

The Someday File
By Jean Heller

PROLOGUE

Las Vegas works hard to maintain its reputation as the city that never sleeps.

Through most hours of the day and evening Vegas pulsates with multi-hued, neon-enhanced, electronically embellished energy that radiates an aura of action and risk. But in the small hours of the morning, before the deep darkness retreats from the displacing shoulder of dawn, Las Vegas steals a short interval to doze. In this seam in time, when awareness ebbs by an increment, nobody notices the assassin.

He swings the rented Ford off southbound Interstate 15 and down the ramp to Tropicana Avenue, the heart of The Strip. The hotels and casinos rise out of the flat, brown floor of the Mojave Desert, garish, surreal monoliths glazed in LED color so intense it overpowers the senses. The impact, the assassin thinks, is a hedonistic indulgence and a waste of a perfectly decent wilderness.

At 3:30 in the morning, he is just another motorist driving conservatively through the light traffic: taxis looking for late fares, cops looking for trouble, and ordinary citizens performing the city's worst jobs while trying to get through their graveyard shifts.

He drives a short distance on Tropicana, into the canyon between New York New York and the Excalibur, and turns into an Excalibur parking lot. He circles the area once and pulls over under a "Do Not Park" sign against the turreted hotel building. Security won't tow the car, assuming it belongs to a guest. Management's first rule of business is to avoid pissing off the paying customers.

He flashes his headlights, kills the engine, and steps from the car into the chill of the desert night. He is of medium height and thin, but wiry strong. His short-sleeved, open-collar shirt reveals cords of muscle in his neck and arms. His hair is blonde, his skin fair, his Northern European features narrow, his eyes empty as a dead man's.

A burly man in the uniform of hotel security slinks from behind the landscaping but hovers close beside it, as if planning cover in case of sudden danger. The security guard has a pony habit, dangerous when you're not good at picking winners. Crushing debt owed to an unlicensed and impatient bookie makes him vulnerable to the lure of easy cash. But he is having second thoughts.

"You got my money?" he asks in a tone that suggests he fears the question will piss off the assassin. This is not a man whose patience he wants to test.

"Of course," the assassin says. He opens the trunk. Two items lie inside, an expensive leather hard-side case and a cheap duffel. He snaps on latex gloves, then reaches in and unzips the duffel. It lures the guard, who inches toward him, the way a hungry man might be drawn to a porterhouse sizzling on a charcoal grill. The man's tongue is nervous, running back and forth over dry lips.

There are two stacks of \$100 bills, 250 bills to a stack, each worth \$25,000. They are held with rubber bands. The assassin tosses one stack to the guard, who cradles it against his chest.

"Count it if you like," the assassin says.

The guard worries his lower lip with his teeth as he riffles the exposed edges of the bills. His eyes dart about, alert for witnesses. Finding none, he shoves the cash inside his jacket, the package hidden by the bulge of his stomach. The guard knows he will get the rest when the job is done. That's the deal.

The assassin lifts out the hard-sided case and the duffel, elbows the trunk lid down and nods to the guard.

"Showtime," he says.

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By 7:13 a.m. the desert sun has risen high enough to reach the roof of the Excalibur and bathe the two men crouched beside an exhaust fan spinning out condensation from the roaring air conditioning system. The warmth of the sun is welcome to the assassin, but it pops an immediate sweat on the security man's upper lip.

At the same moment, across Tropicana Avenue, a tall, swarthy man with jet-black hair and a broad mustache emerges from a limousine in front of New York New York. He is a United States congressman, and four guards surround him. They eye the cheering crowd as if they were Secret Service agents protecting the president. The dark man reaches between the protective bodies to shake hands with political supporters. Then he disappears into the hotel.

The assassin knows the congressman's schedule to the minute. At 7:30, he will speak to a political breakfast and fundraiser. At 8:45, he will hold a strategy meeting with his political staff in a private suite and then give an interview to a local television station. Afterward, he will indulge television's unquenchable thirst for video by taking a turn on the famous New

York New York roller coaster, named Manhattan Transfer. He and his party will be aboard the first occupied car when the ride opens at 10 a.m.

This will be the assassin's moment.

It would have been a simpler shot to take the politician as he entered the hotel. But the roller-coaster kill will create more confusion and buy more time for escape. And in a world where the assassin's talents are valued, such a daring kill will raise his profile.

"Why did we have to get up here so early if you ain't gonna do the shooting 'til ten?" says the security guard, who is resting his back against the roof turrets and sweating.

The question is too stupid to deserve an answer. How many more eyes could have seen them sneaking to the roof at mid-morning than in the deepest of night? The assassin stares at the security guard for a few moments, debating what to say. Then he points to the condenser and tells the man, "Go around to the shady side for a while, before you flood the roof with sweat. And stay low."

"Shudda brought donuts, or somethin'," the guard says as he crabs away.

At 9:30 the assassin consults the small temperature/humidity monitor he has set up to tell him how he must adjust his shot to compensate for the ambient conditions. He uses small binoculars to check out his telltale, a thin strip of torn green garbage bag snagged in a banner holder high on a lamppost. City workers will remove the plastic strip when they take down the banner advertising the casino engagement of a well-known stand-up comic. But for now, it serves the assassin well, allowing him to gauge wind speed and direction and the rise of air from the street. These, too, are factors that could affect the trajectory of his shot.

At 9:43, the guard returns from the far side of the AC condenser, looking as if he has just awakened from a nap.

At the same time, the assassin digs another pair of latex gloves from the duffel and snaps them on. Then he lifts out the components of a cheap Chinese knockoff rifle, assembles it, and lays it aside.

At 9:54, he makes his calculations and takes his good rifle from its leather case. An empty car rattles through the roller-coaster course, a security and safety sweep. The congressman's car will come up next. It clatters up the ramp at 10:07. The target is sitting in the right front seat. There is nobody between him and the sniper.

The image shudders in the riflescope as the car climbs. But as it slows near the top of the incline, the shaking abates, and the scope's cross hairs settle over their mark. The assassin curls his finger around the trigger.

For an instant the car barely moves. The target's profile stands out in sharp definition. The assassin squeezes the trigger. The crack of the shot is lost in the roar of the condenser.

The assassin sees a blossom of blood explode from his victim's neck.

When the roller coaster begins its final terrifying plunge down the tracks, the congressman has slumped sideways in his seat. The bullet has passed through his carotid artery, ripped through his throat and lodged in the chest of the city councilman sitting to his left. Within seconds, the congressman is dead. The councilman, disoriented and confused, slips toward shock. Behind the two men, the protection agents become frantic, torn between tending to their charges and locating the sniper.

On the roof of the Excalibur, the pony-addicted security guard peers between the ramparts, immobilized by the coldness and finality of the execution. He doesn't notice the assassin move behind him with a handgun. Nor does he feel the quick double-tap to the back of his head that ends his life.

The assassin retrieves the stack of bills from the dead man's jacket and takes back all but \$5,000. This is ample evidence to implicate the guard in the shooting, but it makes no sense to leave more than necessary. He also picks up the expended shell casing.

He drops the Chinese rifle beside the dead guard's body, a delaying tactic. He fired it out in the desert before driving to the Excalibur. There, too, he picked up the casing, which he now drops to the roof. This will lead the police to believe the knockoff is the assassination weapon and postpones for hours instructions to all public transportation leaving Las Vegas to examine checked baggage for a sniper's rifle. Meanwhile, the assassin's prized possession and \$45,000 in cash will be nestled in the belly of a Greyhound bus speeding northeast toward Chicago on I-15. Back at the terminal, no one will have noticed that the man who checked the hard leather case onto the bus didn't board with it.

On the way to the airport, the assassin will toss the handgun and the latex gloves into a storm drain, the empty duffel bag into a Dumpster from which a homeless man will claim it within minutes.

By the time police helicopters are in the air searching for suspects, the assassin is walking toward an American Airlines gate on Concourse D at McCarran International Airport to board his flight for home.

CHAPTER ONE

“This Deuce Mora?”

The male voice exuded enough hostility that it threatened to flare through my phone and scorch my blouse. I keep an egg timer on my desk for such occasions. I knew what was coming: more of the same abuse I’d been enduring all morning. My tolerance for it had a strict three-minute limit.

The next sentence out of the caller’s mouth delivered two curses. I flipped the egg timer. Fine sand trickled through its pinched waist. The indentation forming in the sand in the top mirrored the cone forming in the sand at the bottom. I found it soothing to watch the process.

In less than three minutes, he called me a bitch four times, a dyke twice, told me three times to go fuck myself, and concluded I had all the writing talent of “a sock full of shit.”

And I was fine with it.

Then he called my newspaper, the *Chicago Journal*, a “liberal, commie, pinko, butt wipe not even good enough for wrapping fish guts.”

Honestly, I was fine with that, too.

My column in the morning's editions had hinted at the vague possibility that guns kill people from time to time, a notion with which my caller had deep disagreement. He made his point several times, though I assured him I'd got it the first time. Repetitive tirades never persuade me.

The sand ran out, my three minutes of tolerance exhausted.

So I told him, "Sir, as much as I appreciate your having the interest to call, your cranky time is up, and I'm going to hang up now."

I did.

And then I laughed.

"God, I love my readers," I said to no one in particular.

In the next moment I was swept by the sense of unease that had been my sporadic companion for more than two years. I got up to go to the restroom, and it followed along, mocking me. Every time I left my desk I wondered if I would have a job when I returned. Today, the feeling escalated to a mid-grade fear.

While I washed my hands, I checked my face in the mirror, scrutinizing details. People who had known her said I resembled my mother, even beyond the green eyes and auburn hair. She died when I was seven. If it weren't for family photos, I don't think I'd recall what she looked like. I often found myself wishing I'd had time to know her. Now, with my future under siege and my temper short, was one of those occasions. I felt certain I would have learned from her something to help me deal with my current anxiety.

I fluffed my hair, which I had cut short a year earlier after wearing it shoulder-length most of my adult life. The change was a nod to Chicago's summer weather trifecta: heat,

humidity, and wind. My hair still tended to coil into ringlets in hot, damp weather, but at least now it more resembled a style than a meteorological mugging.

I hurried toward the elevators and temporary respite from my unease. Cole Haan dress boots I coveted had gone on sale. A clerk at the Mag Mile store was holding a pair for me. I had told her I would be in early in the afternoon, and I didn't want to be so late that she put my boots back in stock. I could get there and back in my allotted lunch hour.

I don't overspend on clothes, but I never skimp on footwear. I'm six feet tall. I need two sets of shoes, one that emphasizes my height for work, when I need an air of authority, and one that doesn't, for times I meet an interesting guy who isn't six feet tall.

Pete Serrano, a copy desk editor I liked, intercepted me. "Good column this morning, Deuce," he said. "I liked the sarcasm."

"Thanks, Pete," I said. "I've been taking calls all morning from readers who don't share your enthusiasm."

"You gotta write those columns once in a while to be sure folks are still reading you."

"Gun control and birth control," I said. "The two subjects that absolutely positively will clog up e-mail and overload voice mail before noon. I'm thinking we'll take a circulation hit from offended gun nuts. Management won't like it."

"They knew what you were writing," he said. "It was on the news log all day."

I smiled at him. "That won't matter when the cancellations start rolling in. I'll be the one blamed for bad judgment. I could be the next expendable staffer out the door."

His face showed no mirth. "Speakin' of which, you see the bulletin board lately?"

"No. Why? Don't tell me we lost somebody else."

"Four people, including Kevin Clarke."

I felt actual pain. The newspaper economy was brutal. In many respects, the profession I signed on for no longer existed. With circulation and ad revenue in the tank, the *Journal*, along with hundreds of other newspapers, had been buying out and laying off people like crazy. If *Journal* cuts had reached Kevin Clarke, the situation was more dire than I had imagined. He was a Pulitzer Prize winner. Twice. Without our best people, we were nothing, a doomed shell of a nothing.

“Kevin?” I said, hearing heat in my voice. “I can’t believe it.”

“He took the buyout and jumped to the Internet,” Pete said. “No specifics, but I think it’s *Slate* or the *Huff Post*.”

I crossed my arms and frowned. “Tell me something, Pete. You think things are as bad as management says? I mean, come on. We’ve closed four bureaus, cut the staff system-wide by thirty-four percent, and those of us left have taken three pay cuts. Circulation is going up, and the economy is getting better for ad revenue. We’re charging pretty good money for Web access. So why are we still crying poor?”

“If you get an answer, let the rest of us know,” Pete said. “Since it’s a privately held company, there’s no way to look at the books.”

I squeezed his shoulder and continued my trek in silence. I was standing at the elevator doors thinking about all the great journalists all over the country now unemployed or plying their trade on Web sites. I used to think finding a newsprint paper in a plastic sleeve outside my door every morning was as sacrosanct as the Bill of Rights. Everything had changed almost overnight. Was the Internet the future of journalism?

Was it my future? I didn’t like the prospect.

When the elevator doors opened, Eric Ryland stepped out. If he wasn't the last person I wanted to see at the moment, he held a prominent spot on my list.

Eric was the *Journal's* metro editor. The *Journal* had several city editors who supervised the beat reporters who covered Chicago's 200-plus neighborhoods and 77 communities spread out over 228 square miles. It was Ryland's job to supervise and coordinate the city editors. He liked to describe himself as the big-picture guy. I often wondered how he and his ego squeezed into the same office at the same time.

Eric's face darkened when he saw me. I wasn't surprised.

"Deuce, wonderful," he said, his tone matching his expression. He came off the elevator clouded up. I expected him to rain on me momentarily. "Just the person I want to see. You headed out?"

Since I wasn't crazy about Eric to begin with, and since news of Kevin Clarke's departure had put me in a foul mood, I was tempted to reply that I always stand in front of elevators to hear the bells go ding and watch the doors open and close. Somewhere deep in my soul I found restraint.

"I'm headed to Michigan Avenue," I told him, "to see a store about a pair of boots, but it can wait. What happened with Kevin Clarke?"

Without answering me, he turned and walked toward his office. I sighed. I knew he expected me to follow like a well-trained puppy.

Eric closed the door. A flat-screen television on the credenza behind his desk was tuned to CNN. He turned down the volume until we could barely hear it. More conducive to a tongue-lashing. Or perhaps Ryland was about to dump me, too.

We sat, and he got right to the point. As it happened, he hadn't called me in to discuss a buyout. It was more unpleasant.

"We've been getting calls about the column today," he told me.

"Me, too," I said.

"They're not the sorts of calls we like to get."

"Me, neither," I said. "You could borrow my egg timer."

"Your what?"

"Egg timer."

"And what would I do with that?"

"Cook a perfect egg?"

He waved that off. He didn't understand and didn't want to.

"The fact is," he said, "I just left a meeting with the circulation people, who tell me they've taken forty-three subscription cancellations today because of your column and fielded a lot more cancellation threats. You know the economics. We're fighting for our lives. We can't afford ..."

"What are you trying to tell me, Eric?" I said. "Don't circle around it."

"First of all," he said, "I'm not telling you what to write. But maybe you could cool it with the hot-button topics for a while until this settles out."

I could feel the heat rise in my face, and I was certain Eric saw me flush because he frowned and leaned away from me, as if anticipating an explosion.

"The story," I said, "was about a man who bought a gun at a gun show where neither he nor the seller complied with the required background check or the waiting period. He carried the gun home. In the heat of anger he shot and killed his girlfriend and her two-

year-old son. He emptied a magazine into the woman, put in a new magazine, and emptied it into the little boy. The only hot button involved here is the one the state should push to lock the prison doors on him forever. Also on the idiot who broke the law to sell him the gun in the first place.”

“So you said in the column. You do recall that Illinois abolished the death penalty some years ago?”

“Who said anything about the death penalty?”

“Subscribers who believe that’s what you really want. This isn’t your first trip into this briar patch.”

“Eric,” I said, “this state is making it too easy for anyone to carry a concealed weapon. We should be writing about it every time gun ownership is abused, keep the pressure on.”

“You think you alone can turn around public opinion? That you alone always know what’s best? That you can stir things up this way and still have a newspaper tomorrow willing to publish the next episode in this quixotic mission of yours?”

I heard my voice rising. “So you’re telling me not to write on these subjects any more, that the fallout to our circulation is more important than the fallout on babies?”

“We have to consider everything,” Eric said. “Do you want to keep your job? Because if the economics get any worse, the *Journal’s* headed for bankruptcy. We’re an anachronism. We’re holding on by our fingernails. We can’t afford to take the occasional ad and circulation hits. We ...”

But I had stopped listening sometime around the word “bankruptcy.” Something on the television, words hardly heard, distracted me.

“Las Vegas ... Assassination.”

Adrenaline began trickling into my system. I strained to hear more and realized Eric's voice had stilled. I could feel him watching me, and I was certain he didn't approve of my lack of attention to his problems.

"Eric, turn that up," I said.

If he heard the urgency in my voice, it didn't move him.

"We're not through, Deuce," he said. "I want -- "

I interrupted again. "Turn it up, Eric. Please."

First he grunted. Then he picked up the remote and thumbed the volume. I realized I was standing up, leaning toward the TV. I didn't remember getting out of the chair.

"To recap what we know," the anchor said, "eight-term Congressman Charles Reading of Nevada was gunned down by a sniper in Las Vegas this morning as he rode Manhattan Transfer, the roller coaster at the hotel casino, New York New York. Reading, the ranking minority member of the House Judiciary Committee, was struck in the neck by a single shot, which Las Vegas Police believe came from the roof of a hotel across the street ..."

The narrative went on but the ringing in my ears drowned it. The shock hit full force then, and Eric looked alarmed.

"Deuce, sit down," he said. "Are you okay?" He stood up and grabbed my arm, but I pulled away. I had to get back to a little duplex in Cicero where, the night before, I had dropped off an irascible 78-year old drunk after dismissing him as a head case.

"I have to go," I said. "I'm sorry Eric. I have to get to Cicero."

"Cicero?" he said. "What's in Cicero?"

"I'm not sure yet," I said, backing toward the door. "But today I think it's a whole lot more important than I thought it was yesterday."

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