopted that technique. He stepped back on the trail, sighted forward as far as he could see in the dense woods, spotted a tree in the line of sight. He then stepped a few feet off and jogged parallel to the trail until he came to the tree. At that point he carefully found the trail again and repeated the process. It slowed him down some but he could lope quickly from tree

to tree confident he was avoiding any traps. He was still sure he was moving at least half again as fast as his quarry had.

He continued to try to outthink his quarry. *"If I'm right and his hide-a-way is not more than two or three-day travel from where he murdered the couple then it can't be more than ninety miles away. Say five miles an hour average with about six hours of daylight here in the deep woods. That's thirty miles a day, ninety miles in three days, max."*

The next time he stopped to re-check the trail he noticed it veering gradually east, to his right. He veered east also and soon came to a small stream running south. The stream was shallow and easy to wade. Josh presumed that his quarry had waded upstream in an effort to mislead anyone who might be following him.

Josh dropped to his hands and knees and carefully and slowly scanned both sides of the stream along with the stream bottom itself. He reminded himself that it had been almost a week since the man had passed through here, if there were still any signs they would be faint. He crawled for yard after yard, even dropping down to his stomach occasionally to look at a depression from a side view. Suddenly he saw what he was looking for.

The downstream sides of the rocks on the bottom of the stream were covered with moss. On a rock near the opposite side of the stream a large piece of moss had been dislodged and was swinging in the current. Something or someone had dislodged it with a foot and Josh was sure it had been his target. If it had been an animal, there would have been animal tracks and there were none. All he needed to do now was to follow the stream until he came to the spot where the man left the stream. Once again it would be slow and careful, but he was now surer than ever of the direction his quarry was taking.

CHAPTER 4

Slowly but surely he was being led in an approximately northeast direction. Josh estimated that it was directly toward the most unpopulated and unusable parts of the Wilderness Area and toward the Montana and Wyoming border. It was an area Josh had suspected the fugitive might consider his home. It was remote and seldom visited. When he found where the man left the stream it would be time to change his tactics now that he was sure he was on the right track.

He was able to follow the tracks in the stream rather easily. He also found broken and bent branches at what would be shoulder height of his quarry. The man had disturbed the bushes on either side of the stream by using them to keep his balance as he walked on the slippery stones. Judging by the height of the bent branches and the height at which they had been grabbed, he calculated that the man's height was no more than five foot eight inches.

Josh was beginning to move a little faster as he became increasingly sure that he not only was on the trail, but that his quarry was only taking normal precautions. Either the man was confident that he would not be tracked, or he had no real experience in hiding his tracks. Either way Josh was taking no chances, constantly looking for signs of either animal or human traps. He continued to scan the stream bed and its surrounding foliage. He also started scanning about one hundred yards ahead, as much as he could. He was looking for any discrepancy such as discoloration or wilting of leaves. He had no idea of the backwoods sophistication of the man. Josh intended to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume he was dangerous to trail. After several days since his passage along this route, any changes he had made to disguise a trap would start to show. Leaves on broken

branches would have started to yellow. Pine needles would have started to turn brown. Trip wires would have become exposed. Josh was extremely alert to anything that seemed out of place.

In a matter of moments his alertness was rewarded. A short distance ahead there was a jumble of dried leaves and broken bushes on the trail. Something had happened there. Josh again skirted the trail in order to come at the site from the side. Once there he recognized what he was seeing. Another man killer, but this one had already been sprung. It was a simple but very effective trap often used by Indians.

It depended on finding a green and bendable branch that was located on a tree next to the trail and that was at a height of about five feet. The branch would be bent back as far as possible and carefully propped in place so that a trip wire on the path would release it. It would then whip around and easily kill or at least maim anything it hit on the trail. Like the previous one he had disarmed, this one could be used on humans or animals. As Josh looked at this one closely it became obvious that a small animal, perhaps even something as small as a skunk, had hit the trip wire at least a day or so earlier.

He examined the trap closely and realized that his quarry wasn't as good as he evidently thought he was. There was a glaring mistake in the trap he had set. That was why the trap had been sprung by a small animal. The trip wire had been set too close to the ground.

The Indians he had lived with in Yosemite had been experts in trailing and also in setting traps for anyone crazy enough to trail them. No one could set a more dangerous backwoods mantrap than one Indian being trailed by another Indian. In one instance in Yosemite Josh had used a cunning Indian trick of invisibly sabotaging a well-used

trail so that it collapsed under weight and trapped three Yosemite bear killers.

The stream gradually started bending toward the northwest, the opposite direction that Josh assumed the man was really heading. He expected him to abandon the stream pretty soon and continue heading northeast.

Coming up ahead of him he noticed a fairly large tree growing on his side of the stream but leaning heavily across the stream with most of its branches and foliage on the other side. For Josh it seemed the perfect place to exit the stream without leaving any tracks. As he approached it he looked for any unusual usage signs. There were signs galore, but most were not human. He saw claw marks that could have come from a large member of the cat family or many other clawed animals, perhaps even a bear. He saw where some of the tender young leaves had been stripped by some small herbivores. The tree had evidently been a convenient bridge for years, but had his quarry used it?

First he looked to see if there were prints on the ground where he might have climbed out of the stream bed to reach the tree trunk and he found nothing conclusive. Next he examined each protruding rock to see if there were signs that the man had used them as a jumping off spot to reach a lower limb. Sure enough he found several spots where the moss had been lightly disturbed and looking up, saw a small branch that was partially broken off a larger branch. Josh assumed that the man had jumped a few times until he could reach the smaller branch and then used the smaller branch to pull the larger branch to him, almost breaking it off as he did so.

Josh returned to the trunk of the tree and using his Ninja claws, easily climbed to the lower branch then tight roped his way to the spot

where his quarry had joined the tree. He immediately found unmistakable signs of his passing. Small limbs that had been stepped on and squashed, no animal would do that. Broken and bent branches at shoulder height that had been used for balance.

On the far side of the stream, some three yards away, he found a fairly deep set of footprints where his quarry had jumped from the tree onto moist ground. There had been what looked like an attempt to cover them with leaves but after several days of exposure the leaves were scattered.

Now Josh was certain that the man was not even thinking about anyone following him. The half-hearted attempts at hiding his trail were probably just the result of having lived in the wilds so long. Josh felt he could speed up his trailing effort. He could start trotting along an assumed direction and follow the signs that his quarry was inadvertently leaving. It was still slow going because of the heavy underbrush and log-jams.

The trail became easier to follow as his quarry plunged in a straight line through the forest. Bent bushes, occasional footprints, bent or broken branches, squashed or discolored grass, even disarranged cobwebs could be signs. 'Particularly since Josh had figured out his quarry's height, he knew that any disturbance above five feet would probably have been made by the man and not by any animal.

Josh trotted along the trail his quarry was leaving until just before dusk. The weather was good the forest was friendly. He could easily make camp at the last minute after making up as much ground as possible. He was sure that he was far enough behind that he could make a small fire and with a little luck have rabbit for dinner. There had been signs of rabbits all day. Droppings, burrows through the

underbrush, fur scraped off on low branches, he was sure they were plentiful. He had even sighted several of them scampering away from him.

All day long he had been passing and nibbling on wild huckleberry bushes tall enough to hide behind while at the same time keeping an eye out for bears as the huckleberry's were a favorite of theirs. He had stopped for a moment to feed his appetite when he suddenly found he was sharing the bush with a black bear he estimated to be over two hundred pounds. Josh was on one side of the large bush and the bear was on the other. The bear was on his hind legs and had been totally engrossed in eating the berries. He was as surprised as Josh was.

It was one of those moments. They both stared at each other, not moving for a few seconds. The bear growled, shook his head, dropped to four legs and lazily shuffled away. Josh was relieved. His hand was on his knife, ready to defend himself but trying to out-stare the bear as the preferred outcome. It wasn't the first time he had encountered a bear at a berry bush. In his experience, unless there were cubs around, bears preferred retreating to attacking. Particularly if they were sated on berries.

The sudden and unexpected encounter reminded Josh of how easy it was to conceal oneself in heavy wooded areas.

Fire and smoke can be seen or smelled at a great distance when they are both so alien to the wilderness area. Josh decided to be ultra-careful even though he was sure that he was far behind the man he was hunting.

He found a small depression that was on the south side of a huge rock. Any fire he built would be small and practically invisible

from the north. If he kept the smoke to a minimum, there was very little chance anything would be noticed. First he had to catch a rabbit. He didn't have time to set a trap and wait for a cooperative rabbit to spring it. He had to actively hunt one down and kill it with his crossbow, efficiently and silently.

Now, suddenly, where there had been sightings of jackrabbits all day, there were none, maybe because he found fresh wolf tracks around. Distinctive because of the imprint of claws and therefore easily distinguishable from dog or cougars, they had driven the rabbits into hiding. Josh decided he had to flush them out. He gathered a handful of rocks and started tossing them into the brush around him. There were plenty of rabbit trails through the underbrush. Josh just had to get the critters moving again. On the fourth toss he must have landed a rock directly on a huddled group of the jackrabbits, suddenly they flying in all directions directly in front of Josh.

Taking quick aim with his crossbow, leading it a little as it bounded across the clearing in front of him, he was able to kill one with his first arrow. He quickly pulled the steel arrow out of his kill and with one quick blow from the handle of his knife, crushed the animal's skull and killed it.

Back at the camp he cleared a spot for a small fire next to the boulder and set out to gather firewood. He wanted extra dry wood, nothing green or wet that might cause smoke. There were plenty of dried dead branches within reach on the trees and Josh gathered a large armful of them. He also spotted a fairly large bird's nest in a tree and was able to reach it using his ninja climbing gloves. The nest was old and extremely dry and would make excellent tinder for starting a fire.

He built a rock container for the fire and using his flint and the dried bird nest he was able to get a fire going quickly. Then he skinned and cleaned the rabbit leaving the stomach and its contents untouched. In order to roast the rabbit over the fire he skewered it with a green stick from end to end and to keep it from revolving on the skewer he also skewered it from side to side. The Indians had taught him that most-small creatures like rabbits or even field mice were not only good to eat, but they were herbivores and their stomach content was partially digested edible greens which would go a long way to produce a more balanced diet when eaten along with the flesh. Josh would roast and eat the rabbit and its stomach contents.

He then erected the reflective blanket in front of the fire so that it would reflect heat toward the boulder and provide warmth during the night.

He thought to himself that this was pretty luxurious for primitive style camping. He had food, heat and shelter. He wondered what his quarry was doing and what type of a person he was.

One thing he was sure of, regardless of his training or lack of it, the fact remained that after two years of survival in the Wilderness area, his quarry was now a super accomplished backwoodsman, perhaps as good as the Indians that Josh had trained with. Josh needed to treat his quarry as an equal. He could not underestimate him or his abilities. For example, he would be able to smell campfire smoke at a long distance. He would be tuned in to the forest. Animal behaviors would be clues to him. Working in Josh's favor was the probability that he had no clue that Josh was on his trail. Josh would have to keep it that way.

Another factor was weather. Josh had been warned the weather changes in Yellowstone could be sudden and volatile. It was

now September and the weather was beautiful and favorable to Josh at present. He couldn't and shouldn't expect that to continue.

The weather man at park headquarters had advised him. "Expect sunshine, rain, sleet, snow and thunderstorms to happen without warning anytime in the next few weeks. From the flyover he knew about what to expect from the forest ahead.

CHAPTER 5

The next morning Josh quickly policed the area so that there was no indication that he had cooked and slept there then quickly started on his tracking again.

Late in the afternoon Josh spotted the man's second camp. This time he had covered about the same amount of trail in one day as his quarry had.

He almost missed it. It was located a dozen yards off the trail Josh was following, but the discoloration of some leaves and branches caught his eye. As he examined the camp it became apparent that it wasn't the first time this spot had been used. He found buried refuse from at least one previous camp. He also had his suspicions confirmed when he found empty food cans and plastic wrappings for dehydrated meat buried. The man was carrying as much stolen food as he could handle. That weight accounted for the trail signs he had left.

Josh pushed on, deciding that he did not want to use the same campsite his quarry had.

In two hours, as dusk approached, he made a cold camp near a stream while the weather was beginning to worsen and threatening clouds were forming. It was still warm enough to get through the night without a fire, uncomfortable but do-able. He had water from the small stream and could do without food for another day or two, something that Indians did as a matter of course. He'd be cold but safer.

His buckskins were almost like a second skin now, having been worn and sweated in for three days. They were very comfortable,

quite warm and probably stank to high heaven, but they were correct for what he was doing. He had become part of the wilderness.

Josh hadn't allowed himself to worry about what he would do when he caught up with the killer but now he did. Tracking was one thing but a face off was something else. He also had no real idea about his prey's abilities. Could he be doubling back on his trail and laying a trap for Josh? Could he have left more concealed traps along the trail? Josh wished he had learned more from the Indians about how they had actually fought from tree to tree against other tribes.

Josh's plan was to track first and then stalk. In order to stalk effectively, the prey had to have no knowledge he was being stalked. His concern was that stalking was a two-way street. How many times had the great white hunter been pounced upon by the lion he thought he was stalking? Was Josh actually, at this very moment, being stalked by his quarry?

This would be his third night on his quarry's trail. He had probably covered almost seventy-five miles. Tomorrow he would have to start being more careful. By his calculations he might be getting close to where he expected his quarry to have his permanent encampment.

The next morning, tracking became much more difficult. He had gotten up at first light, had a cold piece of rabbit and started. Within a hundred yards the trail almost disappeared. The broken branches, overturned rocks and bent grass were almost gone. It took much more time for Josh to find the almost invisible signs that were left. An out of place rock, a smudge, a slightly bent stalk, things that most trackers would never see gradually led Josh Northeast. Hour after hour he made slow progress.

One thought made sense to him. There had to be a reason the killer had become so much more careful. He must be getting close to his main camp. He stopped to check his weapons and realized he had not thought to ask if his quarry had stolen guns or ammunition from the cabins he had raided, a serious oversight?

All around him was Rosewart, a plant almost entirely edible with a high content of ascorbic acid prized by Indians across the entire United States and Canada. The leaves, stems and even the roots could give him energy for the rest of the day. He chewed on them as he carefully moved forward searching for signs, occasionally bending to the ground to search. In mid-afternoon a gradual sense of anticipation came over him and he redoubled his scanning of the land and trees he was moving through. He started moving in a crouch using bush and tree cover. His sense of danger grew. There was nothing he could lay the feeling to except the absence of signs. No odor, no noise, the forest was abnormally quiet. In itself, that was a sign. He proceeded even more slowly and carefully.

Out of the corner of his eye, his peripheral vision caught a flicker of movement high and to his left. Instinctively and reflexively he threw himself to the right away from the movement. As he landed in a tuck, he heard and saw an arrow thunk into the ground where he had been standing. He continued in a roll, ending up behind a tree. There was no second arrow.

Josh froze and listened. He heard a faint receding sound from the direction of the arrow and decided it was the archer moving away.

He looked at the arrow. It was still quivering in the ground. Sure that he had heard the unmistakable sounds of the archer fleeing; he walked over and pulled the arrow out of the ground. *"Aha."* He thought. *"Hand-made and a thing of beauty. The shaft's really well*

made and the head looks like a piece of obsidian. Could have killed me easy.” Fatalistically he shrugged his shoulders. “But he didn’t, a costly mistake on his part.” He reflected for a moment. “He must have thought he had a sure shot or he wouldn’t have risked giving away his presence. Now I know he’s here and his primary weapon is a bow and arrow and I know he’s a tree climber.” Another thought struck him. “And he’s a damn scary archer too.”

He reflected on the fact that most trackers would have probably been killed by the arrow, not having the extraordinary eyesight and reflexes that He had been blessed with. His quarry was proving to be formidable.

Relying on his hearing and judgement that the man was moving quickly away from where he had taken his shot, Josh went into action. *“Moving that quickly and carelessly he’ll be easy to track.”*

Josh started after the killer. The track at first led directly west, away from the northerly course his trail had been taking. Gradually it curved back to a north easterly course as before. It was easy to follow at first as the man had been anxious to get away. Gradually however there were signs that he was slowing down and being more careful about leaving signs. It didn’t stop Josh. Eventually the trail led back to the stream, more than a mile above where the attack had occurred. Here the trail ended at the stream. He was relying on the stream to cover his tracks again. Josh tried to put himself into his quarry’s mind. He had retreated immediately after missing with the arrow, but he had retreated in a planned direction. He had made a large circle back to the stream in order to hide his trail. The man was good but his abilities hadn’t been sharpened by centuries of Indian history. Josh wasn’t fooled. He spent some time looking for signs that he had either gone downstream or upstream. Once again he found almost invisible but

un-mistakable signs going upstream. Josh moved slowly upstream, searching for signs where the killer might have left the water.

Instead he found a small, obviously man made, rock dam in the stream. *"gotcha!"* He thought. He crouched in the pool, carefully scanning the surroundings for any sign of his quarry. Gradually he climbed out of the stream and carefully started looking for signs of habitation. No hut, no cabin, no lean to, no tent. Nothing except the dam.

"Where the hell are you, you son of a bitch," he muttered.

He started scanning the treetops. *"There!"* He thought. A dark spot among several treetops. With his keen eyesight he was gradually able to make out a small treehouse almost totally hidden by leafy growth high up in the trees. There was no discernable movement.

"Where is he and how in hell does he get up there?" Josh wondered as he moved from tree to tree searching. *"He has to be out there somewhere watching me, he has to."* Josh reasoned. *"Somehow I have to draw him in."*

He made an elaborate show of searching the clearing, then re-entered the stream and started searching upstream for signs where his quarry might have left it. Soon he found it, an almost invisible, elaborately planned and executed swinging vine that allowed a person to land ashore several feet away from the bank, leaving no trail. Assuming he was still being watched, Josh ignored it and continued slowly upstream for more than a mile before exiting the stream and heading circuitously back south.

This time he knew where he was going and how far. He had to be extremely careful not to be spotted. His plan was to get within sight of the treehouse and simply wait. A hunting style Indians had used for

hundreds of years, it required patience and more patience. Once again he blessed his buckskins. He could be almost invisible huddled up against a tree trunk or a fallen log, as long as he didn't move. He emulated the mountain lion and with extreme care and total silence went west for what he reckoned was about a quarter of a mile, then circled back. As he had planned he arrived back at the stream almost directly opposite the clearing. he used the thickness of the forest to conceal his presence.

He found a large tree and using his Ninja clawed gloves was able to climb the back side of the tree to a crotch some thirty feet off the ground. He took a half hour to ever so slowly inch into the crotch to avoid being noticed. It gave him a commanding view of the clearing. He quietly set up his cross bow and made sure he could accurately fire the steel tipped arrows anywhere in the clearing. He began to feel sorry for his quarry, once he entered the clearing, he would be an easy target. He settled in to wait. It was just a matter of time.

Hours went by. Josh didn't move. He ignored crawling insects and one tree snake that slithered over his right leg. He began to feel hunger and thirst but ignored them.

Just as dusk was arriving, Josh's patience was rewarded. A thick growth of ivy like vines surrounding a couple of trees moved. Josh focused upon it. Gradually an opening appeared. A hand thrust through followed slowly by a face. It was the first glimpse Josh had of his quarry. A darkly tanned face, heavily seamed with creases, a long dark beard and almost bald.

Josh held his breath. Shortly a leg was thrust out followed by the man's body as he slid out sideways from his hiding place. He was clothed in ragged jeans and shirt and a pair of old high topped canvas shoes. He slowly stood up and did nothing. Josh felt sorry for him. He

didn't know that he was a dead man standing. Josh could have easily killed him then as he stood motionless. His steel tipped arrows would have reached him before he could possibly move.

Josh waited. He was curious about the tree house. Did he actually use it? How did he get to it? He waited some more, sure he couldn't be seen.

The man was extremely patient. He didn't move for several minutes until he darted to another tree, reached up and freed a natural looking vine from a low limb. He leaned back, put his feet against the trunk of the tree and using the vine as a rope slowly walked his way up the trunk to a branch some twenty feet off the ground. Something Josh could do but few could. Again Josh was impressed by the man's woods-man-ship and agility.

He watched as the man reached behind the tree and pulled a hanging rope out, a man-made rope that Josh had missed when he explored the clearing earlier. The rope led up to another branch high above him. He took a twist of the rope around his wrist, stepped off his branch and slowly swung to the tree where the treehouse was lodged, landing on a large branch. From there Josh watched him climb from to limb to limb to reach the tree house. No wonder no one had been able to find him.

His curiosity satisfied, Josh steeled himself to end his assignment the only way acceptable to him. He couldn't capture the man and march him out for three days. He had deliberately eschewed any back up cell phone or radio to call for help. Nobody knew where he was. The man had deliberately and viciously murdered an innocent family. Josh had no compunction about pulling the trigger, which is exactly what he did. He carefully aimed the crossbow, allowed for a slight wind and pulled the trigger, quickly re-arming just in case. He needn't

have. The arrow punctured the center of the man's chest and he toppled forward off the branch falling in a heap on the forest floor.

Josh dropped off his tree, dashed across the creek and checked that he was really dead. He was. Josh left him and using the same technique he had witnessed, made his way up to the tree house. Inside there was nothing of interest except some canned food, a few articles of clothing and a few tools. This could not have been the year around hiding place he must have had. It was more of a hidey hole. Josh thought it was probably meant to be an unfindable retreat.

"Curious," Josh thought. "I found his hidey-hole but didn't find his camp. Doesn't matter. He's finished."

He already knew what was going to happen next. He had been told that no-one had ever claimed to know the man or know who he was. The only interest in him was removing him as a threat to others. That was done. He was a vicious and unrepentant murderer with no connections to anyone that was known about. Josh decided to bury him where he had fallen. He started digging a deep grave and cut some branches to make a simple cross. The next to last thing he did was to check if was wearing a set of dog tags, he wasn't.

After much thought and some soul searching and as proof that he had successfully completed his assignment.

He scalped him.

THE END.

The following are excerpts from my four novels.

The first two are excerpted from the two Casey Alton Mysteries. The second two are excerpted from the Joshua Rogan adventure novels.

If you enjoy the excerpts, remember they're all available in print and as ebooks on Amazon.com.

Remember, sign up for my email newsletter and get a PDF of my first book, CASEY'S SLIP, for free!

Go to www.rlwren.com to sign up.

But first....

Advance Reviews for MURDER MADE LEGAL

In a word, WOW! This book is incredible and a blast to read. It is action packed and has strong wonderful characters. I was captivated from the first page and held by it until the last, and was left wanting more. It has so much going on and drew me into the entire tale, kept me guessing what would happen next. There is suspense, mystery, murder, family bonds, and friendships formed and the truest sense of loyalty. The details are impeccable and it is extremely well written, so easy to read and impossible to put down. Richard L. Wren is a brilliant writer and I love how his mind and imagination flow. I want more of his work and I highly recommend this book. Definitely one of the most thrilling books and a must read!

Debbie Raynes, independent book reviewer

Written with a visually-rich, vivid writing style that compliments the

mysterious and suspenseful vibe that creeps through each chapter near-perfectly, *MURDER MADE LEGAL* is a must read for any thriller fans looking for a refreshing new addition to the genre that brings with it a plot that continuously has readers guessing what is going to happen next, yet somehow always plays out differently through twists and turns that could catch even the most perceptive readers off-guard.

Jane Lavuire, independent book reviewer

A Few Words About Other Books by RICHARD L. WREN

CASEY'S SLIP

A Casey Alton Mystery (2010)

“Sailboats, motorcycle gangs, kidnapping, blackmail, arson. What more could you want for pleasurable reading?”Oakland Magazine, January 2012

JOSHUA'S REVENGE

A Josh Rogan Mystery Adventure (2012)

“Mr Wren's second book(*Casey's Slip* #1) and he just seems to improve with each book, a sequel to *Joshua* is due out around October and I can't wait . If you want an adventuresome read I would recommend *Joshua's Revenge*.”
(Amazon.com reviewer)

JUSTICE FOR JOSHUA

A Josh Rogan Mystery Adventure (2014)

“Wren's ear for creating fluid, realistic dialogue, as sharp as it is wry, is especially outstanding. There were so many times when I was reading this book that I kept thinking it would make a great film or episodic TV series.”
(Amazon.com reviewer)

SELF-PUBLISHING: IT AIN'T ROCKET SCIENCE, co-authored by Loyd Auerbach

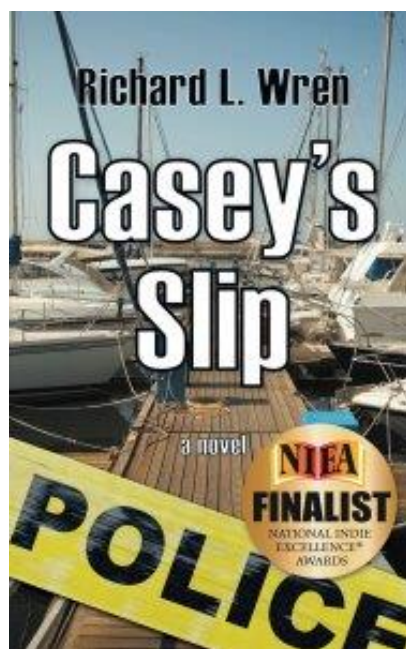
A Practical Guide to Writing, Publishing and Promoting a Book (2015)

"I am a book publicist for the past 3 years and trust me when I say that the authors really know what they are speaking about. They are thorough and helpful. Both of the authors are experienced on the subject.

This booklet covers the basics like writer's block and how to start your story. But, they also shared their complete experience on editing, publishing and promoting. Maybe I should name this book as 'Self-publishing 101' The authors have shared so many links that would be greatly useful for the authors." (Amazon.com reviewer)

All of Richard L. Wren's books are available on <http://www.rlwren.com/> and Amazon.com

An excerpt from CASEY'S SLIP



Published in 2010.

CHAPTER 18

In the garage four black and white motorcycles were lined up for our inspection. They looked like the real thing to me, but I wasn't the best judge. The gang had a few criticisms but pretty much agreed they'd pass general inspection, particularly in the dark and if it didn't rain. The four guys who'd be riding them said they thought it'd work, but they too were worried about rain, and the fact that the paint had a tendency to rub off on their legs.

"So you ride bowlegged," Smitty said. "What? I gotta do all the thinkin' around here?"

The uniforms looked like no city police uniform I'd ever seen. For one thing, they weren't blue, they were khaki. The pants weren't really made for boots and cycles, but the guys had adapted them so they looked okay if you weren't too close up. The shirts and jackets looked pretty good. The helmets were great. They'd painted them uniformly black and white and they looked pretty authentic. The best you could say was they looked like official uniforms of some sort.

"Not perfect, but I think they'll do," Smitty said passing judgment.

"Okay, everybody, I think we're ready," he announced. "We've got about an hour before we should leave. Time to break up into our own groups and rehearse what you're going to do. I'll check in with each group and answer any questions.

"You rowdies go downstairs to the garage and see if you can gimmick your bikes to be noisier than they already are." He told the police group to meet in the rec room and compare notes on how the police had acted the last time they'd been arrested. Evidently they'd had a lot of experience being arrested and thought they could handle that assignment easily.

When he finally got back to our group, I had questions.

"One. What do we do if a neighbor or someone accidentally sees us or hears us breaking in?" I read from my notes. "Two. What do we do if there are

more guys in the house than we expect? Three. What if Carpenter comes back while we're there? Four. What do we do with any guys we catch and tie up?"

"Any others?" Smitty asked. The other guys shook their heads.

"Casey" he said, "you're doing okay. I've been asking myself the same questions. Alright," he said, "to answer your question. "I know there's a lot of ifs in my plan, but you can't predict everything. Part of the answer is why I chose you guys. We may have to punt if any of those if-things happen, but I really think the five of us have the cool to handle just about anything that comes up. The answer to all your questions, Casey, is I don't know. We'll figure it out on the fly."

Needless to say, I didn't know Smitty the way the Devils did. They accepted his plan without a question. I couldn't do that. However I didn't have any choice in the matter.

Smitty paused, leaned back in his chair, linked his hands behind his head and calmly generated us.

"The plan's really simple." he reminded us. "We leave at five thirty, park close to the course and wait until we get the signal the last foursome's coming in. We follow the last group to Carpenter's yard and hide in the bushes. That's it. The rest of the plan depends on what time its dark enough for us to sneak across the lawn. Everybody straight with that?"

Several nods of acquiescence and one "no problem" was the response.

"Now get rid of your cell phones. No surprise calls. I'll have mine and it's already on vibrate. I'll use it to coordinate the ruckus out front, and call for help if we need it. Now, golf clothes on and ready to leave in ten minutes, fifteen tops, okay? And relax, it's gonna work just fine."

CHAPTER 19

Five people plus four golf bags is a tight squeeze in a standard sedan. Three of us ended up in the back seat with one of the bags across our laps. Fortunately it wasn't a long trip.

Near Carpenter's house, Smitty told the three of us in the back seat to scrunch down out of sight while he drove around and looked for a good place to park. Smitty found a street about two blocks from Carpenter's house that dead-ended against the golf course. From the front seat, Smitty could see the course. He could see the fancy stacked log fence.

"It seems like a quiet street, nobody walking around, but keep your heads down, just in case.

It was getting too dark to even think about playing golf when we finally got the call that the last foursome was coming in. Smitty said to watch for them. He'd been told that one of them was wearing pink pants. Pink pants? At least they should be easy to spot.

"Now we need a bit of luck," Smitty said, checking the rearview mirror. "We don't need anybody driving by 'til we get on the course."

Luck came our way. The street was totally quiet. Fortunately, the dead end street had only one house on either side.

We exited the car, retrieved the rest of the golf bags from the trunk and snuck onto the course. The final foursome was about a hundred yards ahead of us and had no idea we were there. We walked big as life up the middle of the course as if we owned it. Smitty made a big deal out of having me carry his bag as his caddy. Promised me a good tip.

Carpenter's house, which looked exactly as Dave had described it, was easy to spot from the fairway. Dave verified that it was indeed the right house and we all melted into the shrubbery beside the course and waited for dark.

Smitty whispered, "Okay, when I judge the time is right, I'll call the guys and have them start doing their wheelies. We'll hear them, for sure. After

they've been doing it long enough to attract attention, we'll start going in. Number Two'll go first because he's the youngest, smallest and the fastest of us."

Number Two. Oh, right – me! I'm going first? Why? I didn't have time to object before he continued.

"I'll go second. Number three, you go after me. I want Nips – I mean, number three in there ASAP so he can get started doing his thing on the doors right away. Four and five, you better come across in your number orders.

Once again we waited, giving me time to contemplate the problem I had with this numbering system of Smitty's. Every time one of guys called me Number Two, I had a silly flashback to when I was a kid and bathroom breaks were called going number one or number two, number two being, to put it delicately, the more odious of the two. The mind sure does funny things when you're under pressure.

I think we waited about twenty minutes. When we ducked into the bushes, we'd just had enough light to see our way in. Now it was pitch black. Smitty admitted we were just lucky there was no moonlight. He'd forgotten to check for that.

He quietly phoned the gang. "Anytime you're ready, we're ready." He slid his phone back into his pocket, then whispered to me, "Real soon now."

All too soon for me I could hear motorcycles approaching. Just cruising in, all four of them together, made a lot of noise. Then the noise ratcheted up. I could picture them racing one or two at a time, up and down the short street, practicing wheelies.

In a minute, Smitty was gonna shove me out into no man's land. What if I get shot? Did he know something I didn't know? Why did he want me to go first? Probably because I was the most expendable? How in hell did I get into this mess?

"Get ready," Smitty said.

CHAPTER 20

A couple of the guys with really old bikes had poked holes in the mufflers to make them even noisier. “With the mufflers holed out,” Smitty’d told me, “they’ll shake his whole house down.”

Unless the whole household was deaf, there was no way they wouldn’t be at the front windows watching.

“It’s time,” Smitty said and gave me a shove toward the fence.

Turns out, it was a breeze. No one shot at me. One step up on a lower log and I could slide over the top of the fence. Nobody had told me exactly how to get across the lawn. I figured I’d crawl on my belly, but Smitty immediately stopped that. “Stand up and crouch down,” he stage whispered at me. “Walk really, really slow to the porch steps. Sudden movements are what people see when it’s really dark like this.”

Against my better instincts, I followed his directions. It was the longest ten or fifteen yards I’ve ever walked, but I made it and threw myself into the welcoming arms of a shrub which, in retrospect, I’m happy to say was not a rose bush.

One by one the others came, all without setting off any alarms, all disappearing into the landscaping except for Nips, who went directly up on the porch.

In a few minutes Nips whispered for us to come on up. He had simply opened the screen door and walked right in. The back door was gonna be a snap, he assured us as we joined him on the porch.

“Hold on. Wait a sec before you force the door,” Smitty stage whispered to Nips.

“I just want you all to remember, there’re probably only two people home, and they’re probably in the front of the house watching all the ruckus. But we can’t be positive. One might still be in the kitchen.”

“I’ve already cased the door and given the lock a good dose of WD 40, it ain’t gonna make a sound,” came from Nips.

“Great. All I’m saying is, we’re not breaking in, we’re sneaking in. So, Nips, we need to open that door as quietly as possible. And we want to get ourselves inside as quietly as possible that way, if anyone’s there, we can still surprise ’em. Hopefully, they’re in the front and when they return to the kitchen, we can grab them without a struggle. And that’s the other thing. Remember – we grab these guys without hurting them. Throw a towel over their head or something, then tie ’em up and gag ’em.”

In the dim light from the kitchen window, we could barely see each other.

“Ready?” Smitty asked.

Whispered okays.

“Okay, Bandanas up.” I felt ridiculous. I hadn’t worn a bandana bad guy style since I was eight.

With that, he signaled Nips to go ahead and open the door, and we tiptoed in. The kitchen was empty and almost dark. Just one light on over the sink.

So far, so good.

Just then we heard sirens in the distance. Smitty smiled with the satisfaction of a plan well executed. “Ah, you gotta love it,” he whispered. “Here come our cops, right on time!”

The single light over the sink barely lit up the large kitchen. We came through the door from the porch. There were two other doors, both closed. Les quietly edged one door open, it led into a dining room, empty. The other, a swinging door, had to lead to the front of the house. Smitty inched the swinging door open a little, then closed it again.

“A hall,” he reported. “Bet they come back here that way. That’s when we grab them. Find some towels. However many there are, as they come through

the door, one of us'll throw a towel over their heads and a rag in their mouths, so they can't yell. They'll never know what hit 'em."

Smitty stationed Dave and Les behind the swinging door with towels at the ready. He, Nips, and I lined up just out of sight of the door, each of us holding a towel in our hands. We were ready... I hoped.

CHAPTER 21

Smitty whispered that he wished his guys out front would finish up and get going

“Damn those guys. They’re having too much fun, taking too much time.” Smitty was getting antsy. “There’s been plenty of time for our cops to have made their arrests and gone on their way.” We waited. Finally the street noised went away.

Shortly after that we heard footsteps coming down the hall. We could hear two guys talking to each other about the arrests and how noisy motorcycles were.

The door swung open and the first guy came through, his head was turned back as he talked with the second guy. He never saw us. Les, being real tall, sized up the situation quickly, threw his towel over the head of the second guy and got the rag in his mouth simultaneously. The first guy whipped around but it was too late. Dave got his towel over his head, rag in his mouth, and we had both of them.

We tied them up, carried them out and set them at either end of the porch, a good distance from each other. As a precaution we taped their mouths.

Then, things began to go wrong. We had just got the guys stored on the porch when Smitty said, “Shhhh. What’s that?”

He was standing next to the swinging door. I tiptoed over to him and listened quietly. Footsteps, that was what Smitty heard, and I could hear them too. There was someone else in the house.

“Where the hell did he come from?” Smitty whispered.

“Now what do we do?” I whispered back.

“We need to find out who’s there. I tell you what; he probably doesn’t know we’re here. You get on your belly and crawl up the hall and see who’s there.”

It's hard to argue when you're whispering. Smitty said we didn't have any time to waste and to get going.

I took off my shoes, got down on my belly and tried to slide along the baseboard to where I could peek around the corner and see who was there. Very slowly I inched my head into the room. In a moment or two I could just about see the whole room and I couldn't see anyone.

I had just started a reverse crawl out of the living room when an arm came out of nowhere and grabbed a handful of my hair. I was pulled around back into the living room and yanked up to my feet.

Facing me was a big guy, much taller than me, and he had a gun in his left hand. With his right hand, he was holding me up by my hair so we were face to face, and shaking the hell out of me for good measure. That hurt!

Whispering into my face, he said. "Who the hell are you, and where are Steve and Johnny?" I was simultaneously thinking that his breath stank, Smitty should have sent someone much bigger than me and he was tearing the hair out of my head.

"I asked you a question, asshole."

It crossed my mind that he must be the bodyguard that was supposed to be with Carpenter.

The only idea I could come up with was to answer him as loudly as I could. Hoping Smitty'd hear me and do something.

"Ow," I yelled, "that hurts!" Okay, you got me. I thought the house was empty."

He shook me harder.

"Where're Steve and Johnny?"

"On the porch. They're okay, honest."

"On the porch? What d'ya mean?"

“They’re tied up on the porch. In the dark they thought I had a gun and I was able to tie and gag ‘em.” I spoke as loudly as I could.

Shaking me like a rag doll he said “Shut up. You’re making too much noise.” I shut up.

“You’re feeding me a bunch of crap. He whispered. “I don’t believe you. No way could you surprise those two. You got someone else out there. I ain’t afraid to use this gun, so you better tell me who the hell’s in the kitchen.”

He still had my hair in his hand and we were still face to face. He was quiet now but very, very menacing.

“I’m telling you the truth.” I still said it pretty loudly, trying to make it sound like I was really scared by this guy. Which was easy because I was. “You don’t need to use your gun on me. I’m telling you the truth, honest.”

“I think you’re lying, but I ain’t taking any chances. I’m gonna let go of your hair and you’re gonna march ahead of me into the kitchen. We’ll see if you’re telling the truth or not. Don’t forget – I’ve got the gun aimed at your back and I ain’t afraid to use it.” He didn’t need to remind me.

With that he pushed me back into the hall and toward the swinging door into the kitchen. He kept one hand on my shoulder, making me walk slowly, while he tiptoed quietly behind me. I could feel the gun barrel on my back. When I got to the door I hesitated but he signaled that I should push it open.

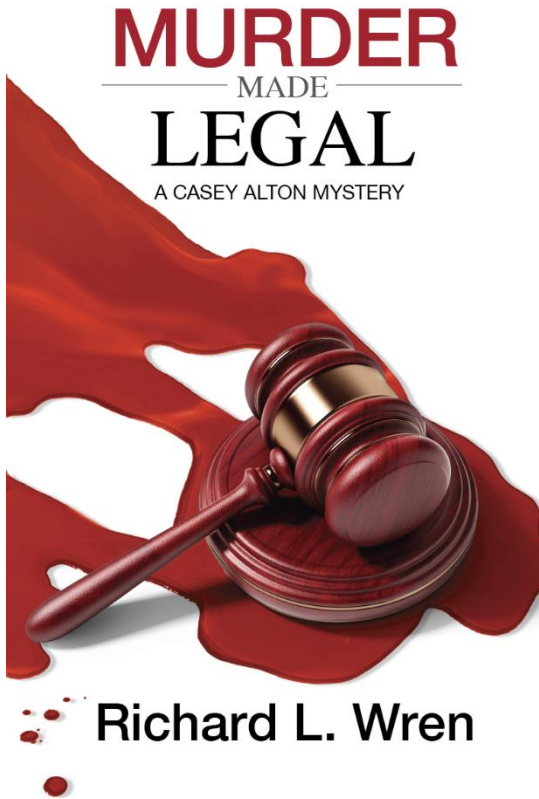
Standing in the doorway, I couldn’t see anyone at all in the kitchen. He pushed me a little way in, then cautiously came in behind me. I still couldn’t see anyone and was wondering where they’d gone when all hell broke loose.

With a loud yell, Dave came out of nowhere and crashed down on my captor. Evidently he’d managed to wedge himself above the door and dropped down from there.

He knocked the gunman down, the gun went off and I was hit.

-end of excerpt-

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CHAPTER 18

Josie and Casey were alone in the kitchen drying dishes. Casey was trying to lighten the conversation. “So what’s it like being an ex-District Attorney and now the lead defense attorney in a major case and at the same time chief cook and bottle washer for this bunch of miscreants?”

Not that easily deterred, Josie stuck to her questioning. “You think that somebody from way back there reached out and killed your lady friend in Denver? Really?” Josie was still skeptical.

“I didn’t think so until your Dad told me about how the Devils reach out to other branches in all parts of the country all the time to get something done. He said gang’s fingers spread out all around the world. Like the tentacles on an octopus.”

“Maybe, but murder?”

Casey hesitated. *“How could he tell her what Smitty had inferred, without saying what Smitty had said?”*

He carefully worded his answer, “He said that way back when, there’d been some idiots in the gang that he was sure had murdered guys that’d crossed them.”

“Okay. I get that. Mom always told me not to dig too deep into Dad’s connections with the gang. Like I said before, she was actually afraid of some of those guys. But here we’re talking about a time span of over forty years.”

“All it takes is some guy that was influential then and was in his thirties. He’d only be in his seventies now and probably totally secure in what he did until he heard the case was being reopened. Or maybe it’s some guy’s son. Or, Smitty suggested it could be a gang. Like he said, gangs go on forever.”

Slowly, Josie posed a question. “Originally you two were going to work for me, be my bird dogs. So far I don’t have diddly squat and the DA’s blocking me at every turn. So maybe the thing is to follow up on what you’re getting?”

Smitty took that moment to join them. “Any more coffee?”

Josie poured each of them a cup and Casey asked the next logical question. “What now? Where do we go from here?”

Smitty was ready with a quick answer. “Shirl’s Bar for a beer. I figure if Elsie was pleased to find that Shirl’ remembered her she might be one of the one’s she called. It’s as good a place to start as anywhere, right?”

The bar wasn’t exactly jumping, three guys playing pool, an old guy reading a newspaper and nursing a beer plus Shirl at the back door talking to a beer truck driver.

Both Smitty and Casey paid more attention to Shirl than they had the previous visit. Casey decided that the word chunky fit her. He noticed that she was tall enough to handle being behind the bar, “*five six or seven?*” he thought. “*And strong,*” he added to himself as he saw her heft a case of beer.

“You two again?” She greeted them in a friendly tone much different than the words themselves. “I got a phone call from Elsie thanks to you. She said she was coming down and might drop by. So I guess I owe you. How about a couple’a beers on the house,” she said as she drew and place two beers in front of them.

Casey and Smitty glanced at each other.

“So she did call you after we talked to her?” Smitty asked.

“That’s what I said isn’t it?” She rested her hands on the back edge of the bar.

Slowly Smitty reached out and covered her hand with his huge paw. “Shirl, we got some awfully bad news for you. Elsie’s dead. She was murdered.” He glanced at Casey. “We think she might have been murdered because of the call she made to you.”

She yanked her hand out from under Smitty's. "She's dead? Murdered? And you think I'm involved?"

"No, no." Smitty reassured her. He went on to recount everything that had happened since they had last visited her bar.

"So you think somebody from the past arranged to get her killed?" she said disbelievingly.

"Nothing else makes sense."

She stepped back, turned and slowly walked to the bar's end and stopped with her back to the two of them. After a moment she returned to them and asked. "So you're saying that she might have been killed because I gabbed to somebody? And you want to know what and who we talked about and who I might have mentioned it to. right?"

"That's it in a nutshell."

Partly to herself she said. "Jesus that puts me in a bind."

"It's for Gus." Smitty quietly said.

She leaned over the bar and whispered in a quick jumble of words.

"The only name she mentioned was Carl Peterson. She said she had mentioned him to you and she wanted to know if he was still around. I told her hell yes he's in here all the time but I don't remember him being involved in that case. She said oh yes he was and was going to look him up with a lot of questions when she got here."

"And you mentioned the phone call to this guy Peterson?"

"I didn't see any harm in it. He's kind of an old friend and a nice guy. No way he'd do anyone any harm. Hell, you can go over and talk to him if you want. He's the tall guy playing pool over there."

Smitty had already noticed the guy intently staring at them. The light outside the cone of light over the pool table wasn't very bright but Smitty had noticed a long scar from the guy's forehead to below his ear.

“That’s Carl Peterson and he was a policeman back then?”

“Detective. He’s been retired for years.”

“C’mon Casey, let’s talk to him.” They walked over as the three guys racked their cues and hoisted their rear ends on the edge of the pool table.

“What’s goin’ on?” The one Shirl had identified as Peterson asked.

“Nothin’. Why?”

Peterson radiated a feeling of casualness but Smitty could feel tension in the air. “We couldn’t help but notice you kept lookin’ over here all the time you were talkin’ to Shirl. ‘You askin’ about us?”

“Nope: not at all. Fact is we came over to give her some bad news. A good friend of hers got murdered in Denver. She said you might have known her too. Elsie Lancaster?”

Whatever else Peterson might have been, he was a lousy actor. He did a slow double take while he obviously tried to formulate an answer. “Let’s see, Elsie Who?”

“Lancaster. She was a police dispatcher way back when.”

Smitty refreshed his memory. “Shirl said she talked to you about Elsie trying to locate you and you remembered her.”

Peterson cast a nervous eye at his two playing partners. “Oh, that Elsie. Guess I just forgot about her, right guys?” They both nodded in unison.

Smitty decided it was time to get out and decide their next step now that Peterson had aroused their suspicions.

“Well if you don’t even remember her, I guess you can’t help us any.”

“Help you?”

“Yeah. We’re working for an attorney that’s investigating an old case. You’ve probably read about how they’re using DNA to re-open those old cases? We thought Mrs. Lancaster might have some new evidence but now that she’s dead,” he paused for a moment then threw out a red herring. “I

guess we'll just go soldiering on and try to find out what really happened by ourselves."

Peterson suddenly developed itchy feet. "Hey I just remembered, I gotta' make a phone call."

It was obviously apparent to both Casey and Smitty that Peterson thought he'd successfully pulled the wool over their eyes.

"Let's go," Smitty said. Casey expected him to make a beeline for the front door but he lingered for a while talking to ShirL.

Finally, as Casey opened the front door, Smitty whispered. "On your toes. I think Peterson might be waiting for us," he reached in his pocket and pulled out two billiard balls, handing one to Casey. "Really good defensive weapon," he chortled.

As they reached their car, Peterson stepped out from the corner of the building holding a cue reversed in his right hand. His two friends backed him up. Smitty didn't hesitate but threw the billiard ball with remarkable accuracy at Peterson's face, giving him no time to dodge. The ball glanced off the side of his mouth, taking all the fight out of him. His two friends ran.

"Thought so," Smitty remarked. "I think we struck a nerve. Is he conscious?"

"Just barely," Casey observed in a shocked tone. "Jesus his lips are squashed and there's blood everywhere." He glanced up at Smitty, "a little excessive?"

Smitty looked at Casey a little derisively. "You ever been in a gang fight? Ever been clobbered by the butt end of a cue stick?" He paused. "Never mind, you'll learn."

The guy was coughing, retching and spitting blood, making a lot of noise. Enough so that neither Smitty nor Casey heard approaching footsteps. The first inkling of company was when out of the corner of Casey's eye he noticed the pointed end of a brightly polished cowboy boot just behind him. He whirled around prepared to call out and warn Smitty only to find himself facing two men, each armed with a gun pointing them.

He reminded himself that discretion was better than valor when facing armed men and gently whispered. “Smitty”.

“What?”

“We got company.”

Smitty, busy propping Peterson up against the side of the building slowly twisted his head around. Two men, each holding a gun trained on him. He immediately noticed how professional they were acting. The one behind Casey had kicked his feet apart and was standing about an arm’s length behind him while the other was a careful two yards behind him. Very professional, almost police like. Smitty slowly stood up letting Peterson slide back down to the ground.

CHAPTER 19

The farthest one wagged the muzzle of his gun threateningly at Smitty.

“Pick him up, we’re going inside.”

The near one gave Casey a shove and said, “Help him.”

Between the two of them they were able to get Peterson on his feet and help him stagger toward the door. The gunmen kept a safe distance behind them.

“Get going asshole” the first one commanded when Casey stumbled. “This parking lot isn’t going to stay empty forever.” He added to his partner.

“Stop,” the smaller of the two commanded as they approached the door. “Peterson, can you walk by yourself?”

“Yesh.” He painfully mumbled, blood still leaking from his mouth.

“Okay, you two, one step to the side and no tricks.”

Casey and Smitty did as told leaving Peterson standing by himself.

“Okay. Now go by yourself. Open the door and leave it wide open. Go! Then you two follow him one at a time. Don’t try to get cute, remember there’re two of us and no witnesses around.”

Casey followed Peterson into the bar. Everything looked normal. The old guy had moved and was sitting at a table under a window still reading the newspaper and nursing a beer. The beer truck driver was gone. Shirl was standing on a chair behind the bar polishing the huge mirror. She saw Peterson’s reflection in the mirror as he entered and immediately jumped to the floor.

“Carl, what happened? You poor dear, your all over bloody.” She hustled to the end of the bar, trying to come to his aid.

“Shut the fuck up you fat piece of lard!” he yelled at her. “Give me a clean bar rag and shut up!”

Shirl was shocked dumb. “Carl?”

“Do it!” Carl ordered.

At that moment the two gunmen came in, ostentatiously waving their guns.

“Do it!” the gunman repeated. “Back behind the bar!” he added.

Casey noted that one of them was consistently giving the orders. He was alarmed by the fact that neither of the men was hiding his face. Ideas and thoughts raced through his mind. *“no masks. Does that mean they intend to kill the two of us? Would they really shoot with Shirl and the old man as witnesses? Does Smitty have a plan of escape?”* He wasn’t encouraged by the looks and manners of the two gunmen, particularly the one he deemed to be the leader. Older, small, thin, well dressed in a blue suit, his face was angular with sharp cheek bones and squinty eyes. In his mind Casey started referring to him as Squinty. He caught Smitty’s eyes and Smitty very slightly wagged his head in a negative fashion. He was telling him not to try anything.

“You two!” he ordered Casey and Smitty. “On a bar stool at opposite ends.”

They did it. Now seated several stools apart, their captor seemed pleased with the arrangement. Casey noticed that the man reading the newspaper hadn’t seemed to notice anything.

Squinty, as Casey referred to him, casually walked behind the bar and stood next to Shirl, his arm laid casually around her shoulders bringing his gun next to her right cheek. She flinched.

He was noticeably shorter than Shirl, maybe only five three or, maybe five four and had to reach up to get his arm around her shoulder.

“Now.” He announced. “I need some information. You told Carl that you’re working for an attorney on an old murder case. I need to know who the attorney is.”

Casey stiffened. “Jesus Christ, they were going after Josie?”

The gunman continued. “Carl said that the three of you were real chummy and all three of you have the info. The question is which one of you would be the easiest to get the information out of. I don’t think it would be either of you two,” he said swinging the gun barrel back and forth between Smitty and Casey.”

Each time he swung the gun it brushed Shirl’s cheek and lips. Her eyes were squeezed shut and she noticeably flinched each time the gun touched her.

He continued. “So that leaves Shirl here, don’t it.”

She shook her head negatively.

“Are you telling me you don’t know anything?”

She shook her head up and down.

With no warning, the gunman reversed his gun and slammed it viciously into the side of her head, splitting the skin over her cheekbone. She screamed and fainted, blood streaming down her face.

Smitty lunged forward. The gunman behind him yelled “that’s enough,” and jabbed his gun into Smitty’s back. At the same time “Squinty” leaned into Shirl’s frame to hold her up while flipping his gun in his hand and menacingly pointed it at Casey. He froze Casey with his eyes and gun barrel.

Nobody moved until Shirl moaned and stirred. “You gonna’ let her bleed to death?” Casey took a chance speaking while looking down the barrel of a gun.

The guy didn’t even glance at her. “She’ll be fine,” as she slowly straightened back up. “Cover them both for me,” he directed the second gunman. “It’s time to see who’s behind that newspaper.” He walked across the bar room and jerked the paper out of the old guys hands.

The guy looked fearfully up at him with rheumy eyes while reaching for a hearing aid sitting beside beer. “What’s wrong?”

Speaking unnaturally loud he asked him a question. “Didn’t you hear Shirl say she was closing the bar ‘cause she’s sick?”

Gesturing at the hearing aid, he said, “Didn’t hear nothin’”

“Can I help you get out? She’s anxious to lock up and go home.”

In a few minutes the guy gulped down the remainder of his beer, folded up his newspaper and was gone.

While the gunman was taking care of the old man and the other gunman’s attention was partially diverted, Casey caught Smitty’s eye and squinting his own eyes, formed the word squinty.

Smitty nodded his head in understanding. If an opportunity presented itself they could at least differentiate between the two gunmen.

Helplessly, Smitty watched “Squinty” lock the door behind the old man and hang a closed sign in the window then head back toward the bar and Shirl. As he walked past Casey he suddenly whirled and before Casey could react backhanded him across his unprotected throat. Smitty recognized the blow as a particularly vicious and effective Karate type blow. ‘One that could paralyze or even kill a person. Casey fell to the floor gasping and clawing at his throat. His head hit the floor with a loud thud.

Smitty spun off the bar stool toward Casey only to be met with the gun muzzle zero’d in on him and a threat. “Don’t” was all the gunman said, but the gun muzzle spoke volumes.

“Tie him up. Hog tie’m,” he casually instructed the other gunman without wavering the gun the least bit.

All Smitty could do was hope that the blow hadn’t crushed Casey’s windpipe and he’d survive the blow.

“Squinty” continued on behind the bar and grabbed Shirl by her head of dyed blond hair. “Convinced?” he asked. She nodded her head up and down. “Your memory’s improving?” She nodded again.

“Good, that’s real good.” He looked around the room, talking as if to himself. “Let’s see, one out of it and all tied up, the other covered by two guns, doors are closed and locked and a closed sign in the window, and” turning to Shirl, “you ready to be real cooperative, right?”

She nodded miserably.

He glanced at the wall clock. “I’ll be damned. Eleven fifteen already. It’s amazing how time flies when you’re having fun.” He looked around and spread his arms expansively. “I always wanted to own a bar and now I got one all my own. I think it’s time for lunch, don’t you?” He smirked at Shirl then turned his attention to Peterson.

“You alive?”

Peterson groaned. “I think I lost at least two teeth from that sonuvabitchin’ cue ball, yeah, I’m alive, so what?”

“Get off your ass and get us some beers. Then clean yourself up and Shirl here too. When you two are presentable get her to fix us some lunch.” He turned to his buddy, “hey Gene, sandwiches okay?”

He sat facing both Smitty and Casey. Now Smitty had two names. Peterson and Gene. He wondered what Squinty’s name was as he retreated to his bar stool and the gunman seemed to relax a little.

Letting the gun dangle from his finger on the trigger guard, he nonchalantly put his shiny cowboy boots up on the table and directed his attention to Smitty. “You don’t mind if we get comfortable do you? The way I figger’ it, we got all afternoon to get everything Shirl knows outa’ her. Nobody knows we’re here and Shirl’s gone home sick.” He laughed at his own joke. “Then I’ll have to decide what the hell to do with the three of you.”

Smitty took a shot in the dark. “You’ll probably do what your boss’s told you to do, that’s my guess.”

The gunman instantly replied. “Well of course I’ll do what I’m paid to do but it’s the parameters that’re interesting. They don’t give a shit how I get the info they want just get it.” He nudged Gene on his butt and gave a short laugh, “that’s right ain’t it, Gene.”

“That include running down and killing old ladies?” asked Smitty.

“Now what the hell’re you talking about?” Squinty appeared totally mystified by the question.

Smitty instantly thought his statement vindicated his theory. There had to be an organization of some sort behind this. The killing in Denver was obviously related to what was going on here but Squinty didn’t seem to know anything about it. “*Someone higher up’s pulling the strings,*” he thought to himself as he looked with concern at Casey.

Peterson came out from behind the bar carrying three drawn beers. “Might as well have the best,” he said as he set them down. Then in what looked like sheer vindictiveness he walked over to Casey tested his bonds and kicked him twice in the ribs.

CHAPTER 20

Casey didn't move. He had a rope tied around his ankles, his knees doubled up and the other end of the rope was a noose around his neck. If he tried to straighten out he would choke himself. Blood was dripping from a cut on his face. So far, he seemed to be out cold completely.

Squinty addressed Smitty. "You didn't like it when I clobbered old Shirl did you? Maybe that's the key." He deliberated for a moment while rubbing the barrel of his gun along his jaw line. "Would you tell me who you work for if I threatened to chop of her fingers one by one 'til you came clean? I wonder?"

Smitty had no doubts now that the guy was a psychopath of some sort. His casual cruelty to Shirl and Casey made that plain. He just stared back at the gunman without blinking, not knowing the best attitude to take.

"Another beer." The gunman ordered. Peterson jumped to get the order. Smitty narrowed his eyes. He suddenly realized that Peterson was afraid of the gunman but putting up a front of bravado. "*Could he use that?*" He wondered.

Suddenly Peterson stopped in midstride and said, "What was that?"

"What?" the gunman said, suddenly tense.

"Thought I heard a car door slam."

The gunman relaxed. "Probably just a disgruntled customer. He'll leave when he sees the closed sign. Take a look."

Peterson walked over to a window and carefully peeked out between the blinds.

"Shit. It's a cop car."

"What're they doing?"

"Nothing, just sitting there, two of 'em."

“Two cars?”

“No, two cops. One of ‘em’s getting out. He’s coming over here. Oh shit, the other’s out too and he’s got his gun out standing on the other side of the car.”

“What the fuck?” Squinty quietly exclaimed as he rose to his feet.

Peterson stumbled as he tried to retreat from the front window. The gunman showed his nerves when he almost snapped off a shot at the noise. “He’s looking at the closed sign.”

“Stay calm,” the gunman ordered. “I’m gonna’ check the rear to see if there’s another cop out back.” He ran quietly behind the bar and through the swinging doors to the kitchen knocking Shirl off her feet as he went.

A loud pounding on the front door riveted everyone’s attention.

“Shirl! Answer up!”

Peterson turned towards the rear of the bar and in a loud stage whisper tried to reach the gunman. “Earl, Earl.” No answer. He tried again, “Hey Earl, what’ll we do?”

Shirl spoke up from where she was laying on the floor with a view of the kitchen area from under the swinging doors. “He’s gone.”

“Gone?” Peterson said. “What d’ya mean gone?”

“He opened the door a little and peeked outside then he quietly slipped through it and disappeared. The door’s still open,” she said suggestively.

At the same time the cop outside shouted to his partner. “Something’s fishy here. Take a look out back but be careful”

Gene spoke up. “That prick split on us, screw him,” and tossed his gun onto the table. At the same time he opened up a long pocket knife and headed towards Casey.

Smitty sprang to his feet, but before he could get there the guy started cutting the bonds off of Casey and issuing orders to Peterson.

“We didn’t do nothin’, Earl did it all, got it? Answer him,” he ordered Shirl.

“That you George?” Shirl shrilly yelled.

“Shirl? Let us in.”

Peterson said, “What’s goin’ on?”

Gene said, “Peterson, shut the fuck up and sit down, you moron.” They both sat down at an empty table, carefully avoiding the table where Gene had tossed his gun.

Shirl said, “Smitty, answer the door.”

Smitty yelled, “We’re coming,” and walked to the door. “I’m unlocking it,” he continued, and turned the key. Before he could turn the knob he felt it twisted in his hand and was thrust backward by the force of the policeman ramming the door and entering with gun drawn and shouting, “everyone on the floor, hands where I can see them.” He swept the room with his gun as Gene and Peterson fell to the floor as directed. “You too buster” he shouted as his gun ended up pointing at Smitty standing beside the door.

“Shirl. Where are you” he called. Shirl crawled out from behind the bar. “Jesus H. Christ” the cop mouthed and immediately called for backup.

“Any more around?” he questioned Shirl. The second cop answered as he came in from the back door. “Empty back here, looks like one of ‘em got away.”

“Upstairs?” he asked Shirl.

“All clear,” she answered. “There were only three of them.” She pointed at Smitty on his knees, hands in the air. “George, that’s Smitty. He’s a friend but I think we need an EMT team for Casey there.” She pointed to Casey who was just beginning to writhe around, “another friend of mine,” she vouched.

George took a closer look at Shirl's face. "I think you better go with him to the hospital. What the hell happened here?"

She countered with a question. "How come you guys came by?"

"We didn't just come by. We were told you were in trouble."

Shirl was mystified. "Who?"

"You're old Mr. Regular, that's who. He says they kicked him out."

"Yeah they did. After they realized he was damn near totally deaf. They thought he was harmless and hadn't seen anything anyway."

"Well, you owe him a big thank you. They were right he hadn't noticed anything but the guy that kicked him out made a big mistake. It took him a half hour or so to pick up on it but when he did he called us right away and we hustled on down."

Slowly, Shirl ran the scene at the front door through her mind once more. "I sure didn't see any mistake the guy made."

"Something he said. Turns out Mr. Davis's got some smarts and he sure as hell used them. The guy said you were in a hurry to close up and go home. Davis just kinda' accepted that statement for a while until he remembered that you lived upstairs. You wouldn't go home, you're already home! So he called us, pretty smart huh?"

Smitty had hustled over to Casey and was trying to staunch the bleeding and gently bring him back around to consciousness. He called over to the officer, "Yeah he needs an ambulance and so does she."

The second cop said, "It's on the way."

Shirl's cop friend George asked her, "You up to telling me what went on here?" She proceeded to describe the morning's happenings lucidly and clearly until they heard sirens in the distance and she began to wilt.

"I'm beginning to feel sickish." She told George.

“‘‘Could be a slight concussion.’’ Smitty volunteered. ‘‘The guy that got away really smacked her.’’

Shirl was feeling well enough to explain Smitty and Casey’s presence there and add, ‘‘He can fill you in on the rest of the story. I’ve known him for years.’’

The cop looked at Smitty and grinned, ‘‘Yeah I know who you are and I remember what happened last year. No worries.’’

Smitty told him what the missing gunman had done to Casey and how he had fallen on his unprotected head as he’d clutched at his throat with both hands. ‘‘Wish to hell they’d get here with the ambulance.’’

The second cop broke in. ‘‘They’re just now turning into the driveway.’’

‘‘Was there any sign out back of the guy that got away?’’ George asked him.

‘‘I didn’t see nobody. The door was standing open and I was looking more inside than outside.’’

George turned to Smitty. ‘‘I need a description I can call in for an APB.’’

Smitty pointed to a coat hanger fastened to a post behind the tables. ‘‘See the bottom of that hanger? That’s exactly how tall he was when he stood next to it.’’ George stood next to it. ‘‘That’d make him about five three or so. What else?’’

‘‘Real lean, I’d say about one thirty or so. Dark black slicked back hair, sharp dresser, shiny new looking cowboy boots and a kind of screwy look to his eyes, sorta’ squinty like. I thought maybe the light was bothering him but it’s pretty dark in here. Oh yeah, his name’s Earl and I would guess him to be about sixty.’’

He said all this as he was watching the parameds examine Casey carefully and then load him on to a stretcher. The paramed saw his concern.

“He’s gonna’ be okay, no broken bones, lots of bruises.” He hesitated. “Are you his dad?”

“Father in law.” Smitty responded. “Why?”

He moved away from Casey’s hearing range. “His throats something else. I’ve seen that kind of injury before on Martial Arts students. Nothing’s broke but a lotta’ damage’s been done. Sometimes it takes weeks before you can talk again. What somebody did to him was just short of a killing blow.”

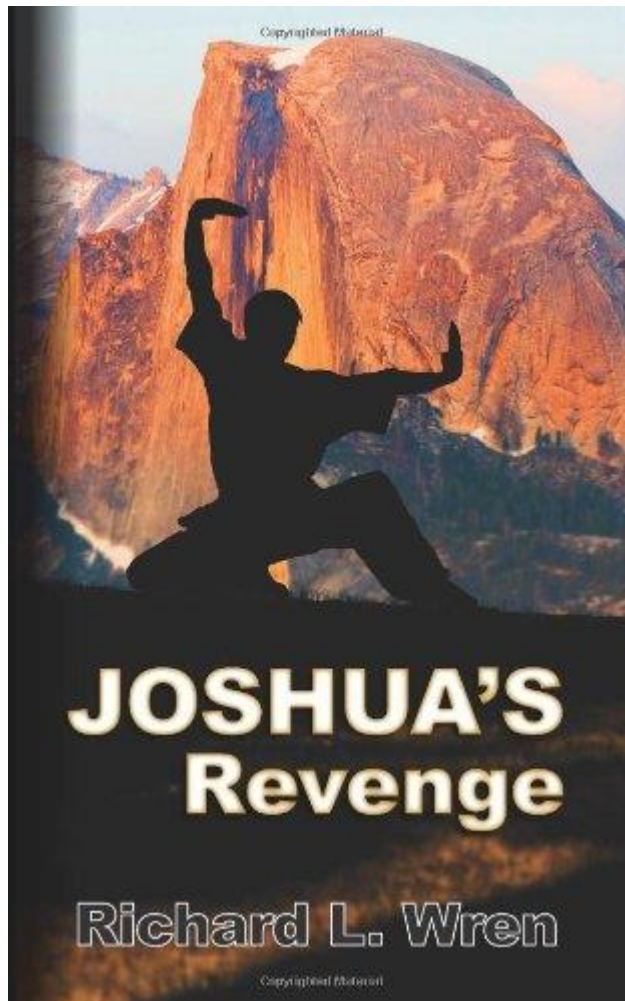
“Shit.” Was all Smitty could muster in response.

After looking around carefully, the paramed added, “Up to me with my experience I’d call a Karate school and get them to recommend an oriental doc’ that’s familiar with Karate injuries. Gotta’ go.” He moved back to Casey’s side and finished strapping him in and then wheeled him out on the gurney. Casey grabbed Smitty’s hand in passing and squeezed it hard. He tried to speak but could only muster a croak.

Smitty said, “You’re gonna’ be okay, nothing broken and the throat’ll heal itself in a day or two. I’ll call Josie and see you at the hospital.”

-end of excerpt-

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CHAPTER 30

In his experience, there were usually many Chinese businesses that never made it into the phone book. Thriving businesses that derived their customers entirely from the comparatively small, but very crowded, Chinese community. They didn't need to advertise. Everybody knew everybody. Plus, in these days, they all used cell phones and didn't need to be listed.

The problem was that the guys that had attacked him in his room said that Fong traveled from pool hall to pool hall looking for business. Josh might have to visit several to find him.

All he could do was nose around. It was never easy for a non-Chinese to nose around in the Chinese community, particularly outside the tourist area. However, being fluent in several dialects would give him an advantage. A huge worry was they might have his picture. They had known his hotel room because they had seen his Room passkey. But they had also seen his Park Ranger ID with his picture. Could they have copied it in that short time?

After further thought, Josh decided it was highly unlikely he would be recognized. Nobody knew yet that the attack on him had failed. The only person he thought might have his picture was Charley Fong himself.

He walked to Chinatown and became a tourist. On the way he devised a story that might help him find other pool halls if the listed one wasn't the right one.

In Chinese, he talked to several merchants.

"I'm looking for a Chinese Merchant seaman friend of mine. I was supposed to meet him yesterday in front of the temple, but my ship was a day late. All I can remember is that he plays a lot of pool and said there were a couple of pool halls here that he liked. I found one but I don't think it's the right one. Do you know of any others?"

Mostly he got negative answers. Some said they thought there were some, but they didn't know where. As it got later into the evening, some of the stores started closing. He moved further into the heart of Chinatown and away from the tourist streets. Here the stores were different. Grocery stores, meat markets, small restaurants, liquor stores, all open. Almost one hundred percent Chinese customers.

In order to blend in, Josh started buying stuff. A few dollars worth of groceries or meats bought him the opportunity to jaw with the owner for a few minutes or so. Often, the only reason he was able to get any information at all was because the merchants were surprised by his fluent Chinese. Eventually he got a couple of leads.

The problem was that the information was pretty vague. They all knew they were around just didn't know exactly where they were. "Over two blocks, in a basement." Or, "Across from park, in a basement."

Evidently, wherever it was, it was in a basement. It reminded Josh of what a Chinese friend of his had told him once, many years before, in Shanghai.

"You want the best Chinese restaurant in Shanghai? Find a disreputable old building. Walk up three flights of a dirty staircase and down a dingy hall to the very last door. Inside that door you'll find the best restaurant!"

Now it was dark but there were still lots of people walking, talking and shopping. He was still able to walk the streets somewhat unnoticed. The closest place he had heard of was two blocks away and he headed for it. "Over two blocks and in a basement."

In two blocks, Chinatown became residential. No stores, no bustling shoppers, few lights. Tenement type houses, side by side, and apartment buildings. Many of the larger buildings had small windows just above the sidewalk level, obviously opening into basements. By now it was quite dark and a number of the basement windows were beacons of light. Josh was able to quietly make his way down the streets, peering into the basement windows.

Rounding a corner, Josh came across a group of Chinese teens. Expecting them to be belligerent toward a white stranger, he was pleasantly surprised by their friendliness. A couple of them were hastily trying to hide bottles wrapped in paper bags behind their backs. Josh thought they were worried that he was “The Man,” and would arrest them.

“Relax guys, I’m just trying to hustle up a pool game. I heard there was a hall nearby?”

“Okay, man. Pool? How about right there?” one of them said and pointed to a stairwell about two doors away. “But you ain’t gonna like it!” Then in Chinese to his neighbor, “They won’t even let him in!”

Speaking in Chinese, Josh said, “Why won’t they let me in?”

A moment of surprised silence, then, “You’re not Chinese.”

“Right. But I am a pool player, I’m going in.”

“It’s your neck! Don’t say we didn’t warn you. C’mon guys, we gotta see this!”

Followed by the teens, Josh walked to the stairwell and stepped down about eight very dark steps to an unlighted door. Glancing back at the teens, he saw one of them pantomiming for him to knock on the door. In the quiet of the stairwell he could hear muted sounds from inside.

Josh had two cards to play. One was that he spoke fluent Chinese. The other was that he was a superb eight ball player. He thought, *if I can just get in and challenge someone to a game of pool, I’ll have a chance to get the information I need.*

On the way, Josh had found a two-piece billiard cue at a second hand store, complete with carrying case. He used it to knock on the door.

CHAPTER 31

Josh didn't expect any real trouble. After all, there was nothing illegal about a pool hall, unless they were operating without a city license or something. He thought all he would have to contend with was being a complete outsider.

The door opened just enough to see half of a Chinese face.

A rather belligerent "Who are you?" in English.

Josh answered in Chinese.

"I guess I'm what you might call a 'pool shark,' looking for a good game."

"You want to play pool here?"

"That's why I'm here!"

"It's a private club!"

"You got any really good players here? I'd be interested in playing against your best player, maybe for a hundred bucks?"

That got him in. The room was quite large and filled with eight regulation tables. Six in the front room and two toward the rear of the hall. It was more like a private club with pool tables than a hall. One side of the hall had a bar and what looked like a small restaurant.

Josh could smell Chinese food and cigarettes. The hall was thick with cigarette smoke. At first, no one took notice of him. Gradually, at the tables nearest to him, the play stopped and he was stared at.

The guy that had spoken to him at the door, called for attention and said;

"This guy wants to play pool. Says he'll take on anyone for a hundred bucks a game!"

Josh added quickly, in Chinese, “I got tired of playing against the amateurs at the “Y”. A Chinese guy there told me about you guys. I’m just looking for some real competition!”

Toward the side, sitting at a table near the bar, a heavy set, middle aged, gray haired Chinese man waved a hand in the air and called out, “Over here!”

“Sit!” he said. “Who are you?”

Josh told him his real name and that he worked for the U.S. parks and was on vacation. He crossed his fingers, hoping that his name wasn’t already on somebody’s list.

“You’re pretty good?”

“I think so.”

“Willing to play for money?”

“Yeah. Sure!”

“Okay, this is my joint. I handle all the bets. That okay with you?”

“Sure, that’s fine.”

“Okay, you’ll play the winner at whichever table clears first. We usually play for twenty-five bucks a game, okay? Plus five that goes to me, Okay? Anything over twenty-five, it’s put up or shut up and I hold the stakes. Okay?”

Josh was tempted to say “okay” right back at him but settled for, “Sounds fair to me!”

“Okay! Want something to eat?”

“Tea and rice?”

“Okay,” was the answer, accompanied by a snap of the fingers and an order placed with the resultant waiter.

In a short time a table came free. The owner called the winner over to his table. Turning to Josh he said, “I’m Chan. This is Henry Yu. Henry, this is Josh. Josh says he’s pretty good and wants to play for money. Okay?”

“Eight ball?” Henry asked.

“Eight ball!” answered Josh.

“How much?”

“Chan said you guys usually play for twenty-five but I can play for more if you want.”

“Twenty-five sounds okay to me, at least for the first game.”

Josh had barely had enough time to watch his opponent play in his previous match. He thought he would be pretty easy to beat, but he couldn’t afford to be over-confident. He had to win in order to continue playing and have any chance to direct the conversation around to Charley Fong.

CHAPTER 32

They lagged the cue ball for the break and Josh intentionally lost. He had seen just enough of Yu's game to be sure he wouldn't be able to run all eight balls in one turn. Josh drew solids and Yu broke the rack.

Sure enough, Yu missed on his number three ball. Josh took his turn and pocketed all seven of his balls and then the eight to win the match.

By the time he got to the number six ball a small crowd had gathered. By the time he pocketed the eight ball, others were ready to play him.

Chan called him over. "Okay, you want to play more?"

"That's why I'm here, but don't you have some better players? Maybe willing to make the game a little more interesting, say a hundred bucks interesting?"

Chan called out, "Man wants to play for a hundred bucks. You saw him play, who wants to take him on?" Half a dozen hands went up.

Chan selected one of the volunteers, collected a hundred and five bucks from Josh and his opponent and they headed to Josh's table.

Josh took a chance and used the same idea he had used on the first game. He intentionally lost the lag. This time his opponent was only able to get his first ball in before missing. Josh didn't want to scare off the opposition so he purposely missed after four balls. This time his opponent got two balls in before missing.

Josh easily ran the rest of his balls to win. He told Chan to hold on to his winnings because he wanted to play some more.

"Okay, Okay, plenty more want to play you."

Josh congratulated the guy he had just beaten and asked if he could buy him a drink. Josh told him he needed to relax for a minute or two before playing again.

At the table with Chan and his opponent, Josh tried to steer the conversation to Charley Fong.

“I have a Chinese mother-in-law. Lives over in Oakland, needs help with some sort of legal stuff. Some lousy tenants are giving her a bad time. She doesn’t speak much English. I told her I’d try to find a Chinese attorney that wasn’t too pricey. You got any ideas?”

“Lots of Chinese attorneys around but they charge an arm and a leg just to meet with you.”

“Wait, I’ve got a better idea. She doesn’t really need an attorney all she needs is someone that knows enough about the law to convince these squatters to leave. Maybe a private detective firm? Do you know anyone like that?”

The guy he’d just beaten glanced at Chan and said, “Charley?”

Chan shrugged his shoulders and said “maybe.”

Then Josh stopped. He figured he would let them stew on that for a while and see if it led anywhere.

Over the next forty minutes or so he played three more games, winning them all easily and decisively. So far he had won over four hundred dollars but hadn’t gotten any more leads to Charley Fong.

He had noticed a group of tables in the rear of the room, almost all by themselves. A number of young Chinese were gathered around them, not mixing with the ones Josh had been playing. They were all dressed in black and making a lot of noise. Now a couple of them wandered over to his table and watched the action. Nobody got in their way.

After a few minutes they walked back to the rear table, only to return with a tall, young Chinese carrying his cue stick. Probably in his early twenties, he had a perpetual sneer on his lean face and long black hair tied in a ponytail. It was obvious that he thought he was big stuff. Like the others, he was all dressed in black. He elbowed his way to the front of the small group watching and then

addressed Josh, “You! You think you’re pretty much a hot shot, taking money from these amateurs. How about you let us take a little money from you?”

“You want to play me for serious money?”

“That’s what I’m saying!”

“How much?”

“How about five to start?”

“Okay, but I want to speak to Chan first.” With that he walked over to Chan and asked in a low voice, “You hear that?”

“Yeah, it’s okay!”

“Are they good for it?”

“Sure, they’re okay, are you?”

“I’m okay, here’s a thou. Will you hold the stakes?”

“Okay, plus five dollars!”

On the way back to his table, one of the guys he had beaten earlier sidled beside him and whispered, “Be careful! These guys could be dangerous if you win too much!”

Before Josh could thank him, he whispered again, “Ask Chan about Charley, for your aunt, he’s a detective,” and was gone.

Maybe Chan was the lead he would need to find Charley, but he couldn’t corner Chan yet, he had to play these “tough guys.”

CHAPTER 33

Seven of the black-clad guys surrounded the pool table. Most of other players in the room, the one's Josh had been playing so far, moved a respectful distance away. The tall one, evidently the leader, asked him, "You willing to lose some real money?"

"Sure, let's get at it!"

"Okay, it's your table. We'll rack, you break." With that he turned to one of the six and said, "Ty, you start."

A short, round faced guy strutted up to the table, grabbed a chalk and said, "I'm Tyler. Can't wait to start spending your thousand bucks. Bruce is our best, I'm maybe third or fourth, but Bruce thinks I'll take you in a snap."

Evidently Bruce was the boss of the gang, the tall guy with the sneer.

Tyler racked the balls and Josh set up to break.

Josh set the cue ball in his favorite break position, slightly left of center and stroked the ball with a little top English.

The ball got the topspin he wanted, hit the one ball square and achieved a great distribution. Two balls dropped, one striped and one solid. Josh decided to play the solid as he thought he could see a run on solid from the beginning.

The first two balls were a little difficult, the rest were easy and Josh ran all the remaining six and the eight ball to win the game. He turned to Bruce and said, "Next?"

Bruce took his guys into a huddle before answering. Evidently he still thought Josh was beatable and chose another of his guys to play the second game.

This guy was almost as tall as Bruce and had a scar running down his cheek. He looked to be in his early twenties as well. By the way he walked over to the table, you could see he fancied himself as a tough customer.

Before they could get started, Bruce got himself into Josh's face and said.

"You got real lucky on that one! This one's ours!"

"You think so?" Holding his ground Josh said, "then let's up the bet! How about three grand?" Josh had come equipped to play a lot of pool in order to find Charley Fong, to the extent of having a pocketful of traveler's checks. He could really goad these punks and maybe find out something at the same time. Maybe Fong would show up during the match.

A slight hesitation then, "You got it!" He turned to Scarface and said, "Beat the shit out of him, you got it?"

Josh deposited his winnings and a couple of traveler's checks with Chan and Chan assured him that Bruce was good for that large a bet. Josh could feel the tension building up. He sensed that Bruce wasn't accustomed to being beaten, let alone humbled on his own turf. All Josh wanted was information. He didn't want a fight. On the other hand he didn't like to lose either.

Scarface said, "Piece a cake!"

CHAPTER 34

Perhaps feeling a little overconfident, Josh relinquished the break to his opponent. His opponent sank the seven ball and two more solids before missing. Josh successfully ran all the balls on his turn, showing off a little by doing a couple of intricate bank shots. One of his shots was called a masse. The ball curved around his opponent's ball and pocketed the eleven ball as he had planned.

The guy was pissed off and so was the gang. Bruce told Josh to "wait here" and took his gang over to talk to Chan. Josh watched them reluctantly hand over the three thousand bucks to Chan and Chan signaled to Josh that he had his winnings.

Josh walked over to the group and said, "You want a chance to get your money back?"

Bruce, suspicion in his voice, said, "Now what?"

"Simple. You pick your best player and I'll put all my winnings in the pot. You win, you get all your money back!"

"You want us to put up another four grand against what you've won?"

"Sure, if you've got confidence in your best player!"

Josh thought Bruce had a real problem. He was their best player. If he backed down, they were not only out the four grand, but it'd make him look like a coward. On the other hand, maybe they couldn't raise the four grand.

Josh went back to the table and idly racked up the balls, giving the gang time to think over his offer. Watching them, it looked like they were negotiating a loan from Chan. Enough to cover the bet. In a few minutes, Bruce came over and said.

"Okay, I'll play you and I'm going to whip your ass!"

This time Josh exercised his prerogative and made the break and a very unusual thing happened. The eight ball went in the pocket. Quickly, Josh called over to Chan.

“Are we playing Bar Pool?”

Chan went silent for a moment and then, reluctantly agreed that was what they played all the time.

“Game’s over!” Josh said.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“In bar pool, if the eight ball is sunk on the break the shooter wins! Look it up, or better yet, ask Chan.”

Bruce yelled to Chan across the room, “Is that true?”

Chan looked stricken. He hemmed and hawed for a while and Josh said, “Let’s look it up on line.” Finally Chan agreed that Josh was right and the gang had lost. This time he had to dig into his own pocket to pay Josh. While he was digging the money out, Josh asked him about the Chinese private eye named Charley.

“One of your guys said there’s a Chinese private detective named Charley, comes in here a lot?”

“You mean Charley Fong? He isn’t no Private detective! Charley would like you to think he is. He might do you a favor occasionally for a fee, but he isn’t licensed as no private eye.”

“Could he help my Aunt?”

“Maybe, why? You want to get in touch with him? He’s here almost every afternoon about four or so. Or, I can give you his office address but he’s never there.”

Josh was keeping an eye on the gang members in the meantime. They had gathered together in the rear of the hall and were arguing among themselves. He remembered what one of the regulars had told him, “They might be dangerous if they lose money.” Altogether, they’d lost eight thousand dollars. Four thousand paid to Josh and another four thousand they now owed Chan.

“If I can’t find him by tomorrow afternoon I’ll probably come by here, if that’s okay with you?”

“It’s okay with me, but I’d steer away from that gang if I was you. They’re okay in here, but out in the streets? Uh, uh! And the tall one, Bruce? He’s a knifer and probably carries a gun. Did you notice they’ve gone?”

Sure enough, the gang had disappeared from the rear of the hall. There must be a back door, Josh thought.

“Eight thousand bucks of their money in your jeans, walking through Chinatown close to midnight? I’d be awfully damn careful if I was you. You want me to call you a cab?”

Josh thanked him for his professionalism, told him not to worry, and took his leave. Out on the streets, it was almost pitch dark. He decided to carry his cue in one piece instead of separating it into its two pieces and carrying it in its bag. He had a hunch that he wasn’t through with the Chinese gang tonight, not yet.

CHAPTER 35

Walking up the steps to the sidewalk level, Josh tried to scan both sides of the street in both directions. It was a little after two in the morning and the streets were empty and very dark. He took a moment or two to let his eyes adjust to the darkness and then started walking up the block. His hotel was about ten blocks away, most of it through Chinatown.

As he rounded the first corner he realized his expectations. Bruce and part of the gang were waiting for him. Not taking his eyes off Bruce, out of the corner of his eyes Josh counted an additional five facing him. Six against one. They quickly formed a loose circle around him. Each held a cue stick. Several were beating the heads of the sticks into their palms in a threatening manner.

“Hi guys, I kinda expected I’d meet you again tonight. I bet you think you’re going to get your money back?”

“Hell yes, wise guy. Either you give it to us or we take it. If we take it you’re gonna be hurt. Bad!”

“So I have a choice?”

“Yeah, you can hand over our money and live a little longer, or...”

Calmly, Josh replied, “Given a choice, I think I’ll keep the money.”

“Okay, you asked for it. Guys, take him!”

The six of them started tightening the circle about him, holding their cues as clubs, ready to overwhelm him.

Josh let them come. When they were within about five feet from him he started twirling his cue stick around in circles, holding it by the tip end. Something he would usually do with a staff. They were immediately frozen in place, no way could they approach him with the butt end of the cue stick whizzing past their heads every second or so.

Once they were frozen in place they were easy to handle. Pulling the stick back to himself, Josh grasped it in the middle and in one continuous motion, using both ends he was able to leap at the nearest two and take them out with cue blows to their heads before they realized what was happening.

A butt end cue stick blow to the head can kill. He had to be quick, decisive and delicate. All he wanted to do was knock them out. His blows were surgical and successful. With those two out of the fight, Josh shifted to the four others.

Josh felt the familiar body sensations he expected when in combat or intense competition. His body relaxed, his senses sharpened. Again, everything seemed to almost be happening in slow motion.

Accustomed to their fear tactics scaring their enemies, they were in no way ready for the sudden onslaught that Josh unleashed on them. The surprise momentarily froze them in place. Taking advantage of their ineptitude, Josh continued his movement. Dodging the two crumpled forms in front of him, Josh threw himself toward the side of the building. In mid-air he twisted his body landing against the building feet first with his knees flexed. His knees absorbed the shock and Josh used his momentum to push off in a different direction. It was a little like doing a double somersault except he did it against the side of a building. Using the building as a springboard he landed on his feet behind the remaining four.

As they attempted to whirl around and confront him they were in each other's way. It's what's called a closing movement. There was no way they could now counter attack. Then before they could react, using the same lightning fast move used before so effectively, he swept the legs out from under two of them with the cue stick. One of them had the wind knocked out of him with the butt end of Josh's cue stick, the other started crawling away, one leg bent awkwardly, out of the fight.

That left Bruce and one more. Josh had deliberately left Bruce to the last. That turned out to be a mistake. Anticipating that the two remaining would come at him with their cue sticks, he was unpleasantly surprised when he heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked.

“That’s enough you bastard. Now stand up and drop your cue stick. Slowly! And if you think I won’t use the gun, think again. It won’t be the first time.”

Dropping the cue stick, Josh raised his arms and backed up against the building wall. He wasn’t too worried about handling Bruce, even with a gun. Guns are noisy and he doubted that Bruce would actually use it. But he didn’t want any of the other gang members coming up behind him while he had his arms raised.

One of the first guys he had dropped had regained his breath and his cue-stick. He started toward Josh and keeping a respectful distance, started poking and hitting at Josh, using the butt end of his cue stick. All the time making sure that he didn’t get between Josh and the gun. Shortly he was joined by a second. They seemed to get particular delight in hitting him in the chest and legs. Josh could take a lot but the butt end of a cue stick is heavy, hard and dangerous. He felt a rib crack and knew he had to do something quickly.

He started taunting the two. Bruce seemed inclined to let them beat up on him for a while. Maybe he could work that to his advantage, if he could get them to come closer and between him and Bruce, maybe he would have the time he needed.

He sneered. “You’re real brave now that I’m defenseless and there’s a gun pointed at me, a couple of cowards. You’re so damned tough, come up and hit me with your fists.”

They continued to slug him with their cues. Josh could feel the strength ebbing out of him. They began raining blows on his head. Josh thought he could use the change to his advantage. Pretending to reel from the blows, he slowly sank to a squatting position, back against the wall and put his arms over his head as if to protect himself from the blows.

Bruce yelled, “Get the money.”

The guys closed in as if for the kill and for a moment they were between Josh and the gun. Josh quickly reached behind his neck and palmed a black, star

shaped, ninja throwing device. Something most Ninjas would never be without. Something that Josh could kill with if necessary.

He continued to feign fear and cower, all the time keeping an eye on Bruce. Bruce obviously thought he had the situation well under control. He was relaxed and holding the gun rather casually, barrel pointed toward the ground. Was he careless enough?

When the two got close, Josh exploded. Leaping up, he drove one of his attackers into the other with his left shoulder so that they both fell over backwards and at the same time drew back his right arm and threw the throwing star at Bruce. Before Bruce could respond the star found its mark, hitting the middle of his forehead, stunning him. He fell to his knees, dropped the gun and sat there, shaking his head, blood dripping down his face. Josh thought he might have a broken nose. Josh scooped up the gun and tucked it into his belt.

He was hurt. He'd had cracked ribs before and was sure he had another. It hurt but he could stand it. He could even disguise the hurt so that his assailants had no idea. He stood up straight, wiped his forehead with his sleeve and determined there was no blood. Outwardly he showed no signs of having been attacked.

He stood over the fallen gang members, picked up his cue stick and calmly twirling it in his fingers, said, "You still want my money?"

All six were done for. Josh walked back around the corner to the pool hall and knocked on the door. Chan himself opened it.

"Mr. Chan, you better call an ambulance. There are six guys, including Bruce, lying in the street around the corner. A couple of them looked like they'd been in fight and Bruce is bleeding pretty badly. At a glance it looked to me like he probably has a broken nose."

He took particular pains not to show his own problems.

Chan was shocked. He had been prepared to see the gang swagger back in flashing the eight thousand dollars. “How the hell?” he began.

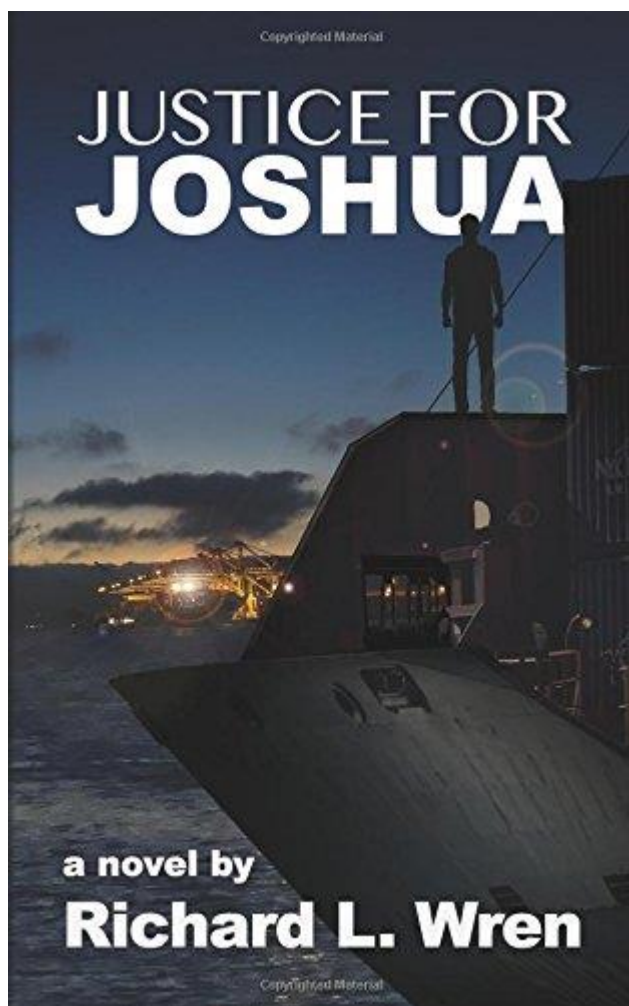
Josh cut him off. “Some other gang, maybe? I don’t know. They’re just lying there and they need help.” He turned and left.

The ten-block walk to his hotel was uneventful, if a little painful. On the way he reflected on the day’s happenings. Had he wasted the whole day? All he had for his efforts, was the office address of the Chinese PI, a severely bruised or cracked rib and an expectation of catching Charley Fong at Chan’s place tomorrow afternoon.

What he needed to find out was the organization behind the killing of the bears. An organization that was willing to kill a Park Ranger. Maybe Charlie could take him there? It was the only lead he had.

-end of excerpt-

An excerpt from



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CHAPTER 21

“TV? Aqui? Esta noche? Si, si, esta bueno, mucho bueno. Gracias, Gracias.” The only trouble Josh had arranging the filming was that the owner kept reverting to Spanish when he was excited. He had told them to come by anytime.

The renting of the camera had been no trouble either and Hal’s concern that they might look like fakes was unfounded. The shop could not have cared less what they wanted the camera for, they were just happy to take the money. “Business is bad,” the guy had told Josh. “Everyone can take quality video on their own phones now. I don’t reckon we’ll be here this time next year.” They had walked away from the shop with a substantially sized camera with a pop out digital screen that Josh could hide behind. The camera had a bright light on it so they could illuminate their subjects in the darkened club, which Josh knew would obscure the view of him even further. But just to be sure, Hal took him to a costume shop where he picked up a brown wig that he could wear under a baseball cap and, with his three day stubble, he was certain not even the most devout Martial Arts fan would know it was Josh Rogan calling the shots.

Hal decided it would be sufficient to disguise himself by giving himself a buzz cut, like the one he had had in the Merchant Navy, and to shave off his beard. Without his grey hair he said he felt much younger and Josh had to admit he would not have recognized him on the street. Josh was happy that Hal seemed to have gotten over the misgivings about the plan after a couple of days driving the cab as normal. Hal had complained of boredom and was clearly pleased to be back adventuring.

Hal drove them in the rental car to the club and shortly after nine that night; feeling secure in their disguises, Josh and Hal stood beneath the neon MEXCO sign. The owner greeted them effusively at the front door and immediately led them to a small stage at the end of the bar. Josh and Hal were pushed onto the stage, while the owner grabbed a microphone and asked for the attention of the whole room. To his left, at the bar, it was as if no one heard him. The noise level was high and drinks had been flowing. To his right, people were seated at dining tables and it was much quieter. People turned in their chairs to see what was going on. The owner called out to the bartender to tone the bar down, and gradually some quiet was attained. Josh was worried

the announcement would scare off Navarese, or members of his gang, and hoped he was not at the club already.

“Amigos. -----“, he started to say, then quickly switched to English. “We have a TV crew here tonight. They’re doing a series on successful local businesses, so tell them nice things about us! But if any of you cheating husbands or wives out there don’t want to be caught on film, you’d better leave right now!”

He got a small laugh and some jeers as he left the stage.

Together they circled around the dance floor and explored the various parts of the club. They didn’t see any sign of Navarese. Ten o’clock came, and no sign of him. Hal and Josh stood in a dark corner and stopped recording.

Hal whispered, “Can we go now?”

The owner approached them. “What do you think the chances are of this getting on the air?”

“I don’t really know. I thought you’d be more crowded, you know more people to interview.”

The owner glanced at a wall clock. “Won’t be long, you’ll have more’n you can handle.”

Hal said, “Guess we’re staying a little longer, right?”

“Right. Let’s keep moving.” Gradually the crowd thickened, mostly at the bar. Josh and Hal concentrated on diners at their tables and dancers.

Finally, shortly before eleven Navarese came in, alone. Josh nudged Hal and nodded toward the front door. They watched him bull his way to the far end of the bar, where two younger men were sitting on the last two stools, nursing their beers. He stopped behind them. The two young men were engrossed in themselves and their beers and didn’t notice him come up behind them. However the bartender did. Very quickly, he walked down to their end of the bar, leaned over as close to the two and said something to them. They swung around and saw, for the first time, the large menacing figure of Navarese standing behind them.

One of them said something back to the bartender, shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the bar with his back to Navarese. Navarese

made a slight move and a knife appeared in his hand. The bartender held up his hand signaling to Navarese to stop. At the same time he, much more vehemently this time, spoke to the two young men again. Just as one of the men started to shake his head “no”, the owner arrived. First he spoke to Navarese. It was more like he was arguing with him and then threatening him. Finally the knife disappeared and Navarese backed away a few steps, but he didn’t leave.

The owner then turned his attention to the two young men. He quietly spoke with them for a minute or so and then led them away to a nice table for two near the dance floor. One of them surreptitiously gave the finger to Navarese as he walked by. Josh thought the young man was very lucky in that Navarese didn’t spot it.

As the owner left the two men, he walked up to Josh and Hal. “Did you see that?”

“We saw that guy pull a knife.”

The owner looked crestfallen. “Did you film it?”

“No, don’t worry.”

“Good. I don’t want people thinking this is a bad place. That guy’s been in here a lot lately, trying to establish his turf I suppose, but I never seen him pull a knife on anyone. Be careful with him. Don’t be asking him to say ‘cheese’.”

Josh asked if he knew what the bartender had said to the two young guys. The owner had no idea and Josh thought it would be a good thing to find out. It looked to him as if the bartender knew something about Navarese, or at least his reputation. After the owner left them, Josh made his way over to the bar alone. He had to elbow his way in to get the bartender’s attention.

“So, it’s my turn for stardom?” he asked, nodding to the camera.

“Your boss said we better interview you, or we might have a revolt among the customers.”

“He’s right. This place would die overnight if I left. I’m Gus.”

“Got a minute to talk, Gus? Somewhere a bit quieter, where I can record a quick interview?”

Gus looked around the crowded bar and beckoned to a bus boy. "Hold the fort a while, Esteban." The boy looked overjoyed, probably with the prospect of tips, thought Josh, as he followed Gus along the bar and then through a door that led away from the noisy public area and to a corridor.

"How's this?" asked Gus, running his fingers through his slick hair.

Josh reassured him he looked great and he held up the camera. He began by asking him a few basic questions about the club and Gus responded enthusiastically. Then he turned to more probing questions.

"They tell me you know everyone's names, that true?"

After a further few minutes, it was clear that Gus either knew nothing of importance about Navarese, or wasn't telling. He brought the interview to a close and followed Gus back into the bar. Hal was nowhere in sight.

Just then he felt someone grip his elbow and all of a sudden he was being steered towards Navarese himself by one of the gang members.

Before he could release himself from the grip, Navarese appeared before him. Josh caught a flash of light from the switchblade in his hand and he looked into the snarling face of Navarese, his eyes slitted, teeth clenched. The music was loud and Navarese had to bellow. His breath stank of cigars.

"What do you want, asshole?" Not waiting for an answer, he went on. "I been watching you, making believe you're filming the crowd here, while all the time you're after me. Somebody paying you to get pictures of me? Fat chance you got 'cos I'm on to you." And with that he made a lunge toward the camera, but Josh was too quick and moved it out of reach. Frustrated, Navarese next made a swipe at Josh. "You son of a bitch."

Josh was easily able to misdirect the knife in such a way that Navarese just thought he had missed his target. Josh also gave him a slight nudge, which sent him falling back into his group. As he righted himself he snarled, "You ain't heard the end of this yet."

By that time, Gus and the owner had arrived. Josh didn't know what to expect. Navarese crouched, knife in hand as if he was about to spring at

him. The rest of his group circled behind him ready to follow his lead. Then something unexpected happened. Gus, the bartender, took control. With a wave of his hand at the sound booth, the music suddenly stopped and the club was silent. “BACK OFF!!” Gus shouted.

A surprised look replaced the snarl on Navarese’s face as he lowered the knife. To Josh it was as if a rabid attack dog had suddenly turned into something docile. In a lowered voice, audible only to Josh and Navarese, Gus continued. “One more complaint about you and your knife and I’ll see your job’s gone. You know I can do that, right?”

Navarese slowly turned his back on Josh and with much bravado told his gang, “C’mon, let’s get out of this rat hole.” The silent crowd parted for them as they left the premises.

Gus turned back to Josh, “I told you to stay away from them.”

Josh apologized. “I didn’t think they’d start anything in here.”

“Are you kidding? You saw him draw on those two at the bar, what the hell’d you expect?”

Josh apologized again and added, “Well, it’s over now. Thanks for your help.”

Gus hesitated a moment, then leaned over the bar and in a lowered voice, added: “If I was you, I’d be mighty careful when you leave, that guy’s vicious. And, he holds grudges. Lucky for me I’ve got a big family who can be a hell of a lot more vicious than him and he knows it. I don’t imagine you have that kind of security.”

Josh thanked him and cast a glance around for Hal. Still no sign. This hadn’t worked out as he had hoped. He had chosen this place because it was so crowded they thought they wouldn’t be noticed when he came face to face with the enemy at last. But it hadn’t worked out that way because Navarese had such a temper and drew attention. Now the bastard was really mad.

Josh was anxious to leave. He wanted to tail Navarese. He supposed Hal was outside in the car already so he ran to the parking lot in time to see the tall figure of Navarese fold himself into a Lincoln sedan. As far as Josh could see, he was alone. No other sign of the gang. The door of the Lincoln slammed and Josh could hear the engine start up.

It was time. Josh raced over to his own car, relieved to see Hal inside.

“Start her up Hal, he’s getting away.” Hal didn’t move. Josh thought he had the window closed and couldn’t hear him. As he ran around the car to get in the passenger seat, he gave the fender a huge wallop. “C’mon Hal, let’s go.”

He wrenched the passenger door, threw the camera onto the back seat and got in, expecting to hear the engine start and Hal asking questions. With a growing sense of apprehension, Josh looked more closely at Hal. His hands were pushed into the steering wheel as if he was holding it, but his head was lolling to one side. Quickly Josh took his pulse, strong and steady. As he tried to pry his eyes open and check them, he felt the slipperiness of blood on the back of Hal’s head.

“Oh Hal. Not again,” he mumbled.

Josh fumbled with the seat belt, trying to get it unfastened and finally succeeded, all the while talking to Hal. “Hal, I’ll be right there. Just hang on. I’m going to lift you into the back seat and get you to the emergency room. I think you’re okay, maybe a little concussion. You’ve got a little blood on the back of your head, maybe a stitch or two, but don’t worry everything’s going to be okay.” He didn’t know if Hal could hear him or not, but he wanted to reassure him if he could.

Backing out of the passenger door, he felt something jab into his back.

“Gotcha you son of a bitch. Stay right where you are.”

Josh had no illusions about what was poking him; it was unmistakably a gun barrel. But his first concern was Hal.

“I don’t know what your beef is,” Josh said. “All I wanted to do was give the restaurant a little publicity. Most of the people inside thought it was a great idea. Look, my buddy here’s bleeding.” Josh held up his hand covered with blood. “He needs stitches.”

“Screw him. You’re both gonna’ be bleeding a hell of a lot more than that before I’m through with you.” That was the last thing Josh heard. Someone punctuated the threat with a hard blow to the back of Josh’s head and he was out cold.

CHAPTER 22

Hours later Josh woke up with a start. His body told him that he was lying on concrete and that he must have been there some length of time as he was cold, stiff and his body ached all over. Something was painfully jabbing his leg. He lay still, with his eyes shut, while he tried to assess his situation. He became painfully aware that his hands were bound behind him, and that they in turn, were taped to the water pipe under a sink. If anyone was watching him, he thought it could be to his advantage to remain unconscious for a while. He concentrated on the surroundings. No voices, only the sound of one person breathing, rather heavily.

After several minutes, he was quite certain that, except for the heavy breathing person, there was no one else near by. He gradually opened his eyes. He could only see the concrete floor and a solid concrete wall, both painted a musty green. The lights were bright and he couldn't tell if it was night or day. There were no chairs, no windows, nothing.

Suddenly he felt another jab in his calf and heard Hal's whispering voice.

"Josh, you awake? C'mon Josh, you gotta wake up and get us outa' here."

Josh assumed that if Hal could talk to him, they were alone and started to roll over. He could just turn enough to see Hal, who was similarly tied a few feet away.

"You okay?" was his first question to Hal.

"Yeah, I'm okay. A splitting headache but okay. Been trying to wake you for the last half hour. What the hell happened to us?"

"It's my fault, they outsmarted me. Are you still bleeding?"

"Don't think so. Listen, I don't think Navarese is here. I think this is the basement of his house. I heard him talking to the guys before he left. He told them to wait till you came to and then teach you a lesson. 'Slice him and dice him,' is exactly what he said. That's why I was jabbing you, we ain't got much time."

Josh squirmed around, trying to loosen his bonds. They didn't give. It felt like duct tape, which he knew was a very difficult binding to break out of. He could see that Hal was bound the same way. He pulled and yanked at the water pipe he was tied to, but it didn't give.

"How long have they been gone? Do you know where they are? DID you say there were only a couple of guys?"

"Yeah, two. I think they've been upstairs about a half-hour. They've been checking up on you every once in a while, probably due pretty soon again. Every time they come down they kick you a couple of times to see if you're awake. Maybe you should pretend to be out as long as possible."

"I don't think so. I'd rather take my chances with these two."

"What chances you talking about?"

"If we can't beat them we'll have to outsmart them. Leave it up to me just follow my lead when they come. We need to make them want to untie me from the pipes before they slice me. Just back me up, whatever I say."

"Even if..."

"Hal, quiet. Let me think."

Hal retreated into a reluctant silence and Josh focused. He had to mentally overcome pains. He be physically ready if their chance came. Even though his body was contorted he forced his body to relax and let his mind take control. Slowly his aches and pains started to recede. Somewhere outside of himself he was aware he needed to hurry, but inside his mind he told himself to proceed with thoroughness. A sense of strength gradually overcame him. The inevitability of the situation calmed him. He would try to control what he would try to control what was within his to control and accept the rest. This was nothing new to Josh. There had been times when he'd been on the verge of losing and had to dig deep in order to win. Admittedly, this was somewhat different, since he'd never been cold cocked and knocked out for several hours before, or spent the night shackled to a pipe and on a cement floor before. He'd never been subjected to beatings and kicking's for hours on end before. He thought he might have a cracked crib. His body was complaining about a cracked rib or two, and it's numerous bruises. He worried if he still had the ability to react if he got the chance. Maybe he wouldn't be able to create some sort of a miracle this time and Navarese would succeed in

his plan to kill him. *And poor Hal. God, what about Fern and Fauna?*” He couldn’t bear to think about that. Desperate to regain his confidence and equilibrium, he disappeared into the deepest trance he could muster.

Close to an hour later, Josh heard Hal as from a distance say, “That must be them coming down the stairs. What’ll we do?”

“Lay there as quiet as possible. Let them focus on me. Just don’t say anything, no matter what happens.” With that he rolled back over and pretended he was still out.

In a moment the two thugs stepped into the basement. One of them, ignoring Hal, went directly over to Josh and kicked him in the ribs. Josh was laying on his side, partially curled up, his head tucked between his shoulders to protect himself as much as possible.

“Wake up shitbird,” one of them shouted.

Josh groaned, opened his eyes and spoke as if he was in great pain. “I’m awake, I’m awake, please don’t kick me no more.” He looked at them through slitted eyelids and recognized them as two of the guys from the club. He wanted them to think he was as uneducated as they seemed to be. He wanted them to think he was in pain and scared. He wanted them to think he was an easy target. He wanted them to want to play with him.

“What ever you want, you can have. I got money. I can get lots of money. Just let me go. You can have the camera too.”

“You’ll give us money and your camera if we let you go? What about your pal, the old man. What about him?”

“I don’t give a shit about him. I don’t even know his name. I just hired him for this one gig. Let me go and the money and the camera’s yours.”

“Hmmm, I guess we’ll have to think about that, won’t we Sal?”

“Yeah, we will, long and hard.” And with that they started kicking him all over his body. Josh was keeping their attention on him but he was paying a price. He rolled in the tightest ball he could to protect his head and groin. Gradually they slowed down the tempo of their kicks until just one of them was kicking.

In the background, Josh heard the snick of a switchblade being opened.

One of them grabbed a handful of Josh's hair and yanked his head up off the floor. "What d'ya think? Ready for death by a thousand cuts?" Josh's mind whirled with plans.

"Why me?"

"Who d'ya think you're shittin'? We know who you are. You're the asshole that's been trackin' us and Ramon's gonna personally take care of you. Permanently like. The last guy that Ramon killed took about four hours to die. Now he's fish food at the bottom of the bay and that's where you're going. But first we get to soften you up a little."

Good Christ, these guys really are psycho, Josh thought. I need to do something or they're sure as hell going to kill us both. Maybe it's time to beg for my life. At least for Hal's?

"Get him up on his feet,"

"Roll over, asshole."

Josh slowly and with simulated great pain rolled over to his left side, his back to the sink. He could feel the vibrations of the knife cutting through the ropes and tape. Shortly his wrists fell free from the pipe, but still tied together. They weren't giving him much.

Amidst more kicks, he was ordered to stand up. Slowly, and with his back to the wall, as if for support, Josh stood up. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hal desperately trying to get loose while the guards' attention was riveted on him. Both of the guards had their switchblades out and were tossing them from hand to hand in a threatening way.

"How about a few slices across the chest to start with?" one of them asked.

Josh knew the remark was calculated to raise his fear and make him beg. He reacted accordingly. Up to that minute, he had been surreptitiously stretching, getting the kinks out of his back and legs. Now he dropped to one knee.

“Don’t do this, guys. I never hurt anyone. Don’t cut me I’ll give you all I got.”

One of them advanced on him, still tossing his knife from hand to hand, supremely confident that they ruled the situation.

“That the best you can do? Shit, maybe I’ll start with an ear.” He reached out with his left hand for Josh’s ear and at the same time slashed at Josh with his knife. Josh exploded.

Pushing up with his leg, he sprang headfirst into the thug’s chest. He felt the knife slash across his chest followed by a stinging sensation. The thug was bowled over backwards. Josh twirled to his left to be out of the way of the second man’s knife reach and landed on both feet facing him, but five feet away. Josh glanced down at his chest. The knife had cut through his shirt and made a three inch bleeding slash across his chest. Josh ignored it. He needed to free his hands urgently. He quickly spun away from the two, dropped to a crouch then leaped high. In mid-air, he pulled his knees to his chest and slipped his wrists under his legs. When he landed he was on his feet, facing both the thugs with his hands in front of him. The one he had bowled over was back on his feet, and both of them were facing him, still confident that they had the situation under control, still waving their knives menacingly.

“That’s real cute but it ain’t gonna do you much good. Not with two of us and these babies.” He glanced at his sidekick, “Let’s Take him,”

The men separated and rushed him. Josh let them come and when they were within three feet of him, Josh feinted to his right with his upper body. The thug to his left took the bait and lunged after him, brandishing his knife. With his lower body strongly anchored, Josh swung his upper body back, leaped toward the oncoming thug and launched a kick at the thug’s wrist. The knife fell out of his hand and skidded across the room.

Without pausing, Josh continued his move, picked the knife up and sliced his bonds open. The thug was white faced, his hand dangling helplessly. Josh thought the pain hadn’t hit him yet. He turned to the other thug.

“It’s your turn now.” The guy was momentarily paralyzed by the suddenness and finality of Josh’s move. Josh took advantage of his confusion and continued to strip the tape from his wrists.

The thug made a run for Hal. He must have thought that Josh was distracted by working on the tapes. Maybe he thought he could use Hal as a bargaining chip. Josh made a quick decision. First he quickly flipped the knife in his hand, judging its weight and balance. Then he threw it directly at the running thug. It pierced his right thigh and immediately brought him to the ground beside Hal. Josh pulled the knife out and the thug lay with both hands wrapped around his thigh, concentrating on his own pain.

Josh now had both knives and both of the thugs were non-combatants. He used one of the knives to release Hal.

“Jesus Christ, that was beautiful. I thought we were dead.” Hal said.

“We better get out of here before anyone else shows up.” Josh replied.

“What about these guys? Are we just gonna leave them? What about your chest? You got blood all over.”

“Find the duct tape. Tape their mouths, shut them up. I think they’re in a whole heap of trouble, letting us get away. That psycho Navarese will probably take it out on them big time. But we sure as hell don’t need to be here when he gets back.”

“Hell no. The guy’s a monster. I’m beginning to think you should kill him. If I ever met anyone that needed it, it’s that guy.”

“How’d they get us in here?”

“Upstairs, though a back door.”

Josh ran upstairs, took a quick look out the front and back windows and ran back downstairs.

“Not that way. This isn’t a basement, it’s at ground level. Upstairs the front door’s in view of the whole street and the back door’s right at eye level with the kitchen next door, plus you got a whole flight of stairs in plain view of everybody. We Gotta find a way out down here.”

“We’re at ground level? What’d the houses look like out the front?”

Josh had to think for a second, “Looked like old Victorians to me, why?”

“Basement’s above ground in Victorian houses that’s why. Alameda’s famous for ‘em.”

“What about windows, shouldn’t the basements have them if they’re above ground?”

“You’re right, let’s find ‘em.”

At the rear of the basement were several closed doors. They started opening them. The first one looked like an abandoned workshop. Rusty and broken tools hung from nails. There was a partially collapsed workbench and no other exit.

The second door led to a small, dirty washroom. A sink, a toilet and a cobwebbed, nailed shut window greeted them.

Hal banged on the window in frustration. “Now what?”

“Get me a claw hammer.”

In a short time Josh had all the nails out and they were able to wedge the window open. Josh cautiously stuck his head out and found that the window opened directly under the backdoor staircase. He went on ahead. “This’ll work. Come on out.”

Hal struggled out to join him.

“Now. Stand up straight and brush the cobwebs off your clothes,” Josh said. “We’ve got to walk out of here as if we belong here. As if we have every right in the world to be here. Let’s say we’re building contractors. The blood on my shirt is because I caught myself on a rusty nail. We simply walk slowly down to the corner and then we are gone. My bet is no one will challenge us.”

Standing hidden under the staircase Josh could see that there was a detached garage a few feet from them and a long driveway beside the house leading to the front sidewalk.

They started up the driveway, trying to look casual and professional. Out of the corner of his eye, Josh saw a woman with two children getting into a car parked in a driveway two houses up from them and in the opposite direction from where they were going. She stopped for a second, as if she was going to wave but then hesitated. Josh continued talking and walking with

Hal. "Keep going, we're being watched. Just act normal. If we're lucky, maybe the car's still there and the camera's still in the trunk." He risked another sideways glance at the woman. Luckily for them, it looked as if she was much more interested in getting her children into their car seats than she was in watching a couple of men walking down the street. In a short time they had rounded the corner and were out of her sight.

"Do you have any idea where in Alameda we are?" Josh asked.

Hal pointed to a street corner sign. "We're only about two blocks from a small shopping center."

"We can get a taxi there?" asked Josh.

"I'll call Mabel. She'll get someone here real fast. She comes off real tough, but underneath she's a sweetheart and quick on the draw. She won't ask a lot of questions, just send someone over fast."

Once they were out of sight of Navarese's house they started half running, half walking, and in a few minutes were at a seven-eleven store and on the phone.

"She's got one on the way." Hal reported. "Mebbe' we should see if our cars still at the club?"

Hal took a lot of ribbing from the cabbie that picked them up. "You guys get stood up, or dID you just forget where you put your car?"

Hal tried to put a good spin on their predicament. "Ain't funny. Some guy slugged me and Josh here found me and saved me."

The driver wasn't about to let him off that easy. "Suuuure he did." He responded with a huge wink at Josh.

Hal gave up. "Don't matter. You know where Club Mexco is?"

"Course I do but there's better and closer places to get a drink, if that's what you need."

"Just take us. We got a car parked there and we can get rid of you."

"Okay, okay. But you ain't heard the last of this. Wait'll the guys hear you lost your own car."

Finally he let up on Hal a little bit and drove to the Mexco Club. Josh's rented car was there and unlocked. Hal opened the trunk and their camera was there, just as he had left it. "Wow, what are the odds? I didn't expect the car to be here, let alone intact and not broken into, not in this neighborhood."

Their driver couldn't resist another jab at Hal as he left. "Wait'll Mabel hears you lost your own car, she'll probably fire you."

Josh asked Hal if the other drivers always were that harsh on each other. "That's nothin'. You oughta' see some of other crap we pull on each other."

"As scary as last night?"

Hal, in a wry voice, said. "Last night was interesting as hell, but I'd just as soon not do it again. Isn't there some way I can stay working for you and not get beat up all the time?"

"You know," said Josh, "I've been thinking. That's too nice a neighborhood for a psycho like him to be living in. I'd think the neighbors would be unhappy having him living that close."

Hal was silent for a moment, "How about I get a friend of mine that works at a title company to see if he really owns it or not, couldn't hurt."

"Great. Maybe we'll find out something that we can use as leverage."

-end of excerpt-

Who is...

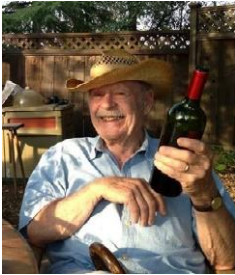
Richard L. Wren started a new career writing novels at age 82, after retiring from a successful insurance career. His first novel, *CASEY'S SLIP*, took almost 3 years to finish and publish (2010). The book has had a screenplay adapted from it which is now in marketing.

Profiting from all the mistakes he made, he wrote and published his second book, *JOSHUA'S REVENGE*, in seven months. Now, at age 89, he published his third novel, *JUSTICE FOR JOSHUA*. Along the way, he wrote and published *A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WRITING & PUBLISHING NOVEL*, an acclaimed, down to earth and fact specific "how to" booklet filled with the most practical advice for authors, which is being used as a text in writing and publishing courses. The book you hold in your hands is the newest version of that booklet, expanded and with an additional section on book promotion.

All of his books, and the forthcoming novel *Murder Made Legal: A Casey & Smitty Mystery*, have been published using the methods he is passing on in the book you hold. All are published under his Poor Richard Publishers company banner, and are available as both print and ebooks on Amazon.com.

Mr. Wren, a lifelong resident of Oakland, recently moved to Lafayette, CA, where he lives with his patient wife Betty.

Richard Wren is a fourth generation Californian. He has been the subject of TV pieces and newspaper articles as a great example of reinvention in retirement years. Richard L. Wren is a great example of someone who has reinvented himself and his career – especially so late in life. He's also a model for would-be novelists, both old and young.



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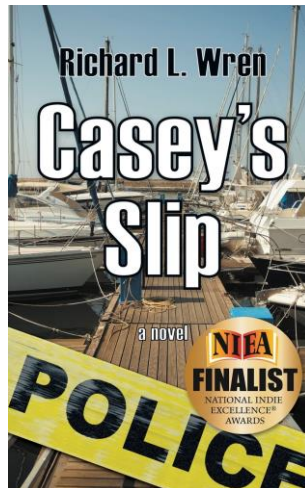


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