

This short story is based loosely on a lot of zany characters the author used to know in the newspaper business and from his own imagination. Jim Belshaw, a real-life newspaper columnist, contributed to this story with ideas and suggestions.

It Only Cost Two Teeth

by Dennis Herrick



The note that Zach Vernon tossed on Eddie Valencia's desk said, *VanSecken is a spy.*

Eddie leaned across piles of newspapers and old reporter's notebooks stacked on his *Albuquerque Sun* desk. He read the note and tried to weigh how long and how strange the conversation might be if he responded. He couldn't settle on a quick and easy way out, so he spoke to Zach at the adjoining newsroom desk.

"He's not a spy, Zach. He's our managing editor."

Zach put a finger in front of his lips. "Shhh."

"Managing editor. There's a difference between spies and editors."

"What difference?"

"Spies have a code of honor."

Zach motioned for Eddie to give back the note. When Eddie did, Zach stuffed it into his mouth and ate it.

Eddie Valencia could never get used to his unpredictable conversations with Zach

Vernon, the newspaper's columnist. *Sun* readers loved him, and they often wrote letters to the editor sprinkled with "quirky" and "zany Zach" and "I read every column." Eddie and other *Sun* reporters liked Zach well enough, but they also thought he had the paper's easiest job. To a man and a woman, all were convinced they could write a better column than Zach Vernon if given the chance.

* * *

Zach took some pride in being a bit odd, as demonstrated by his suspicions of Philip VanSecken, the ex-Washington Bureau reporter turned *Sun* managing editor.

VanSecken's demeanor, his Washington connections, the vague answers he gave when asked about his past, and most of all the rumors Zach had heard—all of it provoked Zach Vernon into a line of thinking peculiar to him.

One time in the cafeteria, Zach overheard VanSecken talking in a hushed voice about a "money drop" to a postal box office. Another time Zach had come around a hallway corner upon VanSecken whispering into a cell phone, and VanSecken cut the conversation in mid-sentence. A few weeks later Zach discovered VanSecken had two cell phones. He was a spy, all right. The question was for whose side?

That worried Zach. A lot.

Zach wondered why VanSecken returned to the paper in New Mexico. To be close to the Mexican border? To be near the nuclear research facilities at Sandia and Los Alamos labs? The nuclear warhead storage area at Kirtland Air Force Base? Lots of possibilities.

Sitting at his desk in the sprawling newsroom that Monday, Zach studied VanSecken in the managing editor's office. All top editors had offices at one end of the newsroom fronted by glass walls, and Zach called them the glassholes. Zach decided to confront VanSecken and give him fair warning that Zach was on to him.

“So, Philip,” Zach said, strolling into VanSecken’s glassed sanctuary.

Even sitting, the 6-foot-4, impeccably dressed, dignified VanSecken was almost at eye level with the skinny, bespectacled columnist.

VanSecken had arrived at the *Sun* a month earlier to become managing editor. He looked up from his computer, his nose and chin lifted in consort with his arched eyebrows. He struck everyone as confident and prideful, which, of course, he was.

“Yes-s-s?” VanSecken frowned at Zach’s unannounced entrance into his office.

“I’ve been talking to someone in the C–I–A,” Zach lied, drawing out each letter to mock VanSecken’s patrician speech. “He says he knows you.”

VanSecken’s eyelids half closed. “I know a lot of people in Washington. I covered them for years. What’s his name?”

Zach walked away. He’d already exceeded his quota for talking to editors for one day. “I can’t give up my sources,” he said over his shoulder.

Then he paused in the doorway and turned to face VanSecken again. “Have you made a decision yet on the petition I circulated in the newsroom. The water in that cooler in the corner is poisonous. I think the paper ought to provide us all with bottled water at our desks.”

VanSecken thrust his arm out in a vicious movement toward Zach. “Get back to work.”

Zach walked to his desk at the other end of the basketball-court-sized newsroom.

Eddie Valencia threw up his hands. “Why are you riling him?”

“I just told you why. He’s a spy. And not for us either, I’d wager. Give him a little heat. Watch him sweat.”

Both of them glanced toward VanSecken, who glared at them across the newsroom.

“You ought to calm down.”

“Hah!” The columnist snorted and started typing on his computer keyboard. “Why should I?”

“Because odds seem very high that he’s not a spy.”

“I know things. Trust me.”

“This seems reckless. You could get yourself in trouble.”

“Bad decisions make good stories. People expect me to be in trouble. I’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

“Don’t get carried away. I’m just saying he’s got friends high up in our newspaper chain and you, uh, don’t.”

* * *

Zach Vernon wrote his human-interest column twice a week. Newsstand sales always increased on Tuesdays and Fridays when his column ran on the metro page. When ideas were scarce, he relied on his popular series about the city’s most colorful characters. His last column was about a woman who described her paintings as “pigments of my imagination.”

He wore the same outfit every day: jeans with a white shirt, a black cowboy hat, and a bolo tie. He had black hair streaked with gray and kept it clipped short with long sideburns. Although a small man, his gravelly voice was low and intimidating like a starved bear.

Every month or so Zach would hear about some reporter wanting to write a column like his. Then he’d walk up to that reporter, shake his head in condescension, and without saying a word he’d walk away. He knew reporters had no idea how difficult it was to write two columns a week that would read like a conversation with readers rather than

dictating or preaching to them. Zach had been entertaining readers with conversational columns for twenty years.

Eddie once asked if Zach had drawn his name out of a box after deciding to have one friend in the newsroom. In fact, Zach picked Eddie because he was an Indian, a Yaqui from Tucson. Zach was a champion of underdogs, and he figured that Indians qualified. However, he told Eddie that he just liked him, that's all.

Zach took several sheets out of his printer, stapled them together, and tossed his next column to Eddie across the divider between their desks, as if a sudden wind gust had blown them over. "Whaddaya think of this?"

He kept print-outs of his columns as proof of any textual abuse caused by editors, challenging them if they became over-enthused about fussing with his prose.

As Eddie read the pages, Zach stared at him, chewing on a strip of paper that hung half out of his mouth. Zach didn't smoke, but he chewed on fat cigars. A city editor two reigns ago, disgusted by that habit, banned his stogies from the newsroom. Once Zach discovered that chewing strips of paper was almost as annoying, he substituted paper for cigars. When he was in an adventuresome mood, he chewed colored paper, which left traces of rainbow stains on his lips. He was subdued and chewed white paper today, the strip dangling two inches from his lower lip.

Eddie handed Zach's column back with a warning. "The editors will never believe this story. The guy is too far out."

Zach chuckled. "You didn't know there was a Haitian voodoo doctor here in Albuquerque?"

"No. I sure didn't."

"Oh, yeah," Zach took the print-out back and admired it. "He just moved here a week

ago. He can give you pain or take it away, all with a needle in the dolls he makes out of corn husks and cut-out pieces of cloth.”

When Eddie laughed, Zach lowered his head and peered over his glasses. “He’s got a doll that looks a lot like you.”

“Really.”

“Don’t believe me? You reporters are such skeptics. Remember when you sprained your ankle a few days ago?”

Eddie looked at him.

“He’d put a pin in your doll’s ankle.”

“You’re full of crap.”

“Maybe.” Zach looked away, then back at Eddie. He grinned, wobbling the paper strip with his tongue. “Maybe not.”

* * *

Eddie was right. The editors didn’t believe Zach’s column. The photographer who’d taken the voodoo picture thought the whole idea looked like a set-up, so the metro desk editors decided to run one of Zach’s earlier rejected columns that seemed less questionable.

Later another reporter sent to check Zach’s column agreed with Zach. “He found a loony, that’s for sure. What’s a Haitian witch doctor doing in Albuquerque, anyway?”

But the voodoo column had been put aside by then, and the other column published in its place.

Everyone thought someone else would tell Zach his column had been held, so he didn’t learn a substitute column had been published until the paper came out Tuesday.

Furious, he blamed VanSecken for killing his voodoo column.

“Joanie raised the questions, not me,” VanSecken said. He motioned toward Joanie Birchard, the 30-ish copy editor he’d called in for reinforcements.

“That’s right, Zach. I thought we needed more verification before we could run the column. It did seem a bit implausible. It’s my fault it was held.”

Joanie reminded Zach of his deceased young sister with her trim figure and shoulder-length black hair, so he had a soft spot for Joanie and never blamed her for anything. He ignored her confession.

Instead he confronted VanSecken again. “If you were a decent reporter, you’d know a good story when you saw it.”

“I told you, I didn’t have anything to do with spiking your absurd column. Besides, it’s now cleared to run on Friday.”

Zach leaned in closer, lowering his head like a goat about to butt VanSecken.

“I’m on to you, VanSecken.” Then, just to goad the editor, he added, “The voodoo man told me about you, but I didn’t put it in this column. Watch out for a pin in your doll, Philip.”

VanSecken rolled his eyes. “This meeting is over.”

Back at his desk, Zach gathered the print-out of his voodoo column. He started pasting the pages together, end to end, as reporters did in the bygone age of typewriters. He leaned back and took a deep whiff of his glue pot. It seemed to relax him.

He tapped his computer keyboard, accessed the Internet, and called up his “ghoul pool.” Zach ran a website that let people place one-dollar bets on what world leader would die next. It was illegal gambling, of course, but he had fun with it, mailing every penny of the wagers to each winner, not even keeping enough to cover his expenses. The last ghoul pool winner had predicted the president of Burundi and collected three hundred

dollars.

Next, he typed “Philip VanSecken” into the Google search engine, but all he could find were articles VanSecken had written from the Washington bureau. Hmm, he thought. The guy must have deep cover. Well, he’d keep looking.

Zach pulled on his black wool vest. He rarely wore more than that during the coldest winter days, and he even wore it on the hottest summer days. He slapped on his sweat-stained, black cowboy hat and left the newsroom. He’d heard of an ex-congresswoman from another state named Eleanor who was homeless now in Albuquerque. He thought of her as Homeless Nell, based on her nickname, and he was determined to find her. The Metro Desk knew nothing about it because he never consulted with editors about any of his columns. He preferred surprising them.

It turned out that homeless Nell would need to wait.

Searching the alleys behind stores and other Dumpster-rich environments for her, Zach walked up an alley, chewing his unlit cigar. He’d just transferred its bulky shape to his right hand when Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton leaped out the back door of a liquor store brandishing handguns.

Zach stopped in mid-step, not sure what to do.

Ronald Reagan raised his pistol and fired. Zach was skinny and hard to hit, but the bullet pierced the brim of his cowboy hat and sent it spinning like a Frisbee through the air. As it skidded along the alley, Zach jumped like a flushed rabbit behind a parked SUV.

Bill Clinton fired two more shots, putting holes and spiderwebs of cracked glass into the SUV’s windshield. Then the two former presidents sprinted in the opposite direction.

In their haste, both gunmen forgot to take off their rubber masks. They were easy to

recognize.

Zach watched as half a block down the alley two police cars screeched to a stop in front of them. The two presidents hesitated a second too long and found themselves looking down the barrel of a police shotgun.

The liquor store clerk burst into the alley next. He glanced at Zach, who pushed his glasses back up on his nose, and then looked the other way up the alley at the flashing police car lights.

“Good. They got ’em. I punched the silent alarm as soon as they walked in. And to think I voted for both those guys.”

* * *

Eddie, as the *Sun*'s police reporter, groaned Wednesday morning as he read one of Zach's few news stories on Page One. Eddie's version, based on the police report, had been whittled down to be the final two paragraphs of Zach's story. Eddie reported that the robbers told police that the SUV was their escape car and that they assumed Zach was a cop because they saw him carrying a gun. It was his cigar.

Eddie had to admit that Zach's first-person account with mad presidents, flying bullets, and flashing police lights was a lot more compelling than his police report.

That same afternoon, Philip VanSecken knew his timing was bad. The appointment had been made before yesterday's argument with Zach, however, so he had to show up. He winced when he saw Zach's presidential liquor store robbers emblazoned across the top of Page One and lying on editor Susan Treeple's desk.

She sat behind her mahogany buffer, a few documents sorted across its top. She had everything in its place, a contrast to the yellowing papers piled on most newspaper desks. She waved him into a chair near the *No Whining* sign perched on her desk's front edge.

“Come in, Philip. Good job on catching the mistakes in that congressional story. Your Washington experience paid off.”

“Thanks.” He settled onto a chair. “But I need to talk to you about Zach Vernon.”

She frowned and leaned back into her chair. “What’s he done now?”

“He has an insufferable attitude. He’s insubordinate to me and the other editors. Half the time we don’t know where he is. He could be at a casino, for all we know.”

Susan Treeple picked up a pen from her desk and tapped it a few times on some letters in front of her, looking at VanSecken the whole time.

“He might be. Lots of good column material there. Or he could be wearing his bullet-riddled hat at Kelley’s Bar & Grill.”

“He’s always there, too.” VanSecken was appalled that she knew it and didn’t seem to care. “I’m just saying we never know where he is or what he’s working on. And when he is here, he causes a lot of tension in the newsroom.”

Susan Treeple sighed.

“The other editors will tell you he’s getting worse. We always know what everyone else is working on. Vernon never tells us anything. He just transmits his columns out of the blue. He is insulting and has no respect for authority.”

“I’ll talk to him again.”

“He’s so uncooperative, some people wonder how he ever got hired here.”

Susan picked up a pen and tapped it on her desk. “We needed a good columnist, and when he came along, we had to take the whole package.”

VanSecken had to make one more point. “Frankly, some people are afraid of him. I think he could be dangerous.”

He let the warning hang in the air with its vision of deranged employees with

submachine guns bursting into the newsroom. She blinked, so he knew she glimpsed that vision.

She leaned forward and rested her arms on her polished mahogany desk. “Zach Vernon is a bit odd. Of course, that helps him find great column material. The fact that he walked down that alley at the precise moment the two robbers burst out of the liquor store proves once again the old adage that no amount of hard work, skill, and planning can replace dumb luck.”

“He accuses me of being a foreign spy. Did you know that?”

“So I heard. I’m sorry, Philip.” There was a weary tone to her voice.

“I think we ought to kill his voodoo column for Friday. Teach him a lesson.”

She sat upright and shook her head. “What? We can’t skip his column. Readers would howl.”

VanSecken muttered. He’d never had to deal with people like Zach Vernon in the Washington Bureau. The people at the bureau were respectable, wore suits, had charge accounts, and knew important people. They were reporters who wore tuxes to the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner. He was starting to regret he’d returned to the bourgeoisie at the *Sun*.

* * *

Detective Carl Foster held the rubber masks of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, one hand inside each mask. Foster was six feet tall with a flat stomach, wide shoulders, and the arms of a weight-lifter. As hard-nosed a cop as he was, even he was amused as he turned the masks toward him and looked at the rubbery faces, which lay in his hands like cartoons, distorted and wrinkled.

He walked into the examining room with Ronald Reagan on his right hand like a

rubber puppet and Bill Clinton on his left.

A beefy man with blond hair like a mop and at least four days of beard stubble sat at the metal table inside the small tiled room. Both wrists were handcuffed to rings in the table, which was bolted to the floor.

Foster raised Ronald Reagan and turned the face toward the man. Then he lowered it and raised Bill Clinton.

“Let’s see. Which one was you? I forget.”

The man smirked. “I’m a lifelong Republican.”

“If you are, your criminal record has prevented you from ever voting.” Foster pulled up a chair and sat opposite the man. “Actually, you’re in the Aryan Patriot Militia now. Yes, we’ve heard about you.”

A black man who’d grown up amid poverty and discrimination, Foster had no tolerance for racists of any stripe and wanted to make sure this guy knew that.

The prisoner despised being restrained. He pulled on the cuffs and glared at the black detective without responding.

Foster set down the Clinton mask and looked at Ronald Reagan’s.

“As for that, Reagan was a Republican. But he wouldn’t have approved of you, Ronnie.” Foster wiggled two fingers through the mask’s eye holes.

“My name ain’t Ronnie. And you know it.”

“That’s right, Ronnie.” Foster turned stern. “I know all about you. I know where you were born, your real name and all your aliases, and how and when you went to New Jersey to meet your militia pal, Billy.” He patted the Bill Clinton mask with his left hand. “I even know why the two of you robbed the liquor store—and the banks and a few other places in five states heading west, the FBI always one step behind you.”

The man huffed and leaned back in his chair. He glanced at a patrolman standing in the room with crossed arms. Then he looked at Foster and his face went expressionless.

“Where’s all the money you took in the robberies, Ronnie?”

“If we stole any money, and I’m not saying we did, we would have spent it by now.”

“That’s not what your pal Billy Clinton says. He says you turned it over to your white supremacist buddies.”

Silence. The man stared, and then he sneered. “You’re lying.”

“Billy always was the weak link. Wasn’t he? You always worried he wasn’t up to it. Well, you were right, Ronnie. He told us all about you and the ‘fundraising,’ as you call it, for the Aryan Patriot Militia.”

“Liar.”

Foster pushed his chair back and walked to the door. He looked at the man one last time.

“Too bad for you. Billy cracked. He gets the deal. You get to die of old age, or whatever, in prison. Attempted murder of that poor, defenseless newspaper reporter in addition to all those robberies. Too bad.” Foster pushed down on the door latch, opening the door.

“Wait a minute!”

Foster smiled to himself. The accomplice-ratting-you-out ploy works almost every time. He cleared his robbery case and eight more in five other states that afternoon. He learned more that would turn out to be useful, too.

* * *

Zach had ditched his bolo ties for one day and switched to the traditional kind so he could enter the Elks Club’s ugly tie contest for July. And he’d won, which had become an

accomplishment he relished almost as much as a prize-winning column.

“This is the one that salted it away for me,” he bragged Thursday to Eddie in the newsroom. He hoisted a tie like a flag and fluttered it a couple of times. The tie swirled with yellows and greens, and Macaw parrots in rainbow hues seemed to dance on the fabric as he waved it.

“That’s a beauty, all right.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

Zach draped the tie over the top of his computer monitor. He left it there, the tie seeming to shine with its own light in the newsroom. Zach patted it twice and sat. He told Eddie, “This might make a good column.”

Eddie looked away from the tie. “I hear your voodoo column will run tomorrow,” he said, grinning. “Met anyone else interesting lately?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. Don’t tell the Metro Desk. Did you know that Billy the Kid’s great-great-grandson lives up on Sandia Mountain?”

“Uh, no, I didn’t know that.”

“Well, he does. He’s squatting on national forest land.”

“I didn’t know Billy the Kid ever had a wife,” Eddie said.

“Oh, you’re right!” Zach slapped his forehead. “How could I be so stupid? I forgot it’s impossible to get a woman pregnant if you’re not married to her. Thanks, Eddie. No wonder you’re the guy everyone thinks should replace me.”

“Okay, okay.” Eddie held his hands with palms outright in the universal gesture of *that’s enough*.

Zach snorted. “Anyway, people sometimes see him riding along the mountain trails on a big gray horse, dressed like a cowboy from the 1870s and wearing a six-shooter in a

holster.”

“Is that legal? Going around with a gun like that?”

Zach poked another strip of paper into his mouth and started chewing it into a wad.

“It’s legal in New Mexico. You can wear a gun here as long as it’s out in the open.”

“I’d heard that but didn’t believe it. Is he really Billy the Kid’s great-great-grandson?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Zach said.

* * *

He didn’t always write about odd characters. He wrote sketches of citizens who were undiscovered gems. He mined the city for them.

The voodoo column ran Friday to citywide reader acclaim. Billy the Kid’s descendent rode through one of Zach’s more humorous columns the following Tuesday.

Then Zach met a ninety-year-old great-grandmother who’d just published her first book of poetry. Emma Atencio was on a fevered quest for B-10 in a Catholic Church’s bingo hall when he went inside to troll for new column ideas.

“The poet of Corrales,” Zach labeled her for that Friday’s column, starting with a quote from one of her poems:

He has been followed by a shadow in dustcloth,

Its hand on his shoulder, evanescent and soft,

Is gently insisting and can’t be put off.

And he’s nodding in his chair.

He portrayed her with sensitivity and told tales of Mrs. Atencio’s personal wisdom. Editors were amazed by his gentle affection as he wrote about her life and inspirations.

The poetry column was so touching that, after the paper came out Friday, reporters

walked around the newsroom showing his column to each other and quoting passages.

“Vernon just won another column-writing award,” one reporter told Eddie.

* * *

Eddie hesitated for a few seconds after stepping into Kelley’s Bar & Grill, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness and his nose to the smell of spilled beer. Neon beer signs and a few small bar lamps provided faint illumination around the wood-paneled room.

Three o’clock was a bit early for the Bar Association, as *Sun* reporters called their gatherings at Kelley’s. Eddie looked around and saw Zach already hunched at the polished wooden bar, studying his beer mug as if its foamy head were an inexpressible work of abstract art.

“Hey, Zach,” Eddie said, perching on the stool beside the columnist. “Mind some company?”

Zach swiveled his head to look at him, appearing unsure of his answer. “Okay,” he said. He turned his attention back to the mug, spinning it in slow circles on the bar top.

Eddie motioned to the owner and bartender, Kelley, a jovial white-haired, red-faced Irishman wearing a Notre Dame football shirt. Kelley set an iced mug of beer in front of Eddie.

“Everyone’s talking about your poet of Corrales column back at the newsroom,” Eddie said, looking sideways at Zach.

“Yeah, I loved her.”

Eddie took a swig of his beer and then waved his mug toward Zach. “I told ’em at the newsroom that reading the *Albuquerque Sun* is like visiting a hospital. You look in one room and someone is sick. In another room a person with broken limbs is hung up in traction. In the third room the family is gathered after the patient just died.” Eddie paused

to savor Zach's interest. "And then they come to your room and say, 'Look, there's a party going on.' "

Zach grinned. "I like writing columns," he said. "I worry that editors will realize I'm having too much fun and will banish me to the copy desk."

"Your poet column will win a prize, you know."

"Yeah, no doubt."

"You don't seem too happy about it."

"Susan Treeple is kicking me around. It's VanSecken's fault. He's trying to get me fired. I talked to her, and she put me on probation again."

"You were put on probation just for having a talk with her?"

"I might have overreacted a little."

"Jeez. I told you to cool down on this VanSecken nonsense."

"Let 'em fire me. I got other offers. Plenty."

"No you don't."

"They're out there."

Zach knocked back another swallow of beer and pointed his cigar at the bartender.

"Hey, Kelly. You still connected to the IRA?"

"Ah," said Kelley, walking over and leaning down to Eddie and Zach's level at the bar. He poked his finger through the bullet hole in Zach's hat lying on the counter. So many people had done so, that the hole had been stretched to .50-caliber size, which suited Zach fine. "And why do you think I ever had connections with the IRA? The IRA's not so popular, don't you know."

Zach shrugged. "I just heard, that's all. I want to write a column about it."

Kelley looked over to Eddie. "I don't know how, but he thinks he found something in

my misspent youth, he does.” He turned back to Zach. “And how can you be sure? You never’ve told me.” He punched Zach’s skinny arm.

“Sources,” Zach said, rubbing his arm. “Fountain of all wisdom to a reporter.”

Eddie chuckled. “Hold on, Zach. First you think VanSecken’s a spy, and now you think Kelley was in the IRA?”

Kelley turned toward Eddie. “What did you say? Who?”

Eddie froze, his beer mug halfway to his mouth. Kelley kept looking at him.

“VanSecken. Philip VanSecken. He just returned from our Washington Bureau. Zach thinks he’s a spy, although he’s going to get fired if he doesn’t lighten up.”

Eddie chuckled again, but he sobered as he saw Kelley’s expression harden.

Zach also saw the expression change. He lurched forward like a prospector who’d just struck gold. When Kelley looked at him, he asked, “Do you know VanSecken?”

“Not really.” Kelley straightened up and rubbed his chin with his right fist. “Well, yes, maybe. I know an unpleasant one by name of Bill Ramsey who has a Dutch-sounding alias like that. Do you have a picture of this VanSecken?”

Zach jumped off his stool. “I’ll get you one.” He ran off, sticking Eddie for both of their beers.

Zach didn’t get far. As soon as he stepped outside, two muscular guys in tight-fitting T-shirts reached for him, each grabbing one of his arms. All Zach had time to notice was that it looked like they’d just come from the gym. One was bald and the other one had a thick black beard.

“We’ll give you a ride home,” the bald one said loudly. “You’ve had too much to drink.”

“Let go of me.” Zach’s feet treaded air as they lifted him and carried him to a black

Lincoln purring a few feet away at the curbside. It was parked in a loading zone, but the threat of a ticket hadn't been a deterrent.

Two trim young women in business suits approached, stopping on the sidewalk with alarmed looks on their faces.

"He's just drunk again," said the bearded man of the pair, laughing as though he were used to dealing with Zach.

The bearded man released his hold on Zach's arm and fast-stepped around the car, opening the other back door and getting in. The bald one still held Zach's right arm. He jerked it to throw Zach off balance, then pulled Zach back to his feet. "Come on Zach-my-boy," he said with a laugh. "You're drunker than I thought."

With a blast of air, Zach blew his cigar out of his mouth at the man, bouncing the soggy cartridge of tobacco off the man's forehead.

"Sorry about the scene, ladies," bald-guy told the women with a smile. "He's had a bit too much. We'll take him home now."

Zach should have yelled for help, but he was too surprised when he saw that the women were scowling at him instead of at the bad guys.

The bald guy pulled open the back door and shoved Zach in. Bearded-guy was waiting for him in the back seat and wrapped him in a bear hug. Bald-guy slammed the door shut, interrupting Zach's string of curses. Then the bald guy bowed to the two women, walked around to the driver's side door, and hoisted himself into the car.

Zach looked back through the rear window, aware now that the women had been his one chance. He saw them shake their heads and resume walking. The wind whirled a newspaper page down the sidewalk with a picture of Zach atop his poet column.

The Lincoln cruised away. Zach pictured a blank spot on the sidewalk, which

appeared now as if he'd never been kidnapped right there just seconds earlier. Everything would be quiet there again except the sound of traffic along the streets and an undertone of music leaking out of Kelley's.

* * *

The coroner would later calculate that the man had been dead for six days. Anyone would have concluded the same thing as soon as they walked into the small, adobe-type house and gagged on the air.

The house's landlord, a stooped old man in a wrinkled shirt, had let the cops in while explaining that he'd noticed a bad smell around the house. The odor of the body's decay had overcome the usual blend of dope, burned wood, Caribbean spices, candles, incense, and who knew what else.

That kind of complaint always brought homicide detective Carl Foster a few minutes behind the uniforms. Foster looked at the body on the floor. The short and fat victim looked African American like Foster, but he looked kind of Hispanic, too. The dead man was draped in colorful robes and wore an odd hat with appendages like stubby fingers all over it.

"He's been shot," said the stockier patrolman. His taller partner added, "Two times. Once in the heart and once in the head."

Foster knelt on one knee beside the corpse. The room's odors insinuated themselves around him in peppery vapors, burning his eyes.

"Open some windows."

The stocky cop slid two windows open. It was a corner room, so there were windows on two sides. It was a breezy day, and the wind blew through the room, carrying the stench outside to compete with the city's carbon monoxide.

“Crime scene is on its way,” the stocky cop said.

Foster pulled on rubber gloves and pushed his hands under the body. “Feels like his wallet is still there.” He pulled it out and showed them that it was filled with cash.

The tall cop shrugged. “Guess it wasn’t a robbery.”

Foster found a passport on a table. “This guy was born in New York City,” he said, and he read the name aloud.

The stocky officer recognized the name. “That’s the guy from Zach Vernon’s newspaper column last week. The voodoo doctor.”

Foster looked around the room at several wooden figures, candle stubs, bright textiles, photographs of Caribbean dancers, and an assortment of items he couldn’t identify.

“There could be only one reason no one heard the gunshots,” the tall cop said.

Foster agreed. “Uh-huh. A suppressor. This wasn’t a robbery. It was an execution.”

* * *

Susan Treepie was upset Saturday morning. Zach Vernon was part of the newspaper flock, even if he was its black sheep, and he’d been missing for most of yesterday afternoon, last night, and now all morning. At first, some newsroom cynics had assumed he was off on some binge. Rumors spread about his kidnapping, however, so that thinking mostly changed, although some still clung to the binge theory.

The corporate manual didn’t have anything on how to handle a staff kidnapping.

Susan Treepie turned to a comforting bureaucratic strategy when faced with a crisis. She called a meeting.

The conference room filled with the newsroom’s editors and reporters. Even those with Saturday off attended, standing against the walls, not wanting to miss the first staff

meeting that might actually turn out to be interesting.

She knew she didn't need to summarize much to start. These were journalists, after all, so everybody knew as much as she did. She depended on Philip VanSecken to get things started, and he shouted to get everyone's attention and called the meeting to order.

The reporters gave about two seconds of silence, signifying their understanding that the meeting now was under way. Then Susan was hit with questions as soon as she stood up. She felt like a swimmer in a shark tank. A small shark tank.

"What did the cops say about Zach?"

"Do they have any leads on where he is?"

"What did he say to you at Kelley's, Eddie?"

"Is that voodoo murder tied to Zach's column in any way?"

"What's going on?"

"He was kidnapped, wasn't he?"

"Do they have suspects?"

"I saw Detective Foster. What did he tell you?"

"Quiet!" VanSecken erupted from his chair beside Susan and waved his hands. He shouted more loudly.

The press mob quieted to a constant mumbling until even that ceased. Susan had always known VanSecken would come in handy some day.

"I have a statement to make," she said.

The reporters could understand that. You need to be quiet when someone makes a statement. You can't rush them until afterward. Every reporter in the room knew these rules.

"The police believe Zach was indeed kidnapped." She wanted to bless the silence.

“They have two women witnesses who said he was forced into a car after leaving Eddie at Kelley’s Bar & Grill. The witnesses thought at first that Zach was drunk and two men were giving him a ride home. Then they became suspicious, went inside Kelley’s, and told Eddie and the bartender what they’d seen. As for the voodoo murder, police don’t know what to make of it. Maybe it was just a coincidence. They’re talking to everyone Zach has written about recently, from cowboys to poets.”

She caught her breath. The newsroom staff members were listening for once. She resumed.

“As you know, Zach never told anyone about his columns until he turned them in. The police want to know if he was working on any columns about drug dealers or other violent criminals. If any of you know about him working on such a story, you need to tell Detective Foster.” She glanced at Eddie, who was more likely to know than anyone else.

The rumbling commenced again, escalating like a thunderstorm sweeping in. Susan knew she had to cut it off or she would lose control. She loved them, but reporters could be like caged beasts. It took a whip and chair to control them sometimes.

“I have more to say.” Her knowledge of reporters’ lust for facts paid off, because they were so eager for more information that they shut up.

“If criminals did kidnap Zach, they won’t harm him. They know hurting him would bring unwanted attention. I’m sure Zach is okay.”

* * *

The bald guy nursed the bleeding knuckles of his right hand. This skinny newspaperman tied to the chair was so bony that the last punch to the reporter’s face hurt his fist. He decided he better kick him for a while instead.

Zach, pretending to be unconscious, opened his one remaining good eye just enough

to see bald-guy bringing back his boot for a good whumpf to the stomach. He braced himself. Then he heard bearded-guy yelling.

Bald-guy complained. “What’s the matter? I was just gonna kick him.”

“He’s unconscious, fool.” Zach had noticed that bearded-guy always called his partner “fool” as if he’d forgotten bald-guy’s real name. Maybe he had.

The bearded thug stepped forward, picked up a glass of water from a nearby table, and splashed it into Zach’s face. Zach was ready and gave no reaction. Bearded-guy checked the pulse in Zach’s neck. He grunted with relief and turned to his bald pal.

“You hit him too hard. Now we gotta wait till he wakes up.”

Zach wanted to smile but didn’t. He’d learned they would quit slugging him if they thought he was unconscious. Like most of life’s lessons, he’d learned this the hard way. Insults and sneers just caused baldy to hit him harder, which hadn’t taken Zach too many punches to figure out. The discovery that bald-guy would quit hitting him if he thought Zach was unconscious had taken longer. Zach’s face throbbed and bled, and he remained slack and kept his eyes closed.

“I barely touched him,” the bald bruiser complained, as disappointed as if he’d been stopped from taking an amusement park ride.

“Well, fool, maybe you rattled his brains. He’s a little worm. Hard to know how hard you should hit him.”

Bald-guy huffed in disgust. He walked to the refrigerator in the kitchen and yanked out a beer bottle. He twisted off the cap and tossed it spinning onto the kitchen counter. He took a long swallow and wiped his lips with the back of his hairy hand. “Call me when he wakes up.”

Bearded-guy grabbed a copy of the *Sun* and relaxed in a leather La-Z-Boy. Zach

opened his right eye enough to see the man push the back of the recliner into a more comfortable angle, put up the foot rest, and open the newspaper. Zach figured bearded-guy wanted to read about his favorite Great White Hopes in the sports section.

A large red banner with a black swastika hung on the opposite wall. Zach knew bearded-guy was a believer but figured the goon would have preferred a flat-screen TV there with some porn right now. As Zach had predicted, the man shook out the newspaper's sports section. Zach wished him luck at deciphering the bigger words.

* * *

Eddie and Kelley moved to a booth while the hired college kids ran the bar. Eddie opened his laptop's lid. Double-clicking on an image called *vansecken.jpg*, he and Kelley waited as the computer's hard drive whirred for a few seconds.

"That's him," said Kelley, pointing at the image as it came up. His forefinger left a smudge of grease on the screen. Eddie gasped.

He pushed Kelley's thick finger away. "Don't touch the screen. Leaves marks." He pulled a tissue out of his pocket and rubbed the smudge, annoyed. *Why do people always touch screens anyway?* He studied the screen and rubbed it some more.

"That's him, for sure. That's Bill Ramsey. And I looked up his cover name. Philip VanSecken. He was a reporter in Washington, he was, but I didn't know he wrote for the *Sun*."

"VanSecken had bylines every week in our paper while he was at the bureau." Eddie looked up at Kelley standing beside him, staring at the screen, his finger now under control. "Don't you ever read the *Sun*?"

"No," Kelley said. "Your comics page is the worst." Then Kelley held up a finger. "Actually, I do read Zach's columns for free on the Internet like everybody else."

“Look,” Eddie said, steering Kelley back on track. “How do you know VanSecken?”

Kelley told Eddie, off the record, that he had been active with the IRA when he was a young man in Ireland during “The Troubles,” as he called the war against Britain. He didn’t know how Zach Vernon had found out. The IRA was trying to throw out British troops occupying northern Ireland, but like many armed causes the IRA attracted criminals who saw a convenient outlet for violence. Kelley dropped out of the IRA, moved to America, and switched from drinking Guinness to selling it.

“So where does VanSecken figure into all of this?”

“You mean Ramsey?”

“Whoever.”

“He raised money for the cause, but diverted it to criminals exploiting the IRA,” Kelley said. “After peace talks started, these criminals left for other groups, thank the Lord. Your VanSecken, as you call him, worked with one of the worst.”

“Was VanSecken an informant for the CIA? The FBI? The NSA?”

“No, of course not.” Kelley looked at Eddie as if he thought Eddie were daft.

“There’s an American white supremacy group called the Aryan Patriot Militia. Everyone figured this VanSecken worked for them. He was trying to align the IRA’s fund-raising success with the hate tactics of this militia group in the United States, don’t you see.”

Eddie thought about that. If VanSecken was involved with this militia, he could make the police long for the good old days when they had just drug dealers and street crime to worry about. Next stop, Detective Foster, to alert him.

* * *

Zach’s arms ached from the ropes binding his arms to the chair. But he wasn’t going to complain, and he sure wasn’t going to show he was awake. He listened to bearded-guy

mumbling to himself as he shuffled the sports pages.

The telephone rang. He heard bearded-guy put the paper down and get out of the chair and heard bald-guy come into the room.

“Yeah,” bearded-guy said after picking up the phone. “He’s out cold right now.” Pause. “No. He hasn’t told us anything about voodoo man that wasn’t already in his column.” Pause. “Yeah.” Pause. “We woulda started beatin’ him sooner if you’d gotten back in touch with us. You still ain’t told us where you were all night.” Pause. “I told ya. He’s been out cold for at least an hour.” Pause. “Okay.” There was another pause, then bearded-guy said “Okay, we will, with pleasure,” and he hung up the phone.

Without warning, a few seconds later water splashed into Zach’s face and he sputtered involuntarily. He opened his one eye that wasn’t swollen shut and looked at bearded-guy and bald-guy standing over him.

“Time’s up,” his bearded captor said. “Our boss doesn’t care anymore what voodoo man did or didn’t tell you.” He motioned to bald-guy, who bent and began untying Zach.

As much as Zach wanted to be untied, he didn’t think this was the best time. He also realized he was no match for even one of these brutes. Unless they were underestimating him.

As soon as the second arm was untied, Zach leaped out of the chair, his legs springing him upward like a jack-in-the-box. He drove his head into bald-guy’s face. Bald-guy backpedaled from the impact, both hands gripping his broken nose, the blood seeping between his fingers. Bearded-guy shouted and reached for him, but Zach spun the chair into him, entangling bearded-guy’s legs with the chair, making him fall in a crash yelling obscenities. Bald-guy, half blinded with pain but lusting for retaliation, charged toward Zach but found his flailing partner and a bouncing chair in his way. He stumbled and fell,

both men shouting and swearing at each other.

Zach ran to the front door, grabbed for the door handle, yanked the door open, and leaped outside. Shouted curses echoed in the room behind him.

Zach was little and skinny, but he was fast. In one of his few social activities, he had been a star runner on his college's cross-country team and still jogged regularly. With enough of a head start, he knew he could outrun these two beer-bellies. He heard them crash into each other at the doorway, each trying to get through first. Then he heard their heavy footfalls pounding behind him.

He angled across the front yard and into the street of an unfamiliar neighborhood, then shot off in a straight line down the middle of the pavement. He heard one of the men gaining on him, so he threw away the first law of distance running and invested more energy into a beginning sprint. When he heard both pursuers panting for air within the first half-block, he knew the race was won. He settled in for the long haul, his legs reaching out for those long-distance-runner strides. Adrenaline overcame the throbbing of his battered face in the race for his life.

Bearded-guy shouted, "Get the car, fool." Bald-guy skidded to a stop and turned back to the house.

Uh-oh. Zach knew he wasn't that fast. He needed a new race strategy. Zach saw a cemetery. At the sound of a car coming closer, he sprinted for the cemetery, vaulted a waist-high stone wall, and dodged between headstones and trees.

A busy four-lane street was on the other side of the cemetery. The goons had taken away his glasses, but he could see well enough to recognize a police car and waved at it. The cop pulled the cruiser over, recognized him, turned on his flash-bar, and tried to talk into his radio while Zach kept jumping around and yelling at him.

“I know, I know,” the cop said, holding his radio in his right hand and trying to keep Zach from jumping into his lap with the other. “Five cars are already there. They caught the two guys holding you. One of the liquor store ‘presidents’ told us where to find them.”

“The bald one has a car. I heard it coming after me.”

“No, we grabbed him when he came back for it. You must have heard one of our police cars chasing the fellow with a beard.

“So you caught them already?”

“Yeah,” the cop said. “We saw you run out the door as we were arriving. Great escape, Mr. Vernon. Unnecessary. But a great escape.” He clapped Zach on the arm.

“Now you can I-D them for us.”

* * *

With his left eye blackened and still swollen shut, Zach looked through his one good eye Monday morning as he typed on his computer keyboard, a strip of paper dangling from his mouth. He would have liked more than just Sunday for his face to heal, but another column was due for tomorrow’s paper and those goons had put him behind schedule. What riled him, however, was that Detective Foster had forbidden him to write about being snatched until police completed their investigation. Worse yet, editor Susan Treepie agreed. Whatever happened to the First Amendment, free speech, independence of the press, news value? It would have been a great column, but the chicken *Sun* wouldn’t publish it.

He decided to settle for something third-rate. He remembered notes for a column idea he’d never written and made a phone call to update it.

As he wrote, he decided the column wasn’t so bad. This wasn’t about just any eighty-

year-old lady hoarding cats. This was about an old lady who adopted cats from the animal shelter so she could feed them to her pet alligator. Cat-lovers would hate the column, but they wouldn't be able to resist reading the horror of it. And they'd tell other readers about that awful Zach Vernon's latest column. He didn't care what they thought, just so they read him.

Eddie had told him about Kelley's positive identification, linking VanSecken to white supremacy groups. However, even Zach knew he couldn't write a column about that yet.

Well, Zach decided, maybe he could help the police get more information on VanSecken. Unofficially, of course.

He transmitted the alligator-lady column from his computer to the metro desk. He put on his hat, turning it so the bullet hole was most noticeable. Then he hurried out of the newsroom. It cheered him to hear the groan behind him as an editor wailed, "Omigod, look at what Vernon wrote about this time. Yuck."

* * *

Now it was bearded-guy and bald-guy's turns to answer questions. Detective Foster interrogated each one until he decided bald-guy might be more forthcoming. He sat across from his target, scribbling notes on paper. "Sorry you had to spend all weekend in jail, but I don't come in for scumbags like you on Sundays."

Bald-guy strained to read Foster's handwriting upside down. "What's that all about?"

Foster covered the page with his hand. "We caught your buddies wearing the presidents' masks. Since then everyone has been looking for you and your partner. Clever of the four of you to not point your crime spree of armed robberies toward your ultimate goal of New Mexico. But we've known who you are from the fingerprints you left behind."

“We didn’t touch any....” The bald guy’s voice trailed off.

“Yes, you did.” Foster shook his head as if he felt sorry for bald-guy. “Remember the plastic New York bank bag you threw away in a dumpster in Ohio? It has your fingerprints all over it, as well as your bearded partner’s. It’s even got a nice clear thumbprint from our liquor store robber wearing the Ronald Reagan mask. Your buddy who wore the Bill Clinton mask stumbled as he left another liquor store, so there is a nice set of his prints on the door casing. We also have videos of all four of you at one holdup or another. There’s no mistaking your faces from the sidewalk camera just before the four of you pulled down your ski masks and went into that convenience store in Iowa. And you guys should have changed clothes. You’re all wearing the same shirts in every robbery.”

Foster stopped, but then he couldn’t resist adding, “What a bunch of losers.”

The man leaned back and bit his lower lip, and his shoulders sagged.

“A minimum of fifteen years on every robbery. You face the most time. We can identify you at five of the eight robberies.” Foster took out a pocket calculator and punched in some numbers. “Oh, too bad for you. That makes about seventy-five years for you on a good day in court.” The sentences might run concurrently, but Foster didn’t want to burden the guy with details.

The man licked his lips and looked around the room before facing Foster. “I want to make a deal,” he said.

“Don’t you want a lawyer?”

“No. I want a deal.”

* * *

Detective Foster shouted like a car salesman in a TV commercial. “He said what?”

Eddie cringed and plopped into a chair. “Zach said he thought something was funny about his interview with the voodoo doctor. Like the guy was dodging some questions when he interviewed him. He said he was going to find out why our managing editor killed him.”

“Your managing editor? We don’t know who killed the voodoo man. Why does he think he knows?”

“He didn’t say. He took the afternoon off after finishing his column and said he had to find someone. I thought you should know.”

“Yes, I should know.” Foster stood to tower over the seated reporter. “Whoever hired those two kidnappers is dangerous. Your crazy columnist is going to get himself killed.”

Foster turned to an officer. “Put out the word. I want every patrol officer on the lookout for Zach Vernon. When you find him, bring him straight to me.”

* * *

Homeless Nell was a hard woman to find. The director at the Albuquerque House for Homeless Women told Zach that Nell had been living there until about ten days ago, when she’d left in a hurry. She also said he was the second person to ask about Nell in the last few days.

“Who was the first?”

“I don’t know. I just heard the word going around that a man had asked about her. I don’t have a description of him. Sorry.”

Zach didn’t have time to chase down that rumor. Armed with a list of parks and fast-food restaurants that Nell frequented, he rushed out to start his search by driving around to possible sites.

Hours went by. He stopped late in the afternoon at Kelley’s Bar & Grill and slapped

his hat on the bar in frustration.

“You’re in a good mood, you are,” Kelley said as he brought Zach his regular beer. He looked at Zach’s swollen and bruised face. “What truck ran over you?”

“Bring me a hamburger,” Zach said. When Kelley returned with a hamburger, he grabbed the bartender’s thick forearm.

“Detective Foster said you denied our whole conversation about Philip VanSecken. And he can’t find VanSecken to question him. You made a liar out of me and Eddie Valencia.”

Kelley reached down with his thumb and one finger and lifted Zach’s hand off his arm. He smiled. “What did you expect me to do?”

“I expected you to tell him what you told us. That VanSecken leads a double life. That he’s some kind of mucky-muck in the Aryan Patriot Militia. That we don’t know why he’s here, but it’s not just to be managing editor of the *Sun*.”

“Oh, you thought I would say that, did you.” Kelley had been writing on a piece of paper during Zach’s tirade, and he pushed the paper over for Zach to read. *Are you wearing a police wire?*

Zach pulled his shirt and vest up to his neck, turned around, and sat down. “No wires. No recorder. Satisfied?”

“Ah, for sure, I’m sorry I misjudged you.” Kelley came around the bar and stood Zach up again. He rummaged through Zach’s shirt, vest, and pants pockets. He even looked under Zach’s cowboy hat and moved his hand along the bottom of the bar, finding only hard wads of chewing gum. Smiling, he invited Zach to sit down again.

“It’s just that in my old line of work,” he said after he faced Zach again from behind the bar counter, “I’ve become of a suspicious nature.”

“You made Eddie and me look like a couple of conspiracy theorists.”

“You didn’t think I’d tell the police that I used to be in the IRA. Did you? I didn’t expect you to chinwag and tell him I was. He might have Interpol’s telephone number, don’t you know.”

“There were extenuating circumstances. Besides, it was Eddie who told him, not me.”

“Those circumstances have anything to do with your banged-up face? Did your kidnappers do that to you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I heard you were grabbed away. It’s all over the bar.”

“You can read all about it if they ever let me write the column. In the meantime, can you back me up on VanSecken?”

Kelley patted Zach on the top of his head, which was the one place that didn’t look sore. “We’ll just keep that between ourselves for now, wee lad.”

* * *

Zach had to delay resuming his search for Nell when Susan Treeple sent a message to Kelley’s that she wanted to talk to him.

She gestured toward a chair when he walked into her office. She sat in the chair next to him, then half rose and leaned toward him. “Are you sure you don’t want to see a doctor about those bruises and swelling? I think you should.”

“Nah. It only hurts when I laugh.”

Actually, the cops had taken him to the hospital right away. And he’d had two teeth knocked out on the left side and others felt loose, so he had a dentist appointment for the next day. Until then, the hospital’s pain medicine numbed him enough that he could think of other priorities, and sometimes he could see colors swirling on the walls.

She sat back in her chair, shaking her head.

“So, what’s this meeting about?” He was in no mood for social niceties, not even with his boss. “Did you kill my alligator-lady column?”

“Calm down. Though I can see that’s difficult for you right now. But knowing your interest in Philip VanSecken, I wanted you to hear the news first from me.”

Zach straightened in his chair. “Oh?”

“I hold you at least part responsible, by the way, but he’s a big boy, and it’s his decision.” She frowned. “I suppose I can’t blame you.” She said that in a tone implying she wished she could.

“What horrible thing did he do? Sell our newspaper secrets to the local TV stations?”

“He told me he’s decided to return to the Washington Bureau. He transferred some vacation days when he came here, and he said he needs to use them to complete some unfinished business. So Friday was his last day here.”

Zach’s one good eye widened. “Unfinished business? Is that what he said?”

She frowned. “Yes, I think those are the words he used.”

Zach stood up. “I’ve got to go. Thanks for the tip.”

“Tip? That wasn’t a tip! I simply told you he’d resigned.” Zach was already halfway to the door. “Where are you going?”

“I think he’s leaving because his four-man militia is sitting in Metro Detention Center. No reason to stay here anymore. He killed voodoo man, and now he’s going to kill Nell.”

“What are you talking about? Who’s Nell? Come back here.”

She was too late. He waved his cowboy hat at her and ran out the door.

* * *

Detective Foster interrupted a meeting to take the phone call. He'd never met Susan Treeple, but he knew she was the newspaper's editor. There were some callers he would always take, and she was one.

She told him she was worried because Zach had just left her office acting strangely. "Well, not strange for him, but nevertheless."

"Did he say where he was going?" Foster felt a tingle of anticipation. Zach had eluded the Albuquerque Police Department all afternoon. Maybe Susan Treeple could help bring the search to an end.

"He accused our managing editor of killing that voodoo man. And he said he feared that some woman named Nell would be next. No one around here knows who Nell is. Do you?"

"Yes, I do," the detective said.

* * *

Zach pulled his car over to the curb next to the park where he'd learned Nell liked to go. It was near sunset at eight o'clock and the fifth time he'd driven to the park today. He saw a familiar-looking woman sitting at a picnic table near multicolored flowerbeds. The last minutes of bright sunlight slanted between two buildings on the opposite side of the street, illuminating her and the flowers. He rechecked three photographs in his car. It was Nell.

He noticed a man at a nearby table watching him as he walked toward her. But at least the man wasn't VanSecken or any of the four hoodlums he'd been tangling with.

She looked toward him, curious. He knew she was sixty. She was dressed in pressed slacks with a clean blouse and a light blue sweater. He liked the scent of lavender, but he didn't know if it was coming from her or the flowers around her. She didn't look like any

homeless person he'd ever seen.

“Hello, Nell, er, Eleanor,” he said, stopping a few feet away from her. “I’m Zach Vernon. I’m a reporter, a columnist really, with the *Albuquerque Sun*.”

“You can call me Nell. Everyone else does. And I recognize your face from your column, but just barely. Are you all right, Mr. Vernon? You look as if you’ve been in a bar brawl.”

“Something like that.” He turned the most swollen side of his face toward her as if it were a badge of honor. “I’ve been trying to find you for almost two weeks, but it hasn’t been easy. No one knows where you are because you’re homeless.”

She looked relaxed among the flowers. “You’re overselling me. I was homeless just for a while. I couldn’t get a bed at the shelter for women the first night, and I had only twenty dollars on me, so I was in a fix. But I met a homeless woman, and she found us a nice hidden spot in this park for us to sleep. It was a warm, dry night, so that was lucky.”

Her face seemed to light up with a big smile and raised eyebrows. “What a marvelous adventure that was. I gave her half my money. I’ve been looking for her but haven’t seen her since.”

“What are you doing in Albuquerque?”

“After I lost re-election—.” She paused. “You know I used to be in Congress, right?”

He nodded. “I’ve done a lot of research on you.”

“Yes. Well, I lost re-election even though I spent all my own money trying not to lose. I was broke. So I came here last January to take care of my sister, Jane, who lived alone and had cancer. I didn’t realize she had this jerk of an old boyfriend who was a horse’s hind end. Excuse my language. She willed everything to him. After she died a couple weeks ago, and I spent all the money I had left on her funeral, the jerk evicted me.

I was so mad, I marched out with just a suitcase and that twenty dollars. I was then homeless.”

“Then you went to the women’s homeless shelter.”

“After the night with the homeless woman. I should say the other homeless woman.” She laughed lightly. “I won’t receive my pension check until tomorrow, so I was still broke. I lived at the shelter for a week until—.” She interrupted herself again. “You might have saved my life, do you know that, Mr. Vernon?”

His puzzled expression answered for him.

“That’s right. I’d served on the House Select Committee on Crime. We’d heard that a white supremacy group was planning to establish a cell and push drugs in Albuquerque, and we also knew it had hired an assassin in the past who practiced voodoo in Haiti. I read your column several days ago about just such a man and feared he might be after me. So I checked out of the women’s shelter, and one of the staffers let me stay at her house. But when I read later that the voodoo doctor had been murdered, I decided staying at her house was too dangerous for her. I’m going to need to send the shelter some big donations when I get back on my feet.”

“I wish you’d gone to the police.”

“Oh, I did, after I heard about the voodoo man’s body being found last Friday. I met with a Detective Carl Foster. I told him my committee had heard rumors that the white supremacy leader was a man we knew as Bill Ramsey.”

Zach grimaced. He slid a hand down his cheek on the somewhat uninjured side of his face. “Eddie and I told Foster about VanSecken, but we never mentioned he was also Bill Ramsey.”

“VanSecken?”

“That’s an alias for Bill Ramsey. Or maybe it’s the other way around. But he’s here in Albuquerque. I think he killed the voodoo man because the guy brought attention to his presence by letting me interview him. My fear is that, before Ramsey-VanSecken leaves town, he’s looking for you just as I have been.”

“I’ve been worried about that, too.”

“Where are you staying now?”

“Detective Foster has been very kind. What a nice young man. He lent me some money so I could rent a room until my pension check arrives tomorrow. He even offered me police protection, but I told him that wasn’t necessary.”

“Not necessary, huh? So who’s that guy at the other table who keeps watching us?”

“He’s like my last husband.” She smiled. “He always seems to be hanging around.”

“Looks like a cop keeping an eye on you.”

She picked up where she’d left off. “My brother is supposed to arrive tomorrow. He’s been out of the country. We’ll drive to his home in Denver after I pick up my pension check at my sister’s old house.”

“When?”

“I told my sister’s jerk boyfriend that I’d pick up my check at ten tomorrow morning. The mail will be at her old house by then.”

“Come on,” Zach said, noticing the light dimming into dusk in the park. “I’ll buy you dinner. Wave to the plainclothes cop at the table. I’ll buy for him, too. I have an idea I want to discuss with both of you.”

That’s when he noticed Foster stepping out of an unmarked police car that had just parked along the street. He realized the plainclothes cop must have called Foster to let him know the missing newspaperman had been found.

All the way to the restaurant, Zach fretted about how he could get away with putting four meals on his expense account.

* * *

Philip VanSecken parked across the street Tuesday morning so he could see the house. The mailman had already come. The man at the house had told him yesterday that Nell would show up at ten. He still had fifteen minutes.

A rap on his passenger side window startled him. He was even more surprised to see Zach Vernon looking in at him. VanSecken reached for the pistol beside his left leg and rolled down the window.

“Hi, Philip. What are you doing in this neighborhood?”

“Shut up and get in the car.”

“I thought we could just talk. Nell said she was going to pick up her mail at ten. I thought you might be here to greet her, so to speak.”

VanSecken leveled the pistol at Zach. “I said, get in the car.”

“Well, since you put it that way.”

Zach opened the door and slid onto the seat. He noticed that VanSecken’s gun hand was steady. The pistol terrified him as it pointed toward him with its barrel ending in a silencer. But he took a deep breath, adjusted his cowboy hat and glasses, and tried to look unfazed. His swollen eye itched. How ironic, he thought, that his eye was starting to heal just when VanSecken might shoot him.

“I was just bluffing before in the newsroom. But I know all about you now.”

“What do you know?” VanSecken’s face tightened into a grim look.

“For starters, should I call you Philip VanSecken or Bill Ramsey? I know you hired the voodoo man to kill an ex-congresswoman because she knew too much. Then you

killed the assassin yourself because he hadn't found Nell and, even worse, he'd let me write about him. You've decided to leave town because your four Aryan Patriot Militia henchmen are all behind bars. But first you want to kill Nell to tidy up before you disappear. How am I doing so far?"

"You said in the newsroom that the voodoo master had talked about me."

"I was just kidding around."

The grimness on VanSecken's face turned nasty. "I had to kill him. He planned to retire after this last job and set up a voodoo practice in Albuquerque. He said if palm readers and psychics could make a living here, he could, too." VanSecken shook his head. "He was supposed to make Nell's death look like an accident. I couldn't have someone with her knowledge hanging around."

"You still have loose ends, even after you kill her. Those four guys in the lockup. They know you and your plans."

VanSecken raised the pistol higher to aim at Zach's face. "They've never met me. We do all our business by phone. They just get their money and follow orders. Those idiots are on their own now. And they don't know anything. But I did enjoy listening over the phone to them beating you up. You look good, by the way."

"So you're planning to shoot Nell when she shows up here?"

"That's right. And you. The operation is blown and there's no need for subtlety any more. Your turn is coming up right now. I'll dump your carcass once we're out of town."

"You might not want to shoot me."

"I can't imagine why not. I'd enjoy it."

The cell phone in Zach's vest pocket started ringing with the William Tell Overture. He looked at VanSecken. "I think that's for you," he said.

VanSecken looked confused. He pulled the phone out of Zach's vest pocket. "Who's this?" His hands began trembling.

Zach could overhear Detective Foster telling VanSecken that a police sniper had him in his sights. VanSecken needed to throw his pistol out of the car's window or he would be dead.

VanSecken flinched. He tossed the gun onto the pavement and stared through the windshield.

Zach opened his door and hopped out of the car. It made him nervous to think about how many guns were zeroed in on it. He leaned through the open window. "You should have asked if I was wearing a wire. The police have your confession, and now they've got you. It cost me two teeth, but I'll have a terrific column for Friday."

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From the author:

I hope you enjoyed this story. If you have any questions or comments about it, you are welcome to contact me by going to my author's website at <http://dennisherrick.com>, where you will find my current email address, bio, and other writing projects.

Discover some of my other short stories and books on that website as well, including:

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- [Missing](#) (2,450 words, winner of the 2010 Society of Southwestern Authors Writing Contest and published in *Story Teller* magazine.) A Pueblo elder with cancer chooses to live out his final days in the mountains instead of a hospital.
- [Spirit Journey](#) (5,900 words, published in the *Wapsipinicon Almanac* literary magazine) Based in Iowa, the story deals with today's illicit trade in Indian artifacts looted from Indian and public lands.
- [Hunting Season](#) (2,500 words, winner of the 2004 Tony Hillerman Mystery Writing Contest and published in *Cowboys and Indians* magazine.) Was the Pueblo hunter's death an accident or was it murder?
- [Woman Without a Name](#) (8,000 words) The refurbishment of the B61 nuclear bomb draws spies to Los Alamos, New Mexico. When a National Security Agent is killed, a woman NSA agent is sent to learn what happened and to stop nuclear secrets from being stolen.
- [To Steal What Is Sacred](#) (3,950 words) An ancient katsina mask sacred to the Puebloan religion is stolen from a museum. An Albuquerque police detective from the Acoma tribe is assigned in this short story mystery to find the person who killed a museum guard in the robbery and took the mask.
- [Alien Visitors](#) (1,800 words) Here's one scenario on how the first encounter between humans and aliens from another planet could turn out.
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BOOKS (forthcoming)

- ***Esteban: The African Slave Who Explored America*** (in-progress nonfiction) The true adventures of an African slave who crossed the continent in a 1528-1536 odyssey, and who guided the first Spanish exploration north into Arizona and New Mexico in 1539.

BOOKS (published)

- [Winter of the Metal People: The untold story of America's first Indian war](#) (historical novel) America's first Indian War was Coronado's Tiguex War of 1540-41. The novel adds the Puebloan point of view for the first time to the traditional conquistador accounts. It follows a young Pueblo warrior who reluctantly takes leadership of his people in a time of crisis, overcoming self-doubt to lead Puebloans in successful guerilla warfare against Spanish conquistadors and their Aztec allies. Available as an e-book or paperback.
- [A Brother's Cold Case](#) (mystery novel) When the murder of Andy Cornell's brother is still unsolved after two and a half years, Andy enters the hidden worlds of cartel violence, street people, and Pueblo secrets to find justice. To be published in late 2014 by a traditional publisher.
- [Farewell to the Master](#) (Reprint of the 1940 sci-fi first-contact novel by Harry Bates) This annotated version includes my new introduction and a list of more than 200 first-contact novels, novellas, and short stories. This is available as a paperback or as an e-book.
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- [For Your Guest Bedroom: Collected Stories](#) (245 pages) Perfect for putting in your guest bedroom, this book is a collection of short stories that your friends can read a little at a time. In the book they'll meet detectives, American Indians, heroes, villains, and ordinary people striving to solve life's problems. Paperback only.

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—Dennis Herrick