

April At The Antique Alley
A Xara Smith Mystery By Bill McGrath
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CHAPTER-01.

My birthday is the twenty-fifth of April, and what Jill suggested my birthday present to myself should be was to refurnish my house. She and I had searched online, then through several catalogs, and then in person at many new furniture stores but still had not found anything decent that I might possibly be able to afford. The furniture was either nice, or affordable, but definitely not both. It was for that reason that Jill and I found ourselves in the uptown area of nearby Dallas which is populated by many used furniture stores.

Right there on Routh street is a small knot of businesses in an old part of town that the locals call the Antique Alley but I had my doubts that everything here was actually old enough to qualify as a real antique. On the up side though we had found several old pieces that were very nice and quite affordable. Of course each piece needed a little TLC first, and I never was exactly a craft person. Jill though had convinced me that we should buy a couple of pieces, haul them back to my house/office in Irving, Texas, and see how much fun we could have refinishing them.

My name is Xara Smith and I will be turning thirty-one later this month. I run my own business which is a detective agency specializing in discrete investigations. At first owning my own business was a struggle but I had completed a rather lucrative case earlier this year so the business was doing better. In any case I much prefer being my own boss to working for someone else. I am my only real employee but my friend Jill Stepho has weaseled her way into my last two cases so I guess it is fair to call her my partner. I had just come off three tough cases in a row and was now looking forward to a couple of weeks where I did

nothing but work on refurbishing my abode while I waited patiently to get a year older.

Apparently Jill and I were serious though about antique shopping because we had earlier that week rented a storage unit near my home where we would deposit the treasures we bought this week-end so they would have a place to gather dust until we actually started their refinishing process. We also had arranged to transport our finds as we were not currently riding in my six year old Taurus nor Jill's two year old Beetle. We were, in fact, stylishly motoring around downtown Dallas in an orange and white rented truck which was hard to drive and even harder to park, but it would be just perfect if we found any furniture.

It was not yet desperation time but it was getting closer by the minute. It was three in the afternoon on this beautiful April Saturday and we had been at it for nearly four hours without buying a single thing. Should we end this day without a truck load of old furniture our plan would continue tomorrow, Sunday, at the huge local flea market called "Trader's Village" in Arlington which is a good sized suburb just west of Dallas. Jill had planned the week-end. She saw nothing wrong with hitting the antique stores on Saturday and the flea market on Sunday. I was in favor of our alternate plan which was that we would buy a truck full of goodies today and spend all Sunday in my hot tub which was only two months old and I still hopped into every chance I got. Therefore, as I said, it was not yet desperation time, but it was getting close.

We exited a small antique store called "Parnell's Prize Antiques" and walked next door to "Lola's Attic." The entire front wall of the store had a faded mural which depicted a six or seven year old girl dressed in an old fashioned flowery blue dress with matching bonnet. The little Lola in the picture was carrying a huge wicker basket up a narrow stair case to what one would expect to be an attic rich with treasures.

As we walked into the building we were greeted by the real Lola who looked to be about seventy years old. I could tell she was Lola though by the old fashioned flowery blue dress and bonnet which matched the girl in the mural.

The real Lola may have been seventy years old but she was sharp as a tack and appeared to be in perfect health. She was currently haggling prices with a young couple but welcomed us to her store and promised to be available to help us in moments.

I really do not know if she ever successfully negotiated a deal with the young couple or not because Jill and I sort of got lost in the treasures while we were waiting. The place was definitely a used furniture store because the huge store front was arranged in row after narrow row of dusty old furniture but to the obvious furniture that was for sale there had been added little things all over the place making it almost impossible to see each piece of furniture without moving

first dusty old paperback books, or country and western eight track tapes, or kitchen utensils, or vacuums that couldn't possibly be working any more. There were many boxes of bell jars. There were religious statues. There were home made candles. There was yarn and knitting needles. There were art supplies. There were incomplete collections of plates with state maps on them. There was jewelry and purses and I found a really nice old poster of Mae West.

All of this clutter actually made it hard to see the beauty of the furniture we were supposedly shopping for but Jill and I worked our way down three or four rows discovering treasures as we went. There were several pieces we actually considered. It was certain that had either Jill or I made the trip alone we would have filled the rental truck a lot sooner because we spent a good deal of time talking each other out of purchases. For instance, I found a wing backed chair that would have gone very nicely in my bedroom and probably would have bought it had Jill not pointed out the huge rip in the fabric on the back of the chair. Jill found a nice dining set that was much better than the one currently in my dining room, and she probably would have bought it when I pointed out that the chairs were rather small and not at all comfortable to sit in.

Jill and I were actually looking at a brass bed frame arguing about whether it was queen size or king size when Lola walked up to us and introduced herself as "Lola Martin, caretaker of the world's treasures and grand daughter of the original owner." She, pointed out that the bed was in fact queen sized but promised that there was a king sized brass frame in the next row over.

Lola followed us up and down the aisles and our progress actually got slower because Lola had a story for every single piece in her shop and it was obvious she loved each and every treasure dearly. I found myself really enjoying her stories though and quickly an hour went by without us making a single purchase. We were at the back of the store at the end of the last row of furniture and I almost felt cheated that the wonderful woman would not be able to tell us any more stories of her treasures, so, simply to prolong our stay I asked what was behind the door that was hidden there. Lola apologized that it was a small workroom off her loading dock where she kept pieces that she had bought which were not yet show room quality. In other words she had to clean them up a bit before she could sell them. I begged like a little school girl to be shown the prizes the store room hid. I guess we were lucky that there were no other customers currently in the store because Lola sighed and reluctantly took out an old key and unlocked the door.

There must have been about a dozen pieces of furniture in the room but I saw only one. Immediately old memories flooded my brain. I am an only child but my mother was from a family of six girls. Occasionally we would visit Grand-ma and Papa, and inevitably when we did my mother and her sisters and my grand-

mother would gather in the living room to gossip and drink hot tea while Papa and I would sneak away to his den, where we would talk about important things like basketball or space travel while he let me rifle through the many nooks and crannies of his huge old roll top desk. The thing had dozens of visible storage holes and even a couple of hidden areas that I had to earn my way into finding by promising undying love for my grandfather while we chatted and I explored.

There, sitting right on the floor, not covered with other junk, was the exact same model desk my Papa had owned. Without hesitation I asked the price and Lola told me she couldn't possibly sell it because she had not cleaned it up yet. Without much preamble she told me she had purchased it this very morning just after she had opened for business with the other pieces in the room from a man who had pulled up a truck and offered to sell her the lot for a very good price. She had bought it all and had not even really looked it all over yet.

It had been years since I had even thought about either of my grand parents since they had both long ago passed, and here this simple old desk had brought up so many memories. I desperately wanted to explore more deeply the emotions the desk brought to the surface. I also wanted desperately to explore this particular desk and see if it contained the same hidden trick compartments my Grandfather's desk had hidden away.

I begged her to allow me to buy the desk and started sounding a lot like that whiny little girl who had so adored my Papa. Jill quickly pointed out five or six flaws, but eventually Lola and I arrived at a price we could agree on. She never did tell me the amount she had paid for the whole truck load of used furniture, but I handed her one hundred and fifty dollars wondering if she had just made enough on this one desk to cover the entire purchase earlier that day.

She unlocked the door that led to the loading dock and instructed me on how to get my truck back there. Using her skirt she started dusting the desk off a bit and I pleaded with her to leave it as it was.

We three went to the front of the store to do just a bit of paper work. I also snatched the poster of Mae West. Lola hand wrote a bill of sale for the two items and punched the prices of the items into an old cash register. She surprised me next by asking me if I had an e-mail address and when I responded she produced from somewhere a modern computer key board and I watched as she carefully entered all my contact information. Finally, our business done Lola handed Jill and I each one of her cards and asked if we had cards we could give her. Jill did not, but I fished one of mine out. Lola told me the cards were her backup system because she did not yet trust the computer and I watched as she opened an old sewing basket and dropped my card into a slot along with perhaps a thousand other cards chronicling her past sales.

At six feet three inches tall and a healthy but not fat two hundred pounds, I had no trouble at all lifting my end of the desk. My partner Jill though is quite tiny at five feet four and she has to eat thanksgiving dinner to get the scale to top one-ten, so I had to go really slow with her struggling to lift her side of my new roll top. Eventually though we wrestled the massive desk onto the rented truck which we had carefully parked out by the loading dock. When we had the desk successfully loaded into the truck and strapped down so it wouldn't slide around we went in to say our good byes to Lola but she was deep in story telling with another customer when we returned, so we silently took our leave.

There were still two hours of daylight left and there were several more antique stores on the block, so we parked the truck back where it had been on the street and continued looking for treasures. Eventually though we ended up with an afternoon gone and my two purchases only. The poster we would take directly to my house/office, but we decided to place the desk in our newly rented storage unit so we could start the next day with an empty truck and high hopes at the flea market. So for the second time little Jill and big Xara muscled the desk to its new temporary place. I made sure the security lock was well in place and we headed to a well deserved dinner.

My office is right in the middle of the small suburb called Irving, Texas which itself is right in the middle of the Dallas – Fort Worth metropolis. It is convenient to everything north Texas has to offer and holds the major airport. Irving also, at least for another couple of years, has Texas Stadium; the home of the Dallas Cowboys football team. Irving has one other thing currently of interest to Jill and I and that is a restaurant called Feldman's on Fifth, which is on, of course, Fifth Street in Irving four miles south and east on my office. Jill's father, Joe Stepho, owns the restaurant and it officially is Jill's place of employment but it has been a few days since she has actually worked a shift as a waitress.

We parked the big rental truck in the parking lot and went inside where we enjoyed good steaks, wonderful cheese cake, and a constant barrage of talk from her father. It was nice seeing Joe and I was quite happy that the restaurant was turning into a success for him. Between the good food and the friendly atmosphere it was a wonderful spot for Jill and I to wind down what had been a very pleasant day.

CHAPTER-02.

We had wanted to get an early start for our big day at the flea market so I had set my alarm clock for eight A.M. However, when I got out of bed at seven I found Jill already awake and the coffee already made. I peeked out the window and the weather looked to be just perfect for a trip to the flea market which was quite

large and would take a good portion of the day. Things should have started out nicely, and we should have enjoyed a very nice Sunday buying treasures for pennies, but it didn't turn out that way.

When I had bought the desk the day before I had in mind a spot for it in my den, but as we were drinking our coffee Jill mentioned that she wanted me to put it in my front room which was originally the living room and dining room, but has been converted to one large room and I currently use it as my office. Her idea, of course, was that since she was now my partner, she would need a desk in the office and she had assumed that I had bought the desk for that purpose. I reminded her that she was not exactly my partner in my detective business, she was more friend that helped out on my last two cases. That sort of started a little lovers quarrel even though we were platonic. Well that was exactly the wrong thing to say to her at that moment and it probably would have been a long miserable day with her mad at me but my cell phone saved me.

I answered the phone and found my friend Senior Detective Eric Samuels of the Dallas Police Department on the line. I said "hello" and he immediately asked me if I had been at Lola's Attic the day before. When I admitted I had he told me that I better get back over there immediately, and when I asked why he wasted no time in telling me that Lola Martin had been murdered.

I asked him if I could bring Jill along because she had been at Lola's with me and he told me to bring her.

Pretty much stunned I told Jill what was going on and we quickly hopped in my six year old Taurus and headed back into Dallas and over to the Antique Alley.

An efficient young female medical examiner was one of a dozen people already inside the yellow tape at the crime scene, so Samuels had her show me Lola's body. Lola's face had been bruised up a bit and she had a bullet hole in her forehead so determining cause of death would be quite simple. My first thought was that at least Lola hadn't suffered much but then the medical examiner pointed out Satan's Path.

Satan's Path is an interrogation technique very bad people use when they want to get information out of you. They had started by shooting Lola in the right ankle so that she could not run, and then they had asked her whatever it was that they wanted to know. Probably something like "Where do you keep the cash?"

As she resisted answering them they then shot her again in the same leg but a few inches higher than the previous wound. They would have slowly continued to give her individual wounds to the leg always going closer to her torso until she either told them what they wanted, or they decided she was not going to tell them. Either way, Satan's Path almost always ends with a bullet to the head. A lot depended on how desperate they were to get the information and how much

privacy they had. The medical examiner counted seven separate wounds between her right ankle and her right hip. Those seven wounds could have been delivered over several hours which would have been a horrible couple of frightening and painful hours, or they could have been done more quickly. Here in a business district, and considering that seven gun shots would have caused a considerable amount of noise, I expected that the entire interrogation would have taken only a couple of minutes. Either way Lola's last few minutes on earth had not been pleasant.

The medical examiner then took out a large thermometer. I knew she would poke it into Lola and take the temperature of the inside of Lola's liver. The body cools at a specific rate of speed when it dies so by finding the current temperature of the liver they could calculate the time of death to within the hour. That would help a lot in their investigation.

I did not wish to see Lola poked so I turned away. Samuels took the opportunity to ask me to tell him about our visit to her store the previous day. I went over everything I could remember including my two purchases, and then asked him how he had known we had been there. He answered that one of the cops had turned on the computer and found my name in her address book along with a date and time stamp on the record.

Jill and I were pretty much in the clear because there were four names added to the list after my name so it was obvious that we had not been her last customers. The medical examiner fixed the time of death between six and seven P.M. and Jill and I told Samuels that we had been with a dozen witnesses at Feldman's on Fifth eating dinner during that time frame. I am sure he believed me but being ever the professional, he wrote down our alibi statement which he would verify later.

Six P.M. made sense because the sign on the door proclaimed the shop would close at that hour. It would be assumed that the bad guy had lain in wait for the shop to close so he could do his dirty work.

Detective Samuels, noting that the cash register was empty, asked Jill and I to estimate how much cash had been in the cash register when we left the store. Neither of us had any memory of Lola opening the cash register and I informed Samuels that I had handed her the cash out on the loading dock when we had first seen the desk. He had one of the crime scene investigators go through Lola's pockets, and they found nearly a thousand dollars cash spread out in three or four pockets.

Samuels asked me to take a look around and see if I could tell where the bad guys had searched. It was kind of weird. I mean the place was a mess, but it had been pretty much a mess when we had shopped there. It really did not look much like they had searched through the store front at all. I did open the door to the room my desk had been in and reported to Samuels that it was empty and there had been

several pieces of furniture there the day before. Of course, I also mentioned to him that the desk I had bought had been out there in the back room, and not on the sales floor.

A young cop interrupted my report to Samuels to tell him that several of the other stores in the neighborhood had security cameras outside so there would be a chance we could see something about who had entered the store last, but that Lola had no cameras either outside or inside.

I was over by the cash register looking through things when I noticed that the sewing basket Lola had put my business card into was missing. I explained to the detective the joke Lola had made about it being her backup system. Of course being the professional he is Detective Samuels probed deeper wanting either me or Jill to completely describe the sewing basket and its contents but what can you say when you truthfully do not remember. I mean I could estimate the size and I was pretty confident about that, but when he asked what color it was neither Jill or I could conjure up an image we were comfortable with. In addition, I clearly remember that the cards were not just tossed loosely into the basket. She had some sort of tray in the basket that was the right size for holding business cards but I could not remember much about what type of tray it was or even if there was a single tray, or more than one.

By now there were about a dozen crime scene technicians crowded into the store all photographing or dusting or measuring and we were in the way. Eric Samuels, Jill, and I stepped out the front door of the shop to find a small crowd of people gathered there. It was time for the shops in the area to open for their day of business and many of the shop owners and employees were curious about what was going on.

The cops had brought an ambulance with them but there were none there needing medical attention so the vehicle was converted to a hearse. We watched Lola's body bag being loaded into the ambulance, remorseful like she was a dear longtime friend, even though we had met her just half a day ago.

As soon as the ambulance took off Eric Samuels addressed the assembled crowd and announced Lola's death. He told them all that the best thing they could do was just open their shops as if nothing had happened and go on with business as usual. He did implore them to cooperate when the detectives came by to ask questions and promised that they would do so with the intention of causing as little disruption to their businesses as possible. There were several quick questions about when the funeral would be and Samuels had to tell the crowd that he would get word to them when he had that information.

Someone in the crowd asked if it was safe for them to open for business and to appease them Samuels told them he would have extra patrols in the area for a few days. With that the crowd slowly dispersed.

It was a beautiful Sunday in April in north Texas with the temperature already above sixty and headed for the mid seventies. There were light clouds in the sky but no forecast for any rain, which meant it would have been a perfect day for two young ladies like Jill and myself with a little money in their bank accounts to go treasure hunting at the southwest's largest flea market. Instead Jill and I spent most of the afternoon sitting at the messy table in the police department lunch room with a very frustrated sketch artist.

Our assignment was to describe for the artist the other pieces of furniture that had been out on the loading dock with my desk. They seemed to be the only things missing other than the card file in the sewing basket, so they were the only real leads the cops had to go on until after the finger print analysis could be completed and until all the outside security footage could be gone through.

The artist was frustrated because his usual assignment was to construct a face from an eye-witness description and here he was drawing old furniture instead. To complicate things Jill and I did not turn out to be very good witnesses. We started with a serious discussion about how many pieces there had even been. I could clearly remember about six other pieces and vaguely remembered what some of them looked like. Jill remembered eight pieces other than my desk and her memory about the other pieces seemed clearer than mine. Complicating this even more, there was one specific piece Jill and I both clearly remembered, but I remembered it being on one side of the room and Jill insisted it was on the other side.

Here we sat each holding a cell phone capable of taking digital pictures and it would have been so easy to simply snap a few pictures of the room while all the furniture was there, but why would we have done that? Eventually though we, with a lot of help from the artist, described four of the pieces with enough detail to pretty much identify them, and we also constructed a map of where the pieces had been in the room at the time we had seen them.

Later, while Jill was still haggling with the artist I snuck away and ended up in Eric Samuels' small office having a private conversation with him. He told me that they were having trouble finding anyone who could be considered next of kin. Lola's body would go through an autopsy and then be cleared for final preparations but to whom he had no idea. He also gave me a printout of the last two weeks from her computerized address book and asked if I could go through it later and see if I recognized anyone on it. I folded up the three page report and shoved it into the back pocket of my jeans. I asked if there was anything I could do to help out and he sternly told me that it was a police matter and that they could handle it without the interference of a snooping private eye, but then almost in the same breath he

suggested that someone might need to talk to other shop owners to find out if they knew the woman at all so that they could get started finding her family. I did tell him I would be happy to speak with them. He thanked me and also asked if I would check with them about any break-ins or robberies they may have suffered recently.

I gathered Jill up and we headed back to the Antique Alley for what would be the last three hours of business on this Sunday.

For the second time in twenty-four hours Jill and I walked into Parnell's Prize Antiques. The shop owner turned out to be Parnell Erickson. Tall and thin looking about thirty years old but probably a little older. His hair was just too black. It was obviously died and well kept, but he either didn't dye his eye brows or they grew way to quickly because they were laced with a lot of gray. His vanity though was not in question. His shop was neat and clean and he obviously worked hard to keep it that way. His treasures were mostly Victorian furniture that had been severely refinished and polished to a very high sheen. The furniture was still lined up in rows but the rows were not as crowded as the other shops owners kept them. He probably didn't sell more than one or two pieces each day but the profits on them more than made up for the low volume.

Parnell was flamboyantly gay and did nothing to hide it which was quite O.K. with me. He was one of those people who never apologized for himself and if anything he did made you uncomfortable it was simply your problem, not his.

As soon as we introduced ourselves and our purpose he immediately let us know that he considered himself to be one of Lola's closest friends. If we could believe him, he and Lola would have coffee and pastries each morning half an hour before the shops all opened. He questioned us on the funeral arrangements which we had no answer for. He reported no recent break-ins to his store but told us that there had been at least one other recent break-in he had heard about and that was only about a week ago at the store called Uptown Treasures which he said was three or four shops down the alley.

When I questioned him about Lola's next of kin he could give me no help at all. Jill asked him what he and Lola would talk about each morning when he and Lola would share coffee. He told us that Lola spoke mostly about current events and steered clear of any nostalgic trips down memory lane. To him she seemed to always be living in the present and looking to the future which seemed odd to him seeing as how everyone on the block made their living dealing with furniture from the past.

He continued by telling us that Lola would never discuss politics but seemed to be current on local news that was more gossip than fact. He said she could speak

for hours about growing flowers, but also pointed out that there were no flowers in or around her store.

He had a modern security system including several cameras and willingly handed over a video disc that should have covered the time period in question. We did not watch any of his video at that time, we just collected it with a promise that it would be returned at a later date. I gave him one of my cards and he gave me one of his.

Parnell's was the store just east of Lola's Attic. Our next target was the building just to the west and it was called simply Antiques of Dallas. Where Parnell had focused on low volume high quality; this store was exactly the opposite. It was quite massive for a used furniture store but all I saw was a couple of acres of dusty junk.

The proprietor was one Fredrick Smith (no relations to yours truly but like every other Smiths on the planet we joked about the commonality of our names) who greeted us with a big smile and called himself the "Mayor of Antique Alley."

His disposition changed though when he found out that we were not customers, but rather we had been pressed into service as investigators of the crime which had occurred next door to one of his fellow business owners. It is not that he was cruel or mean or rude, it was simply that once he figured out that we were not prospective buyers of his junk he simply had no further need of us. He impatiently listened as we requested information about Lola and quickly told us he did not know her very well at all. He told us his store had suffered no break-ins at all and said that he had not heard of any from the other business owners in the area. He quickly pointed out two security cameras both on the inside of the store and both pointed directly at the cash register. He told us they were both fakes that were not hooked up to any recording device and were only to fool would be thieves.

The self appointed Mayor Smith had no information at all about where we might find one of Lola's family members. He asked me if I knew what was to be done with Lola's estate. He was interested in not only the left over treasures but her building as well. I, of course, had no information to share with him other than to tell him it would all be tied up as evidence for a while.

One of his mayoral duties was to complain about the crime scene tape and let me know that Sunday was their second most important business day of the week. He stated that he was quite sure Lola would not wish her death to interfere with the business that needed to continue along Antique Alley. I do not know if I had grown to like Lola or simply grown to dislike Fredrick Smith from his whining about her brutal death possibly having a slight effect on his balance sheet, but I was about to take a swing at the guy when his son saved him.

Donald Smith walked into the room and immediately all attention fell upon him. It was not his fault, it was just the way Mother Nature had crafted him. He was a full two inches taller than me which put him at six feet five inches. He was dressed in black motorcycle leathers with lots of silver chains. His face under the helmet was that of Paul McCartney and when he pulled the crash hat off George Harrison's hair tumbled out. He had a twenty-four karat smile and a three karat emerald in the ring on his left pinky.

I took a deep breath and heard Jill let out an audible wanton sigh. He was either polite or deaf because he made no comment about her little lust noise. Perhaps the boy had grown use to hearing such audible gasps from females upon his arrival.

Fredrick introduced Donald as his son and we quickly brought him up to speed on the recent events. I swear I saw a small tear roll down his cheek when we spoke of Lola's death.

His handshake was fierce and he made sure to tell both Jill and I that he was twenty-seven and single. He claimed to know Lola, but he too had no ideas about how we might contact next of kin. He told us about the one break-in we had heard about from Parnell. I am sure Jill and I would have stayed and chatted for a good deal of time but Donald excused himself so that he could head for home and we had little more use of his father so we moved on to the next store.

Next door to Antiques of Dallas was a store called Buy It Bare. This shop differed from the other antique stores in several ways. They were trying to tap a new market of do-it-yourselfers, so what they did was sell only wooden furniture, and no matter what shape the piece was in when they bought it, they would strip the wood of its finish. Then, rather than refinishing it like so many of the other stores would do, they simply sold it stripped down. That way the customer could pick out the pieces they wanted, and finish them to match. The idea was attractive to the store owner because all of the pieces in the store would potentially match so a customer might buy several pieces instead of just a favorite find. In addition, the business of stripping and refinishing furniture was expensive and time consuming so they were cutting that process in half. To the prospective buyer the idea was attractive because the furniture all looked just like they wanted it to if they simply used their imagination. Additionally the furniture would be a little less expensive to buy. This meant though that their customers would generally be younger people, perhaps having their first antique buying experience.

As soon as you walk into Buy It Bare you notice right away that the entire store has nothing but blond wooden furniture stacked everywhere, and then the smell hits you. The chemicals they use to strip the furniture are strong and have an

odor. To most the odor is not necessarily a bad odor, but it certainly is a noticeable odor.

I flagged down a tall blond woman who I expected was the store owner. Shelly Mizell was not quite as tall as me, and not quite as blond as me, and she also was not the store owner. When I introduced myself and my partner Jill, Shelly told us she was the store manager and that the store was actually owned by a small corporation and was the third store they had opened. The first one had been in Atlanta and was considered the flagship store. The other was in Houston. She had worked in both stores and they had picked her to open this third store up less than a year ago.

There were no customers in the store at the time so Shelly took her time showing us around as she explained how the store worked. She claimed to not know Lola well. She, of course, knew who Lola was and recognized her by sight, but could not recall a single long conversation they had ever had. Eventually she took us in the massive back room of the store which is a work shop where they strip the newly acquired furniture of its varnish and paint. It was a smelly crowded room with several large fans blowing furiously, several projects in various stages of progress, and a man wearing a gas mask using a paint sprayer to wash down a kitchen chair.

Shelly made enough distraction so that the man in the gas mask stopped his work, took off the mask, and spoke with us impatiently.

Rubert Glaston (but usually called Ruby Glass) was a forty year old retired military type with hair way too long and shaggy. His army fatigues were well worn which one would expect for the work uniform of one in his profession. He was pretty old school. I mean he would never look you directly in the eye, but he stared instead directly at my chest and made no attempt to hide it. He had to take the glove off of his right hand so that he could shake hands when we were introduced and he sort of did it like it was a big imposition to himself. Rough as he tried to appear I felt him quite harmless and to me at least it was quite apparent that he and Shelly were much more than co-workers. She obviously was the love of his life but his machismo would not permit him to show tenderness towards her when others were present.

Once the mask and glove were off, and since he was taking a break anyway, Rubert quickly lit up a cigarette and I wished he would step a few feet away from the chemicals he was working with. Rubert knew nothing about Lola, and Shelly had to give him several clues before he even realized who had been murdered. He had a rather stupid look about him and one could not quite be sure whether it was the chemicals he constantly worked with or perhaps an over familiarity with Jack Daniels.

Just west of Buy It Bare was a smaller shop called Uptown Treasures owned by a young lady named Jana Little. It was a name that fit her well as she was hardly Jill's equal in height or weight. She told us she was thirty years old and had never wanted to be in the antique business but her parents had owned the store all of her life and just two years ago she had lost the pair to a drunk driver on New Years Eve. She had not had the heart to close the place but admitted she was losing money every month and would have to close it soon if things didn't turn around.

Jana claimed to not know the other shop owners well at all including Lola Martin preferring to keep to herself and could give us no help at all in finding Lola's next of kin. When I questioned her about the break-in though we hit pay dirt. The story she told was exactly like the tale Lola had told us. Some guy had stopped with a truck loaded down with several pieces of old furniture and had sold the lot to her at a price so low she could not afford to pass it up. The next morning she had found the back entrance to her shop wide open but the only thing missing was one piece of the recently acquired furniture. She was able to give a good description of the piece of furniture, the truck, and its driver. I wish I had gotten a better description from Lola, but, of course, at the time Lola was telling me the story we did not know it would become important. Somehow though the details Jana provided matched Lola's story too closely to be coincidence.

Of the nine pieces of furniture she had purchased from the man she still had eight of them. This time we took pictures, and I told Jana that the pieces may need to be examined by the crime scene techs so she should not sell any of it until after the investigation was complete. Jill and I looked over the pieces of furniture that Jana had bought from the truck driver, but we did it without touching just in case the police would want to try to get finger prints. Without knowing what we were actually looking for we found nothing remarkable about any of the pieces except that they were old wooden furniture pieces.

I asked Ms. Little if she had any records from the purchase of the suspicious goods but she had none. She had not even paid for it all with a check giving the man cash instead. I questioned her about when exactly the piece had been stolen and she told me it had been two weeks earlier on Saturday. She had called the police and they took the information over the phone and told her they would send someone over to talk with her in person in a few days but so far no cops had shown up. She had called her insurance agent who told her she had no insurance that would cover the loss of the piece of furniture unless she had some sort of documentation about the piece itself and encouraged her to file a police report, which, of course, she had already tried to do. With the value of one piece of old furniture being so little, she had just dropped the matter.

Jill started asking Jana questions about the other people owning the businesses, which Jana claimed to not know well. As the two talked I looked

around the place and even took a few more pictures. I determined that Uptown Treasures had no security cameras. I also determined that Jana took little care of the inventory as everything seemed to be covered in dust. I definitely got the impression that she did not want to be in the antique business but that is what life had chosen for her so she would faithfully play her part but play it with as little effort as was possible, at least until something better came along. I had no idea when something better might come along for poor Jana, but I was about to find out.

When we were leaving Jill asked Jana to keep in touch and we exchanged cards. Jana blurted out that she would like to have dinner with us some evening soon. Without checking with me at all Jill made a date with Jana for the next evening and agreed to call her around six so that we could meet somewhere around seven.

Texas Treasuretrove was the last store on the block and the last one we needed to investigate this day. It was owned by Steven and Wanda Crowley. They were both in their late thirties and could have been the cover photo on a magazine targeting African American yuppies. Their store had trouble actually fitting in with the more traditional antique shops on the block. They had made a real effort to modernize the sale of old furniture by supplementing their inventory in several ways. One way was that there was a huge section of what was called vintage clothing but sprinkled amongst the old stuff was some brand new clothing as well. Also, they had a section of simply modern equipment. For instance, they did not sell cell phones, but they sold cell phone accessories. They also had some new accessories for the furniture, for instance you could buy an old table in their store and also find a new high-tech lamp to put on the table. They also had a full array of new books for sale that were recent publications that had to do with antiques.

There was one other thing I noticed about their store. All of the store owners on the alley had a room in the back where they would refinish the old furniture. In these back rooms one would find the tools and supplies one needed for doing that job. Well in the Crowley store they had that room with those supplies and tools, but they also had a section of their store where you could buy the supplies and tools along with modern DVDs showing you how to do the process yourself. That way they could sell the old furniture without the investment of refinishing it themselves.

Of all the stores on the block Texas Treasuretrove appeared the most profitable. As such, it also was the one best protected by technology. Steven Crowley was proud of his security system and although he would not let me take all of his video tapes, he did tell me the cops could borrow them any time they wanted. I looked at his camera array and was happy to see that two cameras were

mounted outside covering the front door and spilling over to the street and parking areas.

Wanda Crowley remembered other people talking about the break-in at Uptown Treasures. Neither of them could remember buying a truck load of furniture from anybody at a ridiculously low price. Both claimed to know Lola but they considered her a bit of an eccentric and very old fashioned. They also told me that every other word out of her mouth was untrue. It is not that she was purposefully lying, but in their opinion she simply couldn't help making a good story a little bit better every time she retold it.

They both seemed genuinely concerned with her welfare though and asked when the funeral would be. Once again we had to explain that we knew nothing about the final arrangements but promised to get the information to them as soon as we had it.

CHAPTER-03.

Jill and I sat in my six year old Taurus parked at the end of the block known as Antique Alley. We each took out a steno pad and started furiously writing notes. Jill finished in about forty minutes and it took me a few minutes longer to put down everything I remembered from the folks we had just interviewed. We had collected business cards from everyone we had talked to with the exception of the Adonis-like son of the mayor but it was not likely that Jill or I would forget any details of the lovely Mr. Donald Smith.

We had collected one security disc from Parnell Erickson that was unlikely to show us anything of value but we also had found that Steven Crowley of the Texas Treasuretrove had some tapes. He would not, however, turn them over unless we were cops, which, of course, we were not. I made a separate note to have Detective Samuels visit with Mr. Crowley.

We had found absolutely nothing that might point us to Lola's next of kin. Everyone we had talked to seemed to like Lola but none knew her well. Those who knew her best knew nothing of her family.

There was perhaps an hour of sunlight left and we were still in the area of the crime so I took my digital camera out of the glove box and Jill and I walked around the area getting photos of the street and its buildings. We even walked around back and photographed the loading docks behind the storefronts including Lola's.

Dinner hour on Sunday is an interesting time for businesses that depend mostly on week-end shoppers. The shoppers themselves were drifting away and would return to their own jobs Monday morning. The shops were doing their

clean-up so they could shut down for the evening with most staying closed the following day or two. In other words Sunday evening for the shop owners was the Friday afternoon of regular week-day workers.

If one went south on Routh street a few blocks towards the central city one would find one's self surrounded by clubs and restaurants that were also winding down the busy week-end. If one traveled north along Routh one would find some more traditional businesses like dry cleaners and convenient stores that yielded after a few blocks to a residential area that was the best address in Dallas fifty years ago but had felt a steady decline for decades.

Not far to the west of where Jill and I stood there was a large inner-city high-school which was, of course, this being a Sunday, all locked up. To the east was an area dominated by business offices mostly serving the legal community which would all be abuzz with activity Monday morning, but just like the high-school they were all abandoned right now.

Jill and I walked the neighborhood and kept my digital camera clicking away until the light faded on this small universe centered by the antique alley.

Senior Detective Eric Samuels had warned me to stay away from this case and then sent me in to interview the other business owners in the area. As Jill and I sat in the Dallas Police Station waiting room I reminded myself that I was on vacation, which basically meant that I wasn't currently being paid by anyone. Still, I had just spent most of a beautiful Sunday up to my armpits on a murder case. My stomach growled at me to remind me I hadn't eaten anything for hours. Jill and I would wait until we could give a brief report to Samuels, then, hopefully, we would be done with the case. It was a police case. Jill and I had nothing to do with it other than we had happened to be in the general vicinity of the crime a couple of hours before it had happened. As good citizens we had helped out as we could, but after our report we would leave it as a police matter.

Finally the detective called us into his small office where we verbally gave him our reports and he also had one of his techs download all the pictures from my digital camera. He thanked me for the one security disc I had been fortunate enough to collect, and he promised he would seek out the ones Steven Crowley would hand over.

We pulled out the business cards we had collected and Samuels carefully copied these. We went over each person we had talked to and Samuels promised to run background checks on each.

Samuels sincerely thanked Jill and I for our hard work and then once again warned us to stay away from the case as it was now officially a police matter. Fine with me. The one part of the mystery I was still worried about was contacting

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