

Dick Slays the Dragons

A Dick Avery Adventure Story

Foreword

Sometimes those who protect and serve their nation are confronted with the most despicable acts imaginable. That's the sordid story in this instance. A conspiracy by cynical, disloyal individuals working in and out of the U.S. State Department threatened to upset the fragile balance of military power in the Far East. Those actions could trigger a nuclear conflict which America couldn't avoid because an important ally's very survival was at stake.

Both military zealots and corrupt government officials plotted to arm Japan with nuclear weapons. They were determined to defend her soil and honor against potential aggressors in the region, most notably North Korea and the Peoples Republic of China. The historic enmity between the Land of the Rising Sun and those countries was deep and longstanding. If either nation learned of the conspirators' plans, one or both might initiate a preemptive, first-strike attack on Japan.

The act would invariably force the United States into a devastating conflict that could quickly spiral out of control. And it would result in a regional conflagration, an unimaginable Armageddon, with no winners. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would seem like child's play by comparison.

The cabal had operated in secrecy and with impunity until the death of a young, special agent of the Diplomatic Security Service. But his untimely and unseemly death now caused a tremendous uproar in Main State and powerful people were asking embarrassing questions of the bureaucrats responsible for investigating the incident.

Dick Avery represented the best hope for tracking down those responsible for the diabolical scheme. His recall to active duty to investigate the agent's death was simply the opening salvo in unraveling a nefarious plot involving murder, foreign intrigue and betrayal. His investigation would haunt his waking hours until the case was solved and the world safe again from those ruthless extremists who would do it harm.

Please join me as I travel the world on behalf of the Diplomatic Security Service and uphold truth, justice and the American way!

Very truly yours,

Richard M. Avery III

Special Agent (retired)
Diplomatic Security Service
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A Breakneck Send-Off

Chapter 1

Hiro Fujimoto thought the assignment was a bit demeaning given his seniority as a Chief Inspector. Then again, maybe his bosses were simply doing him a favor by throwing a piece of scutwork his way, knowing he planned to retire early from the Osaka Prefectural Police in just three months. Perhaps go easy on the old guy, he mused. Regardless, his task was the boring, loose surveillance of a low-ranking Yakuza member. No matter. He was simply serving out his time. After all, he reminded himself, the pay was the same. Hell, he'd go back to directing city traffic if it meant saving his pension!

His target was one Goro Ishino, a long time Yakuza enforcer for the crime organization. He was a big bruiser who could be easily spotted in a crowd. That was the only positive thing Hiro could say about the guy. He had a reputation for violence, earning his spurs in the particular discipline many times over according to his rap sheet. But the reason for the surveillance had never been revealed to him. Hush, hush stuff and he apparently had no need to know. Don't ask was all he was told about the case.

It was the fourth day into the job and Hiro was getting antsy since Ishiro hadn't done anything to raise suspicions or eyebrows about his activities, illicit ones in particular. He didn't seem to have a set pattern of activity. He stopped at some small businesses, mom and pop shops mostly, and Hiro suspected he was collecting extortion money; just a routine, business practice for the Yakuza. The outfit had also taken over legitimate businesses so that may have been the reason for the seemingly random visits. The only slightly unusual stop was at the Osaka Central Post Office where he collected a package and delivered it to a high-tech company on the outskirts of the city. He dutifully noted all of Ishiro's comings and goings. Maybe his bosses could make some sense of them. But he certainly couldn't since they all appeared totally innocent on the face of things.

Well this was a change of pace, Hiro thought. Ishiro had just entered a midrise apartment building and it wasn't the one where he lived. Hum, interesting, but not damnable. He followed his quarry up the flights of stairs, making sure he couldn't be seen. As he turned a corner on the fourth floor, Ishiro roughly grabbed him from behind and put him in a headlock. He was a strong bastard and Hiro couldn't budge from the hold. Perhaps he hadn't been so cautious after all. He'd

ignored the basic tradecraft rules of his profession and now was paying the price for his lack of diligence and outright stupidity. Perhaps it was time to retire after all, he admonished himself.

“So my friend, you have the smell of a cop. Why have you been following me the past few days? Why am I of interest to you?”

Hiro refused to say anything other than confirming he was a police officer and to immediately release him or face arrest. It was merely a bit of cheeky bravado on his part that didn't dissuade his captor one bit.

And Ishiro laughed at the statement.

“That's funny! I could care less about your hollow threats. So tell me what you're doing sniffing my scent like a bitch in heat.” Hiro stayed silent, refusing to cooperate with the thug.

“Oh, the strong, silent type, I see. No worries, my friend.”

With that, Ishiro brutally twisted Hiro's head to the left, snapping his neck in one quick move.

He then tossed the body down the stairs, just another accidental slip and fall. He was convinced the coroner would conclude the same.

Hiro Fujimoto's dream of early retirement had just faded like his life.

Most Offensive Hang-Up

Chapter 2

The ringing of my alarm clock jarred me awake from my wine-induced sleep. By its glowing face, I saw it was 3:15 a.m. and wondered why I had set it for such an ungodly hour. I wasn't employed anymore and didn't have a schedule or life so I usually slept-in. I hit the snooze button, but the damn thing wouldn't shut up! I then realized it was the phone. The caller was Jersey Briggs, my moneyman and sometimes friend. It turned out that he didn't want to chat so it wasn't a sociable call by any means. With my passive-aggressive persona, I'd later chide him for his rude manners. Of course, that would only be after I'd cleaned-up my own issues with life's little civilities. And time was alarmingly on his side.

“Richard, get your sorry butt out of bed! I have some work to throw your way. Are you fairly sober? I hope so because I need you to get down to Main State ASAP or sooner. We have a little problem on our hands and the media will be all over this one like stink on shit. You're good at cleaning up the stuff and I damn well know you need the money. So my man-child put on your rubber hip boots. You're going to need them this time.”

Jersey had such a colorful way with words if you were drawn to redundant shades of brown. With him, everything came down to PR concerns, bureaucratic spin and protecting his career and backside. His penchant for using scatological allusions came in a close second. He was the Director of Investigations and Counterintelligence for the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service; the same position I held until retiring a few years ago. His overly dramatic statements translated into another plea for help: someone to bail him out of another bureaucratic jam. That also meant he needed a convenient scapegoat if things went to shit as he might crudely say. Jeez, I'd just volunteered to step into the brown stuff again! Then again, I'd never had any difficulty putting my foot down when it came to easy money.

Nonetheless, I was his erstwhile whipping and/or errand boy depending on circumstances. Both were painful, offensive experiences at my age. Fortunately, Butt Boy and Stud Bitch were politically incorrect terms and no longer used in the department's lexicon of demeaning words describing those unlucky enough to carry Jersey's water. My back now ached under the weight of the yoke of those many, large buckets filled to the brim. I was a thoroughly stooped figure at this point, but I rarely conquered. Regardless, that was how things worked in

this particular biz. There was simply no rest or respect for the wicked or one very weary Gunga Din who just happened to be expendable to the organization he'd faithfully served for more than twenty years. Okay, so much for camaraderie and collegiality these days.

I lit up a Marlboro waiting for my mind to clear, managing to catch most of what Jersey was saying. By the way, I'd always smoked before being screwed-over hard. Yeah, I recognized it was a vicious habit. The rough sex part I meant.

"One of our guys is dead and he didn't go out in style by the sounds of it. His name was Joey Hernandez, an agent assigned to DSS's Internal Affairs Unit. Jeez, the big turds are really going to hit the fan this time!" Jersey dramatically and distastefully asserted.

"His body was found in one of the men's room stalls on the 7th floor of the building. Richard, it looks like he committed suicide. Get down there and tell me what happened so I can brief the big suits at the opening of business. We don't have jurisdiction so you'll serve in a liaison capacity with the locals. God forbid the FBI butts-in. They shouldn't be involved in the case, but they're a nosy bunch and you can never be certain."

"As of now, you're back on the payroll with the usual perks that go along with the job," he snickered just to annoy me.

"Get going and meet me in my office no later than 7:30 a.m. I've got to put together a press piece for the department's spokesperson. The public affairs folks are going to be up my ass until I've thrown a bone to the feral newshounds from Hell. You remember how the drill works. If I don't come up with some credible, edible pap, I'll be the one getting boned by the big bosses. Unlike some Foreign Service types, I don't enjoy the experience one damn bit! I've had my stool impolitely pushed in once too often, thank you very much."

"Richard, are you awake and getting dressed? Get moving because we don't have much time."

"Yes sir, ten bags full and how much higher can I jump for you?" I sarcastically replied. I had my step and fetch it routine down pat by now.

I would've too because Jersey was right. I needed the money since I hadn't supped recently at the department's generous trough. I admitted to being a needy, hungry whore with no sense of propriety. The perfect candidate for the shit jobs that Jersey tossed my way. By the way, that was how Jersey referred to the meager bits of largesse that I'd call dangerous assignments. He liked to rub my nose in them from time-to-time.

Jersey responded to my little pimp by hanging-up on me. That was how colleagues and friends often bonded in a decidedly undiplomatic Diplomatic Security Service.

Traffic on interstate 66 was almost nonexistent at this hour and I quickly drove the 20 miles to D.C. Luckily, the highway's HOV restrictions weren't in effect so I didn't have to take the George Washington Parkway instead. Properly speaking, my destination wasn't Main State. It was the Harry S. Truman Building, the headquarters for the U.S. Department of State. The name was conferred on the edifice in 2000, much before I retired and, like Jersey, I still referred to the place as Main State out of old habit and just plain bullheadedness. Mother State was a close second.

I easily entered the D Street garage entrance by flashing my retiree identification to the security guard on duty. She looked tired and bored, but still dutifully entered my name and tag number on her clipboard. Parking was also a breeze and I found a spot close to one of the several elevator banks. Next to the Pentagon and Ronald Reagan Building, Main State was the largest building in the Washington, D.C. region by square footage. Several wings had been added to the original structure over the years and one could easily get confused and lost. Maybe that was what happened to Joey Hernandez on some personal level. Some bread crumbs and antidepressants might have helped him find his way out of his emotional maze. In any case, investigating suicides was always sorely depressing for those who protect and serve.

I hit the button for the 7th floor and waited. The 7th floor was Valhalla, the Holy of Holies, where the U.S. Secretary of State and other powerful luminaries reigned during business hours. Appropriately, it was the top office floor in the building, but there was a partial floor above that housed a magnificent ballroom and diplomatic reception rooms decorated and furnished with antique Americana donated by wealthy patrons over the years.

I exited and expected to be greeted by a mob of detectives, medical personnel and straphangers of various stripes. However, that wasn't the case. I walked the corridors for several minutes before I saw the gaggle of people that I earlier expected. Outside a restroom were uniformed officers of both the State Department's Protective Services Division and D.C. Metropolitan Police Department along with several, unidentified others wearing dark suits. The ubiquitous, yellow crime scene tape was draped across the hallway forcing me to stop and identify myself.

However, crime was a bit of a misnomer under the circumstances. Historically, suicide had been considered a felony offense in virtually every jurisdiction in the country. But with time and commonsense, the statutes had gradually been repealed. Assisted suicide by euthanasia or homicide was a different matter altogether. The authorities had no sense of humor when it came to such things.

“My name’s Dick Avery and a special agent with the Diplomatic Security Service. I’ve been assigned as the liaison officer for the State Department for the incident,” I spoke authoritatively while holding up my identification card for the uniformed officer to see.

“Wait here and I’ll check to see if you’re authorized admittance to the scene,” the officer gruffly ordered.

I really didn’t have a set of DSS Special Agent credentials with a gold shield because Jersey didn’t trust me. He thought I’d improperly use them to get out of speeding tickets and other youthful indiscretions. Of course, he was absolutely right.

“Okay, you’re good to go Mr. Avery. Someone high-up in the food chain must’ve vouched for your bona fides.”

That someone must have been Jersey Briggs. It seemed I was now a bona fide agent in good standing for the moment; at least in someone’s eyes. His confidence in me and my investigative abilities would surely be tested at some point. If so, I’d likely never get those official box tops with the shiny badge that I coveted so much. *Then again, maybe I could if I kept badgering him*, I mentally and poorly punned. I was gamely and lamely trying to bolster my spirits for what I was about to see. By past events and experience, I knew it’d be a grim and gruesome scene. Moreover, it would be sad to see a colleague end his life in such a way. We all deserved a better outcome in this cosmic drama called life.

I was spot-on in my assumption. The death scene was indeed a painful, pathetic sight to absorb. Joey Hernandez’s body hadn’t yet been removed from the stall by the medical examiner’s staff. It hung limply from the coat hook affixed to the back of the metal door. The belt around Joey’s neck was attached to the hook and attested to the way he died. His trousers and boxer shorts were clumped at his ankles and his bare knees almost touched the floor. Joey’s pale face was contorted in agony and his eyes bulged from their sockets. The tongue grotesquely protruded from his slack, open mouth. *Ecce Homo!* I thought, jeez, what a horrible way to die.

I'd introduced myself to Fred Grant, a D.C. assistant medical examiner, and Barry McMullen, a D.C. homicide detective who ironically worked the graveyard shift.

"Poor bastard," I spoke to no one in particular. "That's a damn tough way to die. Most of us swallow our gun or accelerate the old minivan into a concrete barrier without bothering to latch the seat belt."

"Yeah, it is, there's no doubt about it. When people are down on life and severely depressed they're not thinking clearly to begin with and do strange things to end their lives. I've seen plenty in the past 25 years," Fred mentioned. "Sadder yet are the attempts that fail for one reason or another. Often, a person ends up in a vegetative state requiring lifetime care and that's a double tragedy for the family."

"Avery, I think your guy is married with a couple a young kids based on the photos I found in his wallet. This is going to go down hard on the family. I've got to make the notifications and I'm not looking forward to it. That's the very worst thing about this job; dealing with the living," Barry McMullen spoke for the first time since we shook hands.

"I know I'd find that task very difficult to do under the circumstances," I responded. "A war death or fatal traffic accident is tough enough, but telling someone that a loved one committed suicide really sucks. The doubts, questions and anguish, and perhaps the guilt, must be overwhelming for the relatives of the deceased."

I then turned to Fred and asked: "Okay doc, tell me what happened. It looks like a straightforward suicide to me, but I'm not the expert."

"I think your medical and legal assumptions are correct in this instance. By all appearances, Mr. Hernandez asphyxiated or suffocated to death, if you prefer. The subconjunctival hemorrhaging, the broken blood vessels in the eyes, speak directly to the medical event. His skin coloration is wholly consistent with asphyxiation as well. My reading of the rectal thermometer suggests his approximate time of death to be 9 p.m. last night. The extent of rigor mortis supports that timeframe."

"The means of death are obvious. He placed his belt around his neck and attached it to the coat hook. He then had to sit or squat down because of the short distance between the hook and floor. Before he hung himself, he puked his guts by the looks of the vomit in the toilet bowl. He must have been so distraught about what he was about to do that he upchucked. Extreme

anxiety can do that and it seems to me he'd recently eaten, given the amount of the stuff. We'll obviously collect a sample and send it to the lab for testing."

"I do find a couple of things unusual, but not inconsistent with my tentative findings. First, his boxer shorts had fallen to his ankles along with the trousers. The trousers I understand because they weren't any longer held up by his belt. It's his underpants I don't get. The second is the involuntary bowel movement he also experienced. Such activity is certainly not rare, but a bit unusual, statistically speaking. In the body's death throes such things do happen. However, involuntary bladder release is much more common in these situations. But uncontrollable panic and extreme stress just before death may have been the cause. In any case, it doesn't change my mind or opinion. Given the profile and circumstances of Mr. Hernandez's death, I'm sure my boss will order a postmortem exam that will also include a full toxicology workup. We need to get him on the table for a proper autopsy and then we'll have a definitive conclusion with an official cause of death."

Jeez, Jersey would love the detail about the BM in Joey's pants since he was always eager to carry the latest poop to his superiors in the DSS. This event would only add to his credibility for such scoops. He was the outfit's town crier for all things excremental, incidental or self-aggrandizing and he reveled in the role. For Christ's sake, what an anally-obsessed asshole! God, I was now beginning to talk like him! That was a scary and unnerving thought. Regardless, he was still my iffy friend, colleague and employer of last resort.

"Barry, what's your take on this?" I asked.

I wanted the opinion of another professional investigator as well as the medical take. Both expert views were important to draw a solid conclusion as to what had transpired or expired in this instance.

"I think it looks like a routine, run-of-the-mill suicide despite the deceased's position with the federal government and where it took place. Those things do add to the mystique, but don't alter my opinion that it's just another self-inflicted death by a badly depressed person. It's sad, but true. There wasn't a suicide note, but that's not significant. Roughly eighty percent of those who commit suicide don't leave a note."

"The other thing is the message on the restroom door that presumably Mr. Hernandez wrote so no one would interrupt him. It was hand printed in ink on a paper towel. Here it is."

Barry held up the hand towel in his gloved hands for me to see. It read: *Out of Order*. In a sense, the message was ironic and fitting. Joey Hernandez was mentally out of order too, but now permanently and forever.

“It’s not particularly significant except he had the presence of mind to write it in the first place. Many suicides wouldn’t have bothered and might even have a subconscious desire to be stopped from carrying out the act. Regardless, their states of mind and judgments are hard to determine after the fact. The hand towel was wedged into the entrance door to dissuade anyone from entering. One of the building’s cleaners found it and the body during his regular rounds about 1:30 this morning and immediately called security.”

“Here’s one more thing that’s a little puzzling: the contusions on the small of the back. Avery, come take a look so you’ll understand what I’m talking about. The doc noticed them as well, but forgot to mention them to you.”

Barry then pulled up the tail of Joey’s blue, oxford shirt and white, cotton undershirt to show me the bruises. By the angle, I could see three purplish discolorations located over his kidneys.

“Okay, what are they exactly and what do they mean?” I asked. I noticed Joey’s suit jacket was rolled-up and residing behind the stall’s commode.

This time, the doc responded.

“The bruising may very well be consistent with the body thrashing around and hitting the back of the stall door as Joey involuntarily struggled just before he died. The postmortem lividity may play a role in the discolorations we see on the body as well. But I’m not sure because he died in a more-or-less upright position. As you can easily see, the blood has already pooled to his lower extremities, just gravity at work. Had he expired in a prone or supine position, it would be easier to make a determination. More likely, the death throes probably caused the contusions, but again I can’t be certain without a full examination of the deceased.”

“Are we all in tentative agreement that Joey’s death was a straightforward suicide? I need to report to my master in about an hour. I want to make sure we’re all on board with the cause of death: by his own hand and not foul play. Is that correct?” I asked Fred and Barry.

“Being a good bureaucrat, I would weasel-word that statement a bit and simply say that his death appears to be a suicide, pending the outcome of the autopsy for a definitive conclusion. Only my office can issue a death certificate stating the cause of a death in the District. Feds or no

feds, it's up to the D.C. Medical Examiner to make the official determination," Fred spoke in his officious voice.

The turf card had just been played, but no one argued the point since he was absolutely correct in what he'd just asserted. The ME was unquestionably the man in such matters.

"No argument here," I replied for the sake of equanimity. "I just want to tell my boss the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God." I thought invoking God's name might underscore my seriousness. But truthfully, I wasn't so sure my new friends appreciated my quirky sense of humor so I quickly changed the subject.

"By the way, did you already check for personal belongings?" this time addressing Barry.

"Yeah, I sure did, but there wasn't anything unusual; a wallet with photos and the usual personal detritus, a State Department ID card, his DSS credentials, some loose change, a comb and the ubiquitous pocket lint, that's it. I'll fax you a copy of the inventory if you want, but I don't think I missed anything. Oh, there's something else you should know about. The techies did a thorough grid search of the entire restroom and came up empty-handed. They also did walkabouts of the surrounding rooms and corridors just for giggles. Again, zero, zilch, nada in terms of finding anything related to our incident."

I thanked Barry and Fred and gave both my business card and they reciprocated by giving me theirs. Actually, I did want a copy of the personal effects inventory, the scene photos, autopsy report and everything else I could get my hands on. I could be so anal retentive at times, undoubtedly the result of Jersey's strict potty training!

The morgue attendants were beginning to unhook Joey's body as I left. Although I wasn't particularly religious and didn't know the guy, I still said a silent prayer for Joey Hernandez and his family. I was now thoroughly depressed too.

Coffee Klatch at HQ

Chapter 3

By now Jersey would be pacing his office like a caged animal at feeding time. I was surprised he hadn't called me on my cell since I was running a few minutes late. By gosh and by golly, I'd accidently turned the nuisance off. The phone I meant. I knew he would blast me for my lack of telephone etiquette. No matter, I was getting even for his untimely call earlier in the morning. Payback was never a bitch. It was always a Dick as far as I was concerned.

I was heading over the Teddy Roosevelt Bridge into Virginia where the Diplomatic Security Service had its world headquarters. The building itself was not particularly remarkable except for the fact it was located a distance from Main State. That was by devious design and conscious, cynical intent. The DSS organizational hub would never be housed again in Main State if the department's Black Dragons had their way. So far they'd succeeded, in spades, as appropriate to their coloration.

The Black Dragons were senior careerists who ran and controlled everything in the U.S. Department of State. They were a cabal of old boys and girls that had existed from time immemorial to serve themselves first and Uncle Sam only incidentally when it suited their nefarious purposes. Unlike their nominal, political bosses, the dragons were neither elected nor appointed to office. Moreover, they enjoyed the protection of federal employment rules that favored continued tenure in their morally corrupt sinecures. For them, it was all about power, perquisites and shaping U.S. foreign policy to their own ends. By the way, they were firmly entrenched in their bureaucratic bolt-holes either in perpetuity or for eternity, whichever was the longer time period.

The notion that the U.S. Secretary of State and his or her political appointees managed the department and the nation's foreign affairs machinery was patently untrue and absurd. The dragons ran the place, plain and simple. They represented permanence and stability in an otherwise uncertain world. They believed they knew what was best for the nation and wouldn't tolerate outsiders, such as those appointed officials from one administration to the next, to dictate how the State Department would represent the most powerful nation on the planet. In their collective wisdom, the public could sleep soundly knowing that America's security was in the strong, good claws of jingoistic Black Dragons.

I and many others certainly didn't agree, but we were just small fish swimming in a sea of loathsome reptilians called dragons. God, where was Saint George when you really needed him?

But the animus existing between the dragons and the Diplomatic Security Service went back many years. The dragons firmly believed that a robust law enforcement and security agency in its bosom was anathema to a foreign affairs establishment that contended that the world's problems could be solved by old-fashioned diplomacy alone; simply reasonable ladies and gentlemen dealing with their reasonable counterparts abroad.

The advent of international terrorism disabused the dragons of that outdated, quaint notion. The security of things and people overseas became highlighted with each passing terrorist event and the mission of the Diplomatic Security Service became more pressing and prominent as a result. The dragons dug in their claws and tried to stonewall the growth of the Service to fight the real threat as they saw it: the DSS itself. They viewed the terrorism phenomenon as a transitory one that would go away of its own volition. Rather than reducing the department's vulnerabilities to terrorist acts as they should have done in the first place, they twiddled their claws waiting for the unpleasant nuisance to subside. However, things got so bad that the White House and Congress stepped into the fray and, through several damning reviews of the department's security programs and operations, ordered change, accountability and oversight. More to the point, laws were enacted to bolster DSS roles and responsibilities; and, most importantly, authorities. More money to fund security enhancements for diplomatic facilities overseas followed. The dragons resented the interference and feared the loss of control and power.

To get around the problem, they placed their own people in charge of the DSS: sometimes a Black Dragon, but more often a Gray who still needed to mature before fully turning to the dark side. Few, if any, of these leaders had any professional credentials or experience in the fields of law enforcement or security. Membership in the department's exclusive dragons club conveniently and predictably overcame those pesky, professional shortcomings. But their credibility, bona fides, and true motives were always issues with the DSS rank-and-file employees. In truth, the two sides hated each other's guts!

Notwithstanding the Hatfield and McCoy relationship, things were now just hunky-dory between the two, old adversaries. Good bureaucratic fences and geographical separation had

finally made for good neighbors. Fortunately, for both parties, the Diplomatic Security Service headquarters was no longer within spitting distance of Main State. Otherwise, bilateral relations and diplomatic exchanges between the two could have been downright spiteful and messy!

“Richard, do want a cup of Joe? I’ve got a fresh pot brewing if you’re interested.”

“No thanks Jersey, I’ll pass if you don’t mind. I’ve already had my fill of Joe this morning,” I replied to his uncharacteristically polite offer.

Jersey liked to say Joe for coffee. In his vocabulary and world there was no room for wimpy things or people. I couldn’t understand how his wife put up with him. But I had to be fairly respectful in his presence. He authorized my paychecks and periodically employed me to do his dirty work. I guessed those things should earn him some gratitude and latitude in my book.

“So fill me in on the details of Joey’s demise.”

It seemed the pleasantries were over and it was down to describing the deed and helping Jersey craft a puff piece for the department’s public affairs folks.

“Joey’s death was a suicide by all appearances. The ME’s office and the D.C. detective assigned to the case concur in that judgment. But the body will have to be autopsied before there is an official cause of death issued. I think we need to keep that point in mind when you draft the press release and brief the big suits upstairs.”

“Joey hung himself with his belt in one of the 7th floor restrooms. The time of death was pegged at about 9 p.m. last night. He didn’t leave a suicide note, but that’s not unusual according to the authorities. There were a couple of anomalies such as unexplained bruises on the body, but nothing to suggest foul play at this point. The assistant ME said they could have been caused by the thrashing of the body against the stall door during its death throes. Joey also involuntarily pooped his pants.”

I watched Jersey’s reaction to that tidbit, but he didn’t react in one way or another. He must have been mentally composing his briefing to his bosses. It would undoubtedly accentuate the positive; Jersey’s management of the incident.

“I’ve asked the investigating authorities for copies of all their reports and findings. They agreed to do so as a professional courtesy to the department and DSS, but all on the QT. I

promised cover and plausible denial if anything leaks. I'll take the fall as usual if things go sour. That's why I get paid the big bucks, right?"

Jersey chuckled at my statement, but didn't disagree since we both knew the proper order of things between us.

Jersey snapped out his reverie and asked how we could spin things to make Joey's death seem more heroic and less a cowardly act of a desperate person. This was classic Jersey at work: play-down any negative connotations by stretching the truth, except sometimes he had a tendency to push the envelope too far in the wrong direction. An agent suicide wouldn't reflect well on the service or the department. It was just too damn dreary and embarrassing. Moreover, DSS didn't like to acknowledge that its employees were human. That didn't fit well with the outfit's macho image that it tried its best to promote within the department and elsewhere. It often believed in its own propaganda at times like this.

"Okay, here are the takeaway points for my brief with the bosses. Let me know what you think. I know you will regardless."

"I took decisive and immediate action when notified by the DSS Command Center that one of our own was dead. Wait, scratch that. I'll use the bureaucratic we and not I instead. That way I can show I'm an inclusive team player. I want to project that I think about the organization on a collective level and not just a personal one. I need to keep my role and ego out of this, at least directly, because the big dogs really eat that stuff up. It will also subtly draw them into a stakeholder position in this drama. If things go bad, I didn't goof-up, we did. Yeah, I like that. That'll minimize most of the possible blowback on me."

I couldn't help but silently laugh at Jersey's thought process and chutzpah. I'd seen him spin bullshit into gold on more than one occasion. He was actually very good at it.

"Then I, I mean we, pushed-out calls and text messages throughout the chain-of-command so the seniors wouldn't get caught flatfooted when they walked into the building this morning. They probably notified their masters in turn, but that's not my concern or worry. It's their responsibility to pass things up the chain of wisdom and not mine."

Jeez, Jersey was on a roll and doing what he knew best: surviving and avoiding any criticism of his performance. I especially liked his comment about the seniors not getting caught flatfooted though. That was terribly ironic since they were all federal cops or flatfoots. The organization also occasionally employed a Dick as well.

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