

SILENT
KNIGHT

by Rob Howell

Title Page

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ISBN: [978-1-946415-05-9](#) (Mobipocket)

[978-1-946415-06-6](#) (EPUB)

Edited by Kellie M. Hultgren (<http://kmhediting.com/Welcome.html>)

Silent Knight

An icy wind blasted snow in my face. I pushed through it to open my door.

“Take your boots off! I’ll not have you tracking snow in my house!”

My wife’s voice carried from the kitchen, but I was already sitting at the bench by the door, tugging the tall, black boots off. I set them in the plastic tray to let the snow melt. I was hanging up my coat when my wife joined me.

“Oh, honey. That thing is so filthy I can’t tell if it’s red or brown. It’ll take ages to clean it.”

I kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry, lass.” We’d been married for a while. She’d cleaned that coat more times than I can count.

She pulled me down for a real kiss. “A tough night?”

I nodded.

“Your boss works you too hard, especially this time of year,” she said with a glare. “Why he has to send Alley with so many names for you to check out, I’ll never know. It’s Alley’s job after all.”

“I made progress, though.” I held out the clipboard with the list. “There’s only these few left. This’ll be the worst.” I pointed at one.

“Knight, Stephen Ronald.” Her brow furrowed. “Where’s Lenexa? I’ve never heard of it.”

“One of the suburbs of Kansas City.”

“Well, it’ll wait for you to take a break. Dinner’s ready, and I baked cookies this afternoon. You’ve even got time for a drink.”

I kissed her again. “That I do, love.” I settled into my chair by the fire. It creaked like it was going to fall apart. Well, so did I sometimes.

She leaned out of the kitchen and smiled impishly. “Milk?”

I snorted. “Brandy. It’s not like I won’t get enough milk two weeks from now to keep my bones healthy for another thousand years.”

After dinner, we returned to the fire, I with my work and she with her knitting.

“Tell me about him.”

“Who?” I looked over.

“Mr. Knight.”

“Not much to tell. He popped up on my list.”

“Why are you so concerned about him?”

“I don’t know. I mean, everything about his case looks correct. He’s charged with fraud, and his trial will begin tomorrow. The evidence suggests that even if he’s not guilty, he might know who is, and that’s just as bad.”

“But something’s caught in your craw.”

“Yes. Sometimes I wish I’d never taken this job.”

She laughed. “You say that every year.”

I smiled. “I suppose I do.”

“Besides, I don’t think you can quit now. Too many people rely on you.”

“And you say *that* every year.”

“And I’m *right* every year.” She chuckled. “What do you plan to do?”

“I’ll go watch the trial. See what I see.”

“Muddle around.”

“You know my methods.”

“I’ve had some time to get used to them,” she said primly. “In any case, I’ll go clean your coat. And don’t stay up too late. You may not need much sleep anymore, but it still doesn’t hurt.”

The next morning, wearing a sharp suit only seven decades out of fashion and my freshly cleaned coat, I arrived at the Lenexa Courthouse on 87th Street Parkway. About as boring a street name as one could hope for, not to mention redundant street terms.

Ab well, not the stupidest thing I’ve seen.

The trial proceeded as they all do, with ponderous arrogance highlighted by ceremonial conformity. I’ve probably seen more court cases than anyone except the Lord himself, and they all look and feel the same, no matter time or culture.

The prosecution presented its case. I kept waiting for the real proof to show up, but by the end of the day they had supplied nothing more than circumstantial evidence. Worse, Jeffrey Royle, Knight’s lawyer, didn’t even point out the lack of substance to the jury. Neither did he cross-examine any of the prosecution’s witnesses, though he at least reserved the right to call them later.

The judge recessed for the day, and I went up to the lawyer.

“Excuse me, Mr. Royle,” I said, handing him a card.

He glanced at it. “Nick Patara, Private Investigator. What do you want?”

“Right now, I want to buy you dinner.”

He looked at me with narrowed eyes, then nodded. “Let me call my wife. There’s a good Indian restaurant a block away.”

“That’ll do.”

“The butter chicken is my favorite,” he said after we sat down.

He was right: the place was excellent, plus the whole dinner was an event. The cheerful manager roamed the room, offering tidbit after tidbit and instructing everyone to be “happy, happy.”

We nibbled on naan after finishing our meals.

The lawyer looked at me. “You wanted to talk?”

No reason to beat about the bush. “Mr. Royle. You don’t seem like the sort of lawyer who doesn’t cross-examine witnesses.”

He sighed. “I’m not. I don’t know what to do. And call me Jeff.”

“I’m Nick. And that explains why you were willing to cancel your plans talk to me.”

“I don’t like PIs, even ones with white beards, beer bellies, and jolly voices at Christmastime.”

“Many lawyers don’t.” I smiled. “But that means you think you need one, and my crew is the best.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t just talk about the case, as I’m sure you know.”

“You can if you hire us to help defend him.”

Royle shook his head. “Knight will never pay for that expense.”

I opened my briefcase and laid a contract out on the table. I had already typed in Knight’s name, with a blank for the lawyer.

His eyes narrowed as he read through it. “You’re willing to work for me to help exonerate Knight for one dollar?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Call it the holiday spirit.”

Royle snorted. “Bullshit, even if you do look like Santa Claus.”

“How about the holiday spirit—and I need another tax write-off?”

“Still bullshit, but at least somewhat believable.”

I chuckled. “I’m willing to charge you more, if it makes you happier.”

Royle smiled and shook his head. He read through the contract again. After a moment, he eyed me and shrugged. “I hate losing cases I can win.” Then he pulled out an expensive pen. He signed and initialed in all the appropriate places and handed it back. “I’ll need a copy of this tomorrow.”

“No problem.” I stuck the contract in my briefcase. “Now tell me what you can.”

“You probably know that if I don’t really defend Knight, I risk getting disbarred.”

“Yes.”

“I figured.” He sighed. “But the man keeps telling me not to defend him at all.”

“Why didn’t you just put in a plea of guilty?”

“He told me he didn’t want it. He told me he wanted to go through the trial and lose.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I know, but he’s the one paying me.”

“*He* is? You’re not a public defender?”

“Oh, I do some of that work too.”

“But not this time.”

“Nope. He paid me, and all his checks have cleared.”

“Did he argue about your rates?”

“Never said anything, just handed the checks over.”

“Interesting.” I looked closely at him. “And you accepted the job despite his restrictions?”

“He didn’t tell me about his restrictions until after we’d started. Yes, I could’ve just quit after he told me to lose. I probably should have.” He shrugged. “But he’s such a sad case, I just didn’t have the heart.”

“And now you’re stuck.”

Royle nodded.

“I’ll need everything you have.”

“Of course. I’ll make a copy of the file and trade it for the contract tomorrow.”

“Good. Is there any evidence that’s not circumstantial?”

“None that I’ve heard about.”

“Okay, today’s Thursday. Tomorrow, do everything you can to stall. That’ll give me the weekend to work on it and make it look more like you’re doing what you can. That’ll help protect you from the bar.”

“Do you think you can find anything out in just a few days?”

“Well, if I don’t, you can complain how I overcharged you.”

Royle laughed, and we went our ways.

Once home, I looked up Royle in my files. I didn’t recognize him, so I’d never had need to take a hard look at him before. He generally showed up on the right list, though there had been a couple of rough years in his youth. Many had done the same, so I was pleased. He’d be a good ally.

I found a plate of oatmeal raisin cookies at my elbow. I looked over to see my love sitting there, knitting yet another stocking. “What did I ever do before I met you?”

She opened her mouth, her dark eyes gleaming as they had when they’d first captured me at church those many years ago.

“Don’t answer that!” I said before she could utter a word.

She giggled. “Just as well. It’s late, and I don’t want to take that much time before bed.”

I had looked at Knight’s file a number of times already, but sometimes this job is nothing but boring, repetitive work, so I reviewed it again. He’d been in the army for a while, mostly serving as a redleg and finishing as a staff sergeant at Fort Sill working at the Field Artillery School. After mustering out, he got his mechanical engineering degree and worked a series of ever-better jobs. A hardworking man, he’d been valued wherever he went. When he changed jobs, it looked to be in search of new challenges.

One reason for his restrictions on Royle became immediately apparent. Knight’s wife had died from cancer, and it had been awful. She’d been diagnosed over ten years ago. She’d fought and fought, but in January she’d finally succumbed.

That explains the depression. But why punish himself like this?

I checked again: he had never once appeared on the wrong list. As good a man as one could find. If there was ever a good and pure knight, he was it.

“Yet, there’s something there. Something more.”

“What?” my wife asked.

I shook my head. “Just talking to myself.”

She rose and looked over my shoulder. “Oh, dear. The poor man.”

“Yes.”

“But...” She ran a finger down his history. “He’s never done *anything* to warrant this.”

“I know.”

“That’s why he bothered you.”

“Yes.” I grimaced. “Oh, it happens far too often, but yes, that’s why.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to go to a bar.”

“Oh?”

“See here? The only tweak in his file is all those nights he spent at Brewbakers toward the end of wife’s life. He apparently drank a lot.”

“No surprise at that point, right? Was she in hospice?”

“Yes.” I sighed. “She fought it to the bitter end. Lasted far longer than most who enter hospice. Over a year.”

“Over a year for him to watch her die.”

I nodded. “That’d test a saint.”

“You would know.” She kissed me on my bald spot. “But before you put all your eggs in that basket, could it be something else?”

“What do you mean?”

“If he didn’t do the crime, then someone else had to do it. Could he be protecting someone?”

I looked through the files. “They didn’t have kids. He was the only child of two only children, and both his parents are dead. There’s no family to protect.”

“And no one to threaten.”

“You’ve got an evil mind.”

“All those Dick Francis novels.”

“Of course.” I glanced up at the clock. “It’s still only ten in KC. Time enough for me to get to Brewbakers for a few and talk to some bartenders.”

“Have a good time, love.”

I kissed her and headed out.

Brewbakers was a tall-ceilinged, concrete-floored suburban grill and bar. I’d seen hundreds over the years, though I still preferred dark, wooden English pubs. But bars are made by the bartenders more than anything else, and this one’s bore a welcoming smile. Slim and dark, her eyes held all the jolly mirth one could ask for, especially during the Christmas season.

I slid onto a padded seat and glanced at the line of taps on the wall.

“What’ll you have?” she asked.

“I’ve not been to KC much. What’s the local brewery? Do they have a good IPA?”

“That’ll be the Boulevard, but we just got in an IPA from a Nebraska brewery that my hopheads really love. It’s the Cropduster from Thunderhead Brewery.”

“Cropduster, eh? Well, that’s clearly a sign. I’ve made more than a few low and slow flights in my life.”

“Tall?”

“Absolutely. It’s been a long day. Seems like it took ten thousand miles to get here.”

She chuckled and soon returned with the beer.

I took a long drink. “Nice. Very nice.”

“Where you from?”

I snorted. “I’ve been on the road for work so much lately, I barely remember. Holiday season always has me hopping.”

“Here in KC for business?”

“Sort of. Mostly was just passing through to my appointments next week. An old buddy of mine told me he came to Brewbakers a few times. I’d call him, but I lost his number, so I thought I’d come in and see if I ran into him. I miss our late nights at Scooters outside Fort Sill.” I finished my beer.

She laughed. “Another?”

I nodded.

When she returned, she asked, “So who was it?”

“My buddy? Steve Knight.”

Her face clouded.

“What?”

“Oh, I haven’t seen him in a while. Not since…”

“What?”

“His wife died.”

“Damn. I knew she was sick, but he didn’t talk much about it. Mostly we talked about old times back in hot, dusty places that didn’t have good beer.”

“I bet.” She shook her head. “Yeah, I haven’t seen him in a while.” She nodded at some regulars on the far side of the bar. “Hey, any of you seen Steve Knight recently? This guy’s one of his army buddies.”

They sighed in unison.

“Not since Maggie died,” said one.

“Yeah. We haven’t heard anything from him,” agreed another. “Such a shame.”

She turned back. “Sorry.”

“Well, I got nothing better planned this weekend but to sit here and drink beer. Maybe I’ll get lucky and he’ll change his mind. In any case, I have to work from somewhere.”

“We get a lot of people sitting and working here.” She pointed at a number of outlets.

“I’ll bring my laptop tomorrow. In the meantime, I might as well have a few more beers and actually talk to people. I travel so much, I almost forget how.”

She named the regulars as she filled my glass again. I spent the evening confirming things I already knew about regulars and evenings in bars. Billy Joel got close, but he thought of it as part of his journey, not a destination worthy in its own right. I’d visit Brewbakers again, and not just for business.

The next day I showed up at court again. While waiting for a recess, I glanced around the courtroom. Most stared off in boredom, awaiting their turns. Two, however, watched intently.

One was a man in a suit that fit like he’d spent a fair amount just getting it tailored. The other was a woman with light brown hair who focused so much on the proceedings, I never got a good look at her.

When the judge called recess for lunch, Royle and I went back to the Indian place for lunch. The buffet was even better than dinner. We exchanged contract for file, and I took home several balloons from the “happy, happy” owner.

My kind of guy.

Before I went back to Brewbakers, I ran through the case file. A local firm had discovered that their supplier had defrauded them by overcharging engineering hours on a contract. Knight had been the engineer, of course. The prosecution had shown electronic records where Knight had supposedly padded the figures and was in the process of suggesting he couldn’t have done all that work. Worst of all, though, they suggested he’d done so to pay for Maggie’s treatments after drinking the rest of their money away.

I sighed. Circumstantial or not, a jury might believe it. They might ask the judge for leniency, but the damage would be done. I knew it was all crap, but none of my sources could testify. They’d seem out of place, at best, in a court of law.

Need to check through all the other employees there. Someone could have changed his hours, paid him his regular salary, then pocketed the difference.

I went to Brewbakers with my laptop. The same bartender pointed me at a perfect spot, near the kitchen and across from the bar. It had an outlet, it was close to the restroom—which matters at my age—and I faced the entirety of the bar. I started by making a list of all the others at Knight’s company.

Let me just say, laptops make keeping lists much, much easier.

I went through everything I could find on Knight’s coworkers. They weren’t *all* a collection of rogues to make Blackbeard proud, though their security officer—the guy in the suit at the trial—might make any pirate nervous. Certainly, sharks wouldn’t bite him out of professional courtesy.

I'm glad my boss never takes that sort. A thought crossed my mind. *So why did Steve go to that firm in the first place?*

A half-hour of research gave me a reason. The firm held patents on things directly related to Knight's specialty, and I bet he wanted to play with those toys.

Besides, he'd never have really noticed the kind of people they were.

Even if I hadn't wanted to help, these were the sort of people my boss encouraged me to stop. A germ of a plan glimmered, and I started searching for the details I'd need to make it work. I may not have been as good as Bushy, my IT guy, but I'd learned a few hacking skills over the years. My boss insisted we get the best training around.

Before long, I'd tracked down blueprints of the building, receipts from the security provider, and a list of their IT purchases over the last five years.

How did I ever do this before the internet?

She walked in at about six. I realized I'd seen her before. In the back of court. This time, I got a good look at her. She wasn't beautiful. If anything, she seemed plain. Light brown hair, not long nor short, but well kept. Relaxed, comfortable clothes that suited her coloring well.

She settled into her preferred chair at the bar like it was an old friend. The bartender placed what looked to be a cider in front of her without asking. Then she leaned in and pointed at me. The woman turned—

And that's when I first saw her eyes. Brown and plain like the rest of her, but also deep, strong, and full of love.

I had seen eyes like that before. I saw them nearly every night now, ever since I married my wife.

That's a woman Helen of Troy would have envied.

She took the bench facing me.

"I'm Jennifer."

"I'm Nick."

"She says you served in the army with Steve."

"Yes, at Fort Sill." I sighed. "Shame about Maggie."

A strange look crossed her face. "Yes. She was a wonderful woman."

"Have you heard from Steve lately?" I grimaced. "I mean, I guess he and I won't drink till all hours like we once did, but it would still be good to see him."

"He's in jail."

"What?" I shook my head. "We talking about the same guy? I mean, he was as straight as they come, even when we were drinking at Scooters."

"That's him." A tear went down her cheek.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"No, it's alright. You can't know."

"Can't know what?"

She didn't answer, just stared at the Boulevard beer sign over my head.

I waited.

She didn't move. Didn't even blink. Just stared at something in her mind's eye.

I kept waiting.

I opened my mouth, then shut it before I did anything stupid. *You've got the patience of a saint, right? Use it, you idiot!*

So I did.

Eventually, she said. "He didn't do it."

"What's he in jail for?"

"Fraud." Her eyes sharpened on me, and I realized she had recognized me. Anger filled those brown eyes.

I slid over my card before she could say anything. "I'm on his side," I said just loud enough to be heard over the basketball game on the TVs. "I'm actually employed by his lawyer. You might have seen me talking to him today."

"His lawyer! What a laugh. He hasn't done anything. That case is so weak, I could beat it, and the closest thing I've got to a law degree is every season of *Law and Order* on DVD."

"He agrees with you."

"What?" She shook her head. "Why doesn't the bastard fight, then?"

"Steve won't let him."

Her mouth dropped. The strength fled from those eyes. She glanced at my card, tapped it on the table a few times, and then stuck it into her purse. She didn't look up.

"What is it?"

A tear slid down her cheek. "It's all my fault."

"What happened?"

She shook her head.

"I'm employed by Steve's lawyer. If you tell me and I can use it to help him, I will. If I can't, well, I've conveniently forgotten things before."

She snorted. "It's nothing for a court of law." Then she sipped her cider. "And I've told my confessor anyway."

"I'm Catholic too."

"Seems an odd thing in 2019 sometimes." She snorted. "Especially in a world where God let me betray and hurt a man like Steve." She swallowed. "He's Catholic as well."

"What'd you do?"

"It was a year ago next Tuesday." She sighed. "I know exactly the day. It's the day my husband died in 2015."

"How'd he die?"

“Heart attack. Just one of those things, the doctor said. He was in good shape, too. We ate right back then, ran 5Ks, went to the doctor for checkups.” She sobbed. “Just one of those fucking things...”

“What happened with Steve?”

She barked a harsh laugh. “We were both here, needing to not be alone. We’d been chatting for months by that point. Even met for mass a couple of times. He spent that night trying to cheer me up. I spent that night trying to cheer him up.”

“And then you went back someplace.”

She nodded, staring at her hands. “Neither of us meant for it to happen. We weren’t even really drunk. Couldn’t claim that excuse when I went to the confessor. I just wanted to care for him. I think it was the same for him, but in the morning, he said he’d betrayed his dying wife.”

“So now I know why he’s telling his lawyer to let him go to jail.”

“That would be Steve, through and through. My Mike would have liked him. Both of them better than I ever deserved.”

“I doubt your confessor would agree to that.”

She shrugged. “He gave me penance and absolved me. I did it all, but...”

“But what?”

“I went to see her.”

“Maggie?”

She nodded. “What a stupid idea.”

“She got angry?”

“The damn bitch had the gall to thank me. Said she hoped Steve had found a good woman.” Tears streamed down her face. “I fucking betrayed a woman like that.” She got up, threw a bill on the table, and turned to leave.

“Jennifer, how do you know he didn’t do it?”

She stopped, looked back. “Before they arrested him, he came to me with the hourly numbers. He said they didn’t look right and asked if I would look at them.”

“Why you?”

“I’m an accountant. Steve understood calculus, not accounting.”

I snorted. “My boss is the only one I know who really understands accounting.”

She almost smiled. “That’s about right.”

“What did you find?”

“Nothing I could put my finger on, but something bothered me. I’m not a forensic accountant, though.”

“Think back what it was.”

“It wasn’t the numbers...”

“What else could it be?”

“I don’t know. Something with the file.” She looked down.

“Don’t lose your faith.”

“What? Why not?”

“Let’s just say, I’ve seen miracles happen.”

She stared at me. Finally, “Can you be here tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“About five.”

“I’ll be here.”

The bartender came up to me after she left. “What happened?”

“She loves Steve. Misses him desperately.”

“We always thought they’d get together.” She grimaced. “I mean after...”

“Yeah, I can see that.” I sighed. “Go ahead and get my check. I think I’m done for tonight.”

“Coming back tomorrow?”

“Definitely. I’ll need a night off.”

“We’ll take care of you.”

I waved cheerfully at the now familiar faces and went home.

“How’d it go?” asked my sweetie.

“Well, I know a lot more, but I don’t know if I can use it.”

“Tell me.”

I did.

“Sounds like you’ve got to win in two courts.”

“Yes. Not sure I can win where it matters, but I’ve got an idea on the other.” I went to the phone on my desk and dialed a number.

“Alley, I’m sending over a list of names. I need our files ASAP.”

“What’s this about?”

“The last few names you sent me.”

“Right away, then.”

Click.

I dialed again.

“Yeah?”

“Wun, is it good to go?”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight. Get Donny to drive.”

“Not Rudy?”

“No, not him. He’s too flashy.”

“One of those.”

“Yep.”

“You scratch it this time of year and you’ll not sit comfortably on your big trip.”

I laughed. “Then make sure it runs well.”

“Harrumph.”

Click.

I dialed a third number.

“I’m busy.”

“So am I.”

“Then leave me alone.”

“Sorry, Shin, but I need your help.”

“You need help, that’s for sure.”

“We’ve got a job. Get Bushy and bring him over to my place. Don’s driving.”

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

Click.

I chuckled. “I’ve really got to talk to my employees about their attitudes.”

My wife laughed. “Go get changed. I’ll not have you ripping that coat if you’re going to be doing what I think you will be.”

“As you command.” I went upstairs. As I changed, my phone alerted me that Alley had sent over the files. For all of their attitude, my people know what they’re doing. I reviewed the notes, especially those of the CEO and CFO, before heading back downstairs.

When I got to the door, my wife kissed me. “Be careful. Don’t want to irritate the boss by getting caught.”

“Heaven forbid,” I said with a laugh.

Donny, Bushy, and Shin waited for me outside. I gave Don the address, and as he drove us to Knight’s company, I explained to them what I needed.

“Get in, get out, don’t get caught. Same as ever,” muttered Shin. “You forget I was doing this long before you met me, old man.”

“Yeah, but maybe you screw up this time.” I handed him the building plans from the Lenexa licensing office and the receipts from the security provider.

“As if.” He looked through it all. “You got me for this? One of these days, old man, you’re going to have to learn to do something for yourself.”

“I’m too lazy for that.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“What’s their computer security like?” asked Bushy.

I passed over my notes on their IT purchases. “This is what they’ve got.”

He studied it for a second. “I should be fine, unless there’s something crazy I’ve never seen.”

“And it’s possible. They do own some patents.”

“Oh, good. Trade secrets.” He pushed his glasses up his nose. “That’ll make it more fun.”

“Any live guards?” asked Donny.

“Yes, according to the security company receipts.”

“Right, go around the back way.”

“You got it.”

“You know they’ll have hidden what you’re looking for,” said Bushy. “It won’t be in the regular files.”

“You get me in, and I’ll find what we need.”

“We’ve heard *that* before,” snapped Shin.

“And have I ever led you astray?”

“I don’t want your boss on my ass because you got us arrested.”

“Don’t worry about it. You all know he’s mellowed over the years.”

All three cursed and took turns insulting me for the rest of the trip.

I leaned back in the comfortable seat. *It sure is nice to have good help.*

And I’ve got the best.

Donny got us to the drop point without anyone seeing us and ghosted our getaway vehicle off into the night.

Shin disabled the security system in less time than most people take to unlock their front door, sticking a loop into the security camera pointed at the back of the building.

We waited a long minute to see if there was a reaction. This was the trickiest part. We were fine, unless the guard had been staring at the right monitor at the right moment. Or wrong moment.

“Nothing going out on their network,” hissed Bushy, pad in his hand.

“Loop is good, and I’m not getting feedback on the alarm system,” added Shin.

I took my hand off the recall switch. “Good. Let’s get going.”

Shin locked the door behind us, just in case someone looked.

I led us straight to the CEO’s office, based on the blueprints. Shin picked the office lock, and we were in.

Bushy slid into the tall, regal leather chair and went to work. He snorted disgustedly almost immediately. “Password123. You’ve got to be kidding me.” He started to move the mouse.

“Wait,” I hissed. “I looked at what Alley’s got on this guy.”

“And?”

“He’s too sneaky to be that dumb.”

Bushy blinked, pushed up his glasses, and went to work. About five minutes later, he leaned back, satisfied smile on his face. “You’re not as stupid as you look, Nick. He had a trap, but I’m around it now.”

“You sure?”

“Don’t make me put a virus on your wife’s knitting laptop.” He put in a USB drive and sent his program after hidden files.

I laughed and started searching. I checked the obvious places first, but like Bushy had pointed out, they held nothing but the numbers that the prosecutors had presented in court. So I kept looking.

“Hsst,” snapped Shin. “Guard’s coming.”

Bushy hit the power to the monitor, and we knelt behind the desk.

After a long moment, Shin murmured, "He's gone, but you better hurry your fat ass up."

I ignored him and went back to it. I checked everywhere I could think of. Nothing.

"You see anything?" I asked Bushy.

He shook his head. "Just these payroll records, but they look clean at first glance."

"Yeah."

"Copy them over anyway."

I sent the files over to the USB drive.

"Will you guys hurry up! We only have about ten minutes!"

"Shut up, Shin," I hissed back.

Bushy's program returned nothing that shouldn't be hidden.

"Damn."

"Eight minutes!"

I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer. When I opened them, I saw it. Right in the open.

"Alley was right. He is a cagey bastard."

"What?"

"The client said something about the data bothered her, but not the numbers, which looked clean."

"So?"

"The CEO's file said he has a horrible relationship with his wife . . . and they have no kids."

Bushy glanced at the screen. I double-clicked on the folder on the desktop labeled "Family Photos."

It asked for a password.

Bushy chuckled, and I got out of his way. A moment later, he was copying the files in that folder to the USB drive.

"Pull the regular files, in case the lawyer wants to cross-reference."

"Got it."

Shin leaned back in. "We've got to go, fat man. Four minutes to pickup."

"On it." Bushy sent across a virus that would erase any hint of our presence that night.

Then I pulled the USB drive and shut the system down.

We crept out into the hall.

"Three minutes."

"We know, Shin," I said.

We were close to the break room when the guard walked in from the other direction and went to the coffee pot. He poured himself a cup. He fumbled with a creamer, splashing a bit on his tie. He cursed.

"Two minutes."

He reached for a packet of sugar, ripped it open, and dumped it in.

He got another.

And another.

He stirred it up and tasted it.

“One minute.” Shin glared at me.

The guard got another packet of sugar, stirred, tasted. This time, the coffee suited him. He sauntered out.

“Thirty seconds.” Shin leaned out, peering down the hall to the guard desk. “Go!”

We slid through the break room back to the storage room. Shin moved to the lock with a glance at his watch, and a moment later we were out.

Donny was already there. “You’re late.”

“Three seconds, jerk,” said Shin. “Now get us outta here.”

He did.

The haul was all I’d hoped for and more.

I arrived at Brewbakers with a copy of the pertinent files at a quarter to five. Jennifer walked in not five minutes later. She had a wrapped present under her arm.

“We both brought gifts,” I said with a smile. The bartender brought her a cider, and I tapped her glass with my Cropduster. Then I slid the documents in front of her.

“Oh my God.” She looked at me with wonder in her eyes. “Those bastards! How did you get this?”

“It’s thanks to you. Look at the bottom.”

She read, “Michelle at the beach.”

“He hid all this data in .jpegs of his wife. I wouldn’t have thought to look if you hadn’t said something seemed wrong about the files. One doesn’t usually see payroll records with that file name.”

“With this, you can prove Steve’s innocent!”

“That’s my hope.” I grimaced. “That’s assuming he lets Royle do that.”

“I think...” She hesitated. “I think I can help with that.”

“Oh?”

She pushed over the package. “Look at the tag.”

“To Jennifer, Love Maggie.” My mouth dropped open. “She gave you this?”

Jennifer nodded.

“And you never opened it?”

“I couldn’t... she...” Jennifer wept. “Maggie told me what it was.”

“Oh?”

“Her last diary. The one after I went to her. It came to me in the mail after she died, with a letter.” She smiled. “She understood Steve. She said I was to use it when the time was right.”

“Seems like now’s the right time.”

“Yes.” She grabbed my hand. “Promise me you’ll get it to him.”

“I will.”

We finished our drinks but didn’t have much else to say.

Sunday morning I called Royle. “I’ve got what we need.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I’m good at my job, and I have a good crew. What’s your address? I’ll bring it over.”

“Meet me at my office.”

“Will do.”

He was astounded when I laid it out in front of him. “How did you get—” He stopped. “Don’t tell me. I don’t think I want to know.”

“You probably don’t.”

“Am I going to be able to admit them?”

“You tell me. It’s exculpatory, so that makes it easier, right?”

Royle nodded. “And the prosecutor here in Lenexa’s a good guy. He might just drop the charges rather than fight this.” He hesitated. “But will Steve let me use it all? He’s still fighting me tooth and nail.”

“I need to get in to see him and give him a Christmas present.” I pulled out the package.

“What is it?”

“It’s his wife’s last diary.”

His mouth dropped open. “How the hell—” He shook his head again. “Don’t tell me.”

“It’s the season of giving.” I grinned. “Ho, ho, ho.”

“And stop with the jolly old Santa act.”

“So get me in to see him before court.”

“Okay. Be there at seven thirty.”

“No problem.”

Steve looked up as we entered the holding room. “Royle, who is this?”

“My name is Nick, and I’m the PI helping your lawyer on your case.”

“What?! I didn’t ask for any help. I’m sorry, but Mr. Royle didn’t have the authority to hire you.”

“Actually, Mr. Knight, I did have the authority,” said Royle.

“I’m not paying for this.”

“No, you’re not.” He pulled out our contract. “I am.”

“What the hell are you thinking?” Steve yelled at me, “And who are you to get in the middle of my life?”

“I’m here now, whatever the reason, and you need to look at this.” I laid out the paperwork.

He averted his eyes.

“Well, if you won’t look, I’ll explain what this is,” said Royle. “It’s absolute proof that your CEO set you up.”

He shrugged. “So?”

“You’re a smart man, so I’m not surprised you realized that long ago,” said Royle. “What I want to know is, why in hell are you letting him do this to you? Why aren’t you letting me do my job?”

Steve shrank from the near-shout. “I... I just think it’s best this way.”

“Do you want me to get disbarred?”

“What?”

“I now have proof, in my hands, that you’re not guilty. If I don’t use it and the Kansas Bar Association finds out, I’ll lose my license.” He pounded the table. “And they’ll be right to take it.”

Steve shook his head. “No, I— I don’t want. I just... I want...”

“I know what you want, Steve.” I leaned over. “And I know why.”

“You can’t!”

“I brought you a Christmas present.”

“What?”

I slid over the package. “It’s the Christmas season. You should open it.” I raised my hand. “Though you should read the tag first.”

He blinked and stared at the package like a gladiator facing a lion.

“Go on, Steve.”

He lifted the tag and dropped it almost immediately. He came at me in a rage. I caught his hands.

“You had no right!”

“Maybe not, but here we are.”

“Mr. Knight.” Royle came between us. “Sit down.”

But Steve had already fallen back to the chair, rage replaced by wonder and grief. “How?”

“Look at the tag again.”

“To Jennifer,” he whispered. “From Maggie?” He looked up. “How can this be?”

“Open the present. Let’s see if there’s a clue inside.”

He stared back, but finally his hands moved. Reverently, he laid the tag to the side. Then he undid each piece of tape with care, preserving as much of the wrapping paper as he could.

Tears slid down his cheek when he saw the journal. “It’s Maggie’s—” He swallowed hard.

“It looks like there’s a couple of bookmarks.”

He pushed the diary to me. “I can’t.”

“Very well.” I opened the diary to the first mark and read. “December 18th, 2018. Finally! And I like her. Her name’s Jennifer. It’s a shame about her husband, but she’ll be good for Steve, once Steve gets over his stupid guilt. Which makes me think I should send that fool a Christmas present. No, I’ve a better idea.”

Steve wept.

I flipped to the second bookmark. “January 12th, 2019. It’s not long now. I’m ready to be done. I look at Steve and I regret ever fighting this damn disease. He looks awful. He still hasn’t told me about Jennifer. I think tomorrow I’ll tell him to go marry that woman. She’s a dear. I wish they’d gotten together back in 2015. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when I tell him *that*.”

“She— She died that night!” Steve wept. “She kept trying to talk, but the doctors...”

“Maggie made arrangements in December to send this to Jennifer. She told her to give it to you when the time was right.”

Steve slid to the floor, crying.

I helped him up.

“I betrayed her too,” Steve babbled.

“You have,” I agreed. “Jennifer’s more than a little upset at how your trial is going.”

“What?”

“She’s been in the back, watching.”

“No!”

“Yes.” I leaned over. “So. Now you have to answer a question. Is she worth fighting for? Or are you going to throw away Maggie’s gift and let those bastards at your company go free?”

He didn’t answer, but Royle had a predatory smile on his face.

Jennifer waited for me when I walked out of the courtroom. The charges had been dropped, and they were already processing Steve out.

“I looked you up,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Patara’s an odd name, so I wondered why I recognized it. Too much parochial school, it turns out.”

“That happens.”

“Still saving soldiers from execution and resurrecting pickled children, aren’t you?”

“Let’s just say I never liked my time in prison.” I looked past her. “Speaking of which.” I pointed. Royle was ushering Knight out of the courthouse. Knight glanced over and turned away.

She hesitated.

“Go to him, Jennifer. You know he won’t, even after seeing the diary.” I smiled. “*That* would be a miracle.”

She laughed. “Merry Christmas, Nick.” She took a deep breath and went over to him.

They stood for a long while. He reached up to touch her cheek. Then they fell into each other’s arms.

And that’s why I check those lists twice.

Author Notes

Rob Howell is the creator of the Shijuren fantasy setting (www.shijuren.org) and an author in the Four Horsemen Universe (www.mercenaryguild.org). He writes primarily medieval fantasy, space opera, military science fiction, and alternate history.

He is a reformed medieval academic, a former IT professional, and a retired soda jerk.

His parents discovered quickly books were the only way to keep Rob quiet. He latched onto the Hardy Boys series first and then anything he could reach. Without books, it's unlikely all three would have survived.

His latest release in Shijuren is *Where Now the Rider*, the third in the Edward series of swords and sorcery mysteries. The next release in that world is *None Call Me Mother*, the conclusion to the epic fantasy trilogy *The Kreisens*.

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