

Confessions
of a
Cat Burglar
by
"Cat" Monroe



Al Stevens

“Confessions of a Cat Burglar”

The book you have in front of you is an appendix to “A Dead Ringer,” a mystery novel featuring the character, Stanley Bentworth, a soft-boiled detective. In that book, Bentworth finds a manuscript of memoirs written on a prison typewriter by his father many years before. The novel uses fragments of the manuscript to give essential information to the protagonist and the reader. This book contains the complete manuscript.

This book is fiction. Any resemblance to any actual event or any real person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Also by Al Stevens

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Foreword

These are the memoirs, confessions if you will, of my father, Cat Monroe, the infamous cat burglar who preyed on the wealthy element in Philadelphia during the nineteen fifties and sixties. He wrote this book while serving twenty-five to life in a state penitentiary.

I never knew my father or, until recently, even that he was my father, although I had heard of the man called Cat Monroe. A recent search for my birth mother resulted in the discovery of who my father was and his writings in a trunk in the attic, some of which follow this Foreword in their original typed format.

A lot of what you'll read in these pages is nothing to be proud of. My father broke laws and took things that didn't belong to him, and he served time for those misdeeds. But this story provides insight into the clever and inventive mind that contrived and implemented his heists, the story of a man who lived his entire life on ill-gotten gains and without ever holding down a regular job.

Stanley Bentworth, 2012

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by
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Dedication

To Alice, who will some day find her Treasure Island.

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Preface

My name is Caleb Henry "Cat" Monroe, and I'm writing these words from Rockview State Correctional Institution in the Pennsylvania State Prison System, my residence ever since 1967 when I was arrested, tried, and convicted of breaking into a US Senator's country estate. Because I'm a three-time loser, because there was a citizen on the premises when the robbery took place, and because my partner was carrying a gun, I'm doing hard time. I'll tell more about how I got here in a later chapter.

This book is an account of my adventures and escapades in crime both in and out of prison. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? Well, don't get your hopes up. This business is more boring than exciting. For each caper, you get a couple weeks or more of dry, monotonous preparation, and then, when the drudgery is finished, you get maybe twenty minutes of adrenalin pumping. And, of course, the loot.

There are exceptions, though. Like when you get

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caught. More adrenalin, less loot.

Someday my children might read this book. They won't know me or who I am, and I don't know who or where they are. But maybe my wife Alice can get it published, and they might read it, never knowing it was written by their old man, and they might learn from it that prison is an awful place, and crime does not pay.

Well, actually, crime does pay, but the retirement plan sucks.

This book, then, is my legacy to them.

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Chapter 1

I was born Caleb Henry Monroe, Junior, in Philadelphia in 1932. My father, Caleb Stanley Monroe, was a long-shoreman and was killed in an accident at the port when I was nine. My mother did her best to hold the family together. She worked two jobs, and my sister Susie and I kind of raised ourselves.

A young boy with ~~litle~~ little or no supervision, I was always looking for adventure, something to pass the time, break the boredom. So, I started going into neighbors' houses when they weren't home. I didn't do it to steal anything, just to look through their stuff and see what I could see without getting caught. I was a typical stupid kid with too much time on my hands, no supervision, and nothing better to do.

My secret explorations evolved into burglary when I was about twelve. A neighbor lady, Mrs. Winslow, a widow, always left her doors unlocked, as did most people in our neighborhood, and I went in one afternoon while she was out. I rummaged through her meager pos-

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sessions and took a brooch that looked like it might be worth something. What had started out as juvenile explorations turned into full-fledged burglary, and I was on my way.

That evening Mrs. Winslow visited us in tears. My mother brought her a cup of tea and sat with her.

"Someone broke in my house," she said. Actually, I hadn't broken in, even in the legal sense. The door was unlocked. She cried as she told about the invasion and the violation of her privacy. "And my pearl brooch. It was a gift from Mr. Winslow before he died. It isn't worth anything, but he gave it to me."

I felt bad about that. I had stolen more than a piece of cheap jewelry from an old lady. I had taken her sense of safety and security.

Keep in mind that it bothered me only because we knew her. I never had such remorse about stealing from strangers, a character flaw that held me in good stead for most of my career.

She stopped crying, mopped her cheeks with a lace-

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edged hanky, and blew her nose. "You send your sons overseas to fight and die for their country," she said, "and this is what you get in return." Then the crying started again.

I didn't sleep well that night.

The next day I waited for her to go out and went to return the brooch. But her doors were locked, a precaution she hadn't needed before.

I bent a wire coat hanger into the shape of one of those old house keys, picked the lock to her back door, this time actually "breaking" in, and returned the brooch to where I'd found it.

Picking that lock changed my life. I formed a life-long fascination with locks and security systems. To this day, whenever I see a lock, I want to open it without a key, not necessarily to retrieve what it protects, although that became my primary use for the skill, but just because it's a puzzle, a gauntlet thrown down, a challenge.

A classified ad in Popular Mechanics offered a home

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study course in locksmithing. I did not have the thirty-two dollars, so I taught myself by reading books and magazines in the public library. And by practicing with any lock I could put my hands on.

As parents, preachers, teachers, and other do-gooders would say, it kept me off the streets.

I had no money for specialty tools, so I built my own from whatever I could find. I made tools from awls, screwdrivers, and lengths of piano wire that I cut out of ~~teh~~ the old upright piano in the parlor. Nobody noticed. Most notes on a piano have more than one string. I guess for when a string breaks, to allow you to keep playing. But, I digress.

By the time I took up the cat burglar trade, I had quite a collection of special-purpose tools designed to get me through the barriers that people put up to protect their valuables. Doors, windows, desks, and cabinets, you name it. I could open it.

Years later, I sent in for that home study course to see what I'd missed. Nothing. Everything they taught

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for thirty-two bucks was covered somewhere or another
in library books and magazine articles.

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Chapter 2

My second excursion into breaking and entering was in high school. Finals were coming and most of my friends didn't study and were ill-prepared. I went into the school one evening--they didn't lock schools at night back then--and broke into the teachers' desks to get the test questions. I took one copy of each test, which wouldn't be missed because they always mimeographed more than they needed.

For five bucks each, my classmates copied the questions. How they got the answers would be their problem. As a result of my underground operation, the class of '50 had record high grades, a statistic that the faculty held over successive class's heads for years to follow. Fortunately, we had all graduated by then and weren't around to feel the heat of their resentment.

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Chapter 3

Five bucks here and there had accustomed me to making a nice living for a kid without having to punch a time clock or answer to a boss. I needed something more permanent than stealing test questions, however, so I thought back to when I had gone into Mrs. Winslow's house, and a plan formed up.

Philadelphia has an effective mass transit rail system, and I traveled to different parts of the city to scope out the upper crust neighborhoods. I'd tell my mother that I was going to a basketball game and ride to one of those neighborhoods, walk the streets, and case the residences, looking for likely targets.

I hadn't learned to get advance information and qualify a specific potential target. I planned to break into houses at random--willy, nilly, even--based only on the affluence of the neighborhood. Nice house, nice car, must be nice stuff in there. Made sense to me.

The first time was almost my last.

It was a wide two-story brick house with white trim,

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a full front porch with columns, and a detached garage. The family had two cars, almost unheard of in the post-war years, and they were both top-of-the-line sedans, one a Cadillac, the other a Hudson. I watched the house for several weeks, hiding in a hedge across the street, eating candy bars and drinking cokes. I always managed to be home before my Mom got there from her second job.

The family in that brick house always went out on Wednesday evenings. It might have been to go bowling or even choir practice. But I watched long enough to establish a pattern.

I went in on a Wednesday. The back door was locked, but the lock was easy to pick, even for a fifteen-year-old amateur.

Once inside, I had no floor plan, no idea of where the valuables would be, and nothing with which to carry whatever I stole. Talk about unprepared...

I did have a small flashlight and the presence of mind not to turn on any lights. Neighbors might wonder

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why lights were going on and off on a Wednesday evening.

I located the dining room and the silver cabinet. Payload. To tell the sterling from the silver plate, I examined the engraving on a piece from a set. If it said "sterling," that's the set I wanted, and I laid the pieces in neat rows on the dining room table. But I had nothing to carry it in. I'd need a pillowcase, and they would be upstairs. I should have gone up there first. The jewelry would be up there too.

A study off the center hallway was a likely place for them to store cash. I went in and rifled the desk drawers and cabinets. I pulled books off the bookcases and looked everywhere. A wall safe hung between two book cases. The money would be in there. But I didn't know how to crack a safe.

This was getting me nowhere.

I went upstairs and located the master bedroom. I searched all the drawers and the closet, and did not find any jewelry other than some costume junk.

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This heist was turning into a bust.

I pulled a pillowcase off a pillow and left the room to return to the silverware. When I went to the landing, I heard a dog growling. That's a sound you never want to hear when you're someplace you shouldn't be. I shined the flashlight down the stairs. The light reflected off the dog's eyes. A Doberman stood at the foot of the stairs, his teeth bared and him poised to attack. Apparently, he had been asleep when I searched the downstairs.

To this day, I have no idea why that dog didn't wake up with all the noise I made opening doors and rummaging in the silverware. I suspect it was old and hard of hearing. Whatever the reason, I was trapped with my only exit route blocked by an angry dog.

There was no way I was going to go down those stairs. But if I stayed where I was, I'd be caught when the family got home. I slowly backed away towards the bedroom. The dog barked loudly and came running up the stairs. I ducked in the bedroom and slammed the door

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just as the dog reached it. He kept barking and scratching at the door, and I almost wet my pants.

A window at the rear of the room was my only hope for an escape. I could stay where I was and be captured, go out the door and be eaten alive, or jump out the window and risk breaking a leg. No problem making that choice. Why didn't I bring a rope?

The window overlooked the back porch roof. I raised the sash, climbed out, and dropped onto the roof. No injuries so far. Then I held onto the roof's edge and lowered myself into the bushes below. Rose bushes with thorns. That hurt and tore my clothes. I extracted myself from the prickly stickers and checked the backyard. It was surrounded by a high wooden fence. I walked quickly to the gate at the back just as I heard the sirens. Flashing lights lit up the neighborhood from in front of the house. Apparently a neighbor had called the cops. Either someone saw me, or that dog only barked when something was wrong.

I went out the gate and was on the sidewalk of a

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back street. I walked briskly to the corner, looking over my shoulder all the way, and found my way to the train station, empty handed in my first foray into being a criminal but coming away from that experience with several lessons learned.

Know the target's house and where they keep their valuables before going in. Make sure there are no dogs. Always have an escape route planned. More than one if possible.

And have something to carry the loot in. A pillowcase from the target's bed won't do. White linen and lace tend to show up even in the dark of night. And a guy walking around at night carrying a pillowcase filled with whatever looks suspicious at the least.

I found my old newspaper sack in the garage from when I was a paperboy for a brief time. A canvas sack with a shoulder strap and the paper's logo on the side, it was the perfect size for hauling tools and loot, and I could walk down the street carrying it without drawing attention to myself. Just another paperboy deliver-

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ing his papers.

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Chapter 4

Thus marked the ignominious beginning to my B&E (breaking and entering) career. At first I thought of it as a sideline, a hobby, something I did for fun. Other kids went roller skating or hung out in pool halls and teen centers. I broke into upscale houses and took stuff. The stuff I took had value, though, and what started as a way for a bored kid to kill time and have some adventure soon became a way of life.

I broke into at least one house a month after that, learning new things with each entry, and building an impressive collection of cash, silver, and jewelry, which I hid in the garage.

True, I was building up a nest egg, but I didn't know how to account for it, how to explain where it came from, and how to convert the traceable valuables into untraceable cash. I was making just under a thousand dollars a week, which was unheard of in the 1950s, but I hadn't yet learned about fencing and money laundering, subjects I'd seriously need to understand before I

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could actually profit from my forays.

And I was bypassing a lot of loot because I didn't know how to open a safe, a serious deficiency for a burglar.

I became what the newspapers call a "cat burglar," but not a second story man. There's a difference. A second story man usually goes in through a second story entrance. Those guys can climb sheer walls, leap from a tree limb to a balcony, and scale ropes tossed onto the roof or a railing with grappling hooks to take hold and support their weight. I don't do that ~~sh~~ stuff. I don't have the strength, and the idea of dangling from a rope several stories above the ground isn't my kind of fun. I like doors and windows. Close to the ground.

I was doing it all by myself at first. Selecting the target, scoping out the setup, learning the habits of the residents, and selling my loot to whomever would buy it. I decided I needed other people: leads and fences.

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Chapter 5

A lead finds the targets. He tells the burglar who to hit and when in exchange for a share of the profits.

A fence buys the loot at so much on the dollar. If it's bundled cash with consecutive serial numbers, a fence buys that, too.

You rarely get bundles of consecutively-numbered cash from a house. Banks, businesses, and armored cars, maybe, but not private residences. I never had to fence cash.

I needed to keep my leads and fences at a manageable number. Having too many people in on what you are doing can spell trouble. Eventually somebody gets caught and rats out his pals to save his own hide.

To recruit leads, I polled my street pals, kids like me who mostly skipped school and hung out on street corners. I'd feel them out one at a time to see who was interested. Without getting specific, I might say, "Want to make some dough on the side? Something less than legal?" If a guy seemed unsure or nervous, that's the

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last he'd hear about it. If he was interested, he'd almost always assume that I needed dealers for my dope, a rare commodity on the street in the 1940s. I'd say, "No, this is easier. I take all the risks, and you can't get caught." That got their attention. Then I'd explain how to scope out the home of a wealthy person. If I could get two or three guys doing that, they'd handle the tedium, staking out houses, logging people's comings and goings, looking for dogs, and so on, and I'd stay busy, hitting two or three such qualified houses a week. I told them to take as much time as they needed in order to qualify a target. The more I knew about a heist, the less chance I had of getting caught, and the better the chance of a meaningful score.

One of my best leads was David, a rich kid whose parents had cut off his allowance when they caught him drinking. Being from a rich family, he had access to the homes of other rich kids, the ones he rubbed elbows with in his parents' social circles. He knew everything about them, their pets, where their folks kept the

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valuables, the family's habits with respect to coming and going, vacations, and so on. The commissions I paid him made up for the allowance he no longer got.

Often a lead would have a client, someone who wanted to get his hands on something specific, something that belonged to someone else. I would not do museums, department stores, or government buildings, though. The alarm and security systems were too sophisticated. But private collections were fair game.

The lead would negotiate his price with the client, and the lead would tell me what and where the loot was and anything else I needed to ~~facillate~~ facilitate the theft. Then I would negotiate my price with the lead. If the numbers didn't add up, either the negotiating started all over again, or we'd abandon the heist.

This was a situation where a lead had to take some chances. This kind of job does not involve the burglar fencing the loot. I'd deliver the goods directly to and collect from the lead. He'd sell it to the client. So, for a while, he'd be in possession of the stolen goods.

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Travel agents make good leads. They talk one-on-one with potential victims and can casually ask the most penetrating yet seemingly innocent questions.

For example, he would say to his client, "Now be sure and set the alarm before you leave for the airport," and they might say, "We don't have one," or "I certainly will." That way, I'd know whether I had an alarm to reckon with.

Another good place to find leads was among construction and maintenance workers who service the houses and grounds of wealthy people. Carpenters, pool service, lawn care, plumbers, electricians, roofers, siding, bricklayers. Those are the first people the cops check out after a burglary, so they want to be clean, but they can provide information to the rest of us in exchange for a piece of the action, all the while keeping a safe distance from the crime itself.

To recruit leads, I'd cruise neighborhoods I wanted to hit and write down company names on service trucks. Or I'd talk to the guy mowing the lawn under the pre-

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tense of needing lawn care. The idea was to find a laborer who wanted to augment his income. The main plumber, the guy whose name was on the truck, wasn't a likely lead--he was in business and had a reputation--but his grunt worker, the guy who dug the trenches and carried the tools, was.

One of my most trusted leads in later years was my neighbor, Melvin Lohr, a construction worker. He worked in all the big houses in the upscale communities. He's also who got me put away in here for a long time. I'll tell more about Mel in later chapters.

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Chapter 6

Getting a reliable fence was easy. Back then almost any pawnshop would fence valuables, looking the other way when something of value came through the door. Getting a pawnbroker to trust a teenager, however, was another matter. That was an obstacle I'd have to overcome.

After a few months, I had a stash of jewelry and silver that I didn't know what to do with, so I visited pawn shops, feeling out pawnbrokers, testing the waters. Most of them didn't believe me at first. Here was a kid, barely old enough to shave, offering to slide some valuable loot under the table. What kind of game is this? I was certain that they weren't worried that I might be a plant working for the cops, though. I was a neighborhood kid, everybody knew me, and the cops can't use kids, anyway. If one of the pawnbrokers showed the slightest interest, I'd bring in a choice necklace, silver soup ladle, or some such for them to appraise. "Where'd you get this, kid?" they'd ask. "Plenty more where that came from," I'd say.

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I never tried to fence anything the same month I stole it. The "hot sheets" that the cops passed out would be stale in short order. Nobody ever looked at page two.

The deal was, they'd give me less than they'd give a legitimate owner looking to pawn the same thing. The difference compensated them for their risk. So, if I had, for example, a coin collection, something they could piece out that was worth, say, ten grand, they'd probably give the owner maybe four or five for it if he came in to pawn it. I'd take two grand. That much discount was their incentive to do business. It didn't matter that I was low-balling my price. It was a big margin for them and a hundred percent profit for me.

I had this network of leads and fences in place working for me by the time I was seventeen years old. Some of them became lifelong friends. One fence, whose nickname was Pickett, became a family friend too. He still writes me letters even today.

Pickett was very influential to me in my young ca-

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reer. He introduced me to people he thought I ought to know and always gave me the best price he could on the items I fenced.

He taught me how to discern the good stuff from junk, too. I learned how to use a jeweler's eye loupe to choose only the best gems and how to tell a genuine antique from a replica.

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Chapter 7

I won't describe all the mundane burglaries I made over the years. I don't remember all of them. They kind of run together in my memory, and I didn't keep a journal. I'd go in, grab the good stuff, and leave undetected. It became routine.

But I will dwell on some of the significant ones.

I've already told about some of the targets I started with while I learned the trade as a teenager. The accounts that follow here are not comprehensive and might not be in strict chronological order. But they tell the story.

The cops eventually tied most of my burglaries together as being the work of one criminal. My modus operandi was consistent and predictable. I rarely broke a lock or window, I never made a mess searching for loot, and often, if a bed needed making, or a dinner table needed clearing, I'd do the small chore just as a way of thanking the owners for their possessions. It became my signature. Don't ask why I wanted or needed a

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signature, but I did.

The newspapers dubbed me the "gentleman cat burglar," the "gent" for short. They had a lot of fun speculating about who I was and where I'd hit next.

Once I became famous as the "gent," the press credited me with every break-in within a day's drive of Philadelphia.

"The mysterious 'gent' of international renown is suspected of having perpetuated the crime," the newspapers would say.

International, indeed. As if I slipped off to Monte Carlo and the Riviera every other week to relieve the rich and famous of their gold and jewels.

On a couple occasions, I got credit for multiple burglaries that happened at the same time in different parts of the state.

My wealthy objectives shared one trait that made them easy targets. They all thought they could not be hit. Their naivete and ingenuous attitudes never ceased to amaze me. You'd expect anyone who was a likely tar-

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get for my shenanigans to pull up the drawbridge and batten down the hatches. They never did. They just went on living their lives as if the "gentleman cat burglar" didn't exist.

That label led to my nickname, Cat. Pickett gave me that moniker, and it stuck, although my mother called me Caleb until the day she died.

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Chapter 8

One of my leads--let's call him Jerry--called me on a Saturday morning with what he said was a hot tip. A home in Chestnut Hill just ripe for the pickings. The family would be away in July on a one-week out-of-state vacation.

Jerry knew about the vacation because he was a travel agent and had booked the hotel for the family.

I won't give Jerry's real name because he never got caught and because he still works for the travel agency he was with when he was feeding me information on the side.

This house had an alarm. I'd have to find out what kind and how to disarm it.

There would be loot, plenty of it. Any family living in such a house in an upscale neighborhood with an alarm system would have fine silverware and jewelry. The master of this house collected rare coins, jade statuettes, and ivory chess sets. He told Jerry about them when Jerry prompted him to talk about his hob-

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bies. And cash. People then didn't totally trust banks. Too many of them remembered the Great Depression and banks crashing all over the country. They kept a lot of their money at home.

I went to the target house the night after they left. That was for an initial exploration. My plan for the first night was to scope out the alarm system and come back the next night with the tools I needed to get in.

I had a week. I could go in as many as five nights without detection.

Entrance into the house was a snap. To disable the alarm, I cut off electricity to the house, which I did with a heavy-duty wire cutter. I could leave it off all week. A back door into the kitchen had a simple garden-variety deadbolt lock, easy to pick.

A trip to the study revealed a wall safe hidden behind a hanging picture. For some reason rich people think burglars are too stupid to look behind pictures. Maybe they saw it in a movie.

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I didn't know doodley-squat about safe cracking. I've since learned more about it, which was some of how I became a two-time loser. More about that later.

To open this safe, I'd need help. I left the study, went into the dining room, and raided the silver drawer of the china closet. It was a good haul. But the treasure promised by this target was far from depleted. That safe beckoned.

The next night I brought a friend, Thumbs Barlow, known in Philly and New York's underground as the best small safe-cracker on the East Coast. He lived in Philly, and Pickett had recommended him.

We went inside together, and I watched while Thumbs opened the safe. He made a lot of noise, but when he was done, the safe was open and its hinges, handle, and dial were destroyed. Fast, efficient, and got the job done.

I wondered whether the demolished safe would tarnish my reputation as a "gentleman cat burglar."

We took cash, the coin collection, several pieces of jewelry, and a maple hinged box that contained about

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forty cut diamonds. I knew Pickett would give me at least ten thousand dollars for the items. That and the cash we took added up to about six grand each in a fifty-fifty split.

I went in one more night and took the coins, jade, and ivory. I estimated the total take from that heist to be almost twenty grand.

That was a lot of money for a teenager.

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Chapter 9

I needed to account for my income. I didn't want my mother or Susie knowing where the money was coming from. I also didn't want the cops wondering why this kid was throwing money around at the same time they were looking for a new cat burglar who was pillaging the homes of the Philadelphia elite.

So I asked Pickett. A pawnbroker in south Philly, he knew about such things. He told me I needed a legitimate business that involved cash and that looked like I was making money when I wasn't.

I looked through the classified ads of Popular Mechanics and found an ad saying that they were looking for writers to get their books published. I sent in for their literature, and a week later I had a package of glossy brochures promoting their services. For a fee, the company would typeset, print, and bind your book and ship and drop on your doorstep a pallet load of copies, which you would have to sell yourself. I showed the brochure to Pickett.

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He said, "That's a scam. A vanity press. Go across town to Bob's Printing and Engraving Shop (not the company's real name). He'll do all that for a lot less money. Only first, kid, you have to write the book."

My favorite book had always been "Treasure Island," and I had always wanted to write a book as good as that. Here was my chance. But I wasn't a writer. I spent the next two weeks in the public library reading every book about writing I could find. Then I bought a used Royal typewriter from Pickett, went home, and wrote a crime novel titled "The Summer Street Strangler" by Caleb Henry Monroe. It wasn't very good. Susie said it was so bad it made her throw up. But my mother loved it.

Bob's Printing and Engraving produced my book for a fee, which included five hundred copies, which I stored in the garage.

To launder my ill-gotten gains, I set up a card table in town on the sidewalk near Independence Hall, purportedly to sell books to tourists. At a fifty cents

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a book--no cheap dime novel for me--I actually sold a few. So I raised the price.

I went out with my card table infrequently and stayed only about an hour each time. Just enough to give the business the appearance of legitimacy that it needed. I even had a street vendor's license, which had been no problem. A trip to town hall took care of that.

A beat cop stopped at my makeshift kiosk one time to check my license. I gave him a complementary copy of "The Summer Street Strangler." He was pleased and asked me to autograph it for him, which I did.

On the record, I had sales worthy of the New York Times Best Seller list, when I might actually sell only one or two books each outing. If that. I banked the cash I had stolen, recording the deposits as book sale receipts, kept records, and paid income taxes. The very essence of money laundering.

My Mom was proud. She bragged to her friends about her son, the successful author, and several of them actually bought copies of "The Summer Street Strangler."

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I hope they never read it.

From the laundered income from pseudo-sales of my book, I was able to buy my car, dress nicely, and take girls on dates to nice restaurants and the theater. Life was looking prosperous.

My mother's pride in her son's achievements as an entrepreneur and published author did not last long.

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Chapter 10

The next lesson I learned was a simple one: When you're making more money than you can spend, don't expand your business.

I was at Pickett's to fence an ivory chess set, and he introduced me to a fellow named "Wheels" Wheeler. "You guys should get to know one another," Pickett said.

Wheels dealt in stolen cars. He had young men all over the city who heisted cars on demand, which is to say that Wheels told them what to look for. Wheels's clients would put in an order for a particular kind of Buick, for example, and Wheels would subcontract the heist to one of his "boys."

He said to me, "Can you boost a locked car?"

"I can get the door open, but I don't know how to get it started."

"I'll teach you," he said. "Come to my shop tomorrow."

Wheels's shop was fronted by a foreign car repair business. He'd take in a stolen car, repaint it, change

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the serial numbers, and register it with the DMV with a counterfeit title and port manifest from another country. Then he'd deliver it to his client or put it on his lot.

He wanted a Cadillac. I knew where there were several Caddies parked in private garages near houses I had targeted. Wheels showed me how to hot-wire a car and sent me out on the search.

I selected the newest Caddie I knew about and staked out the house. When the family was away, I opened the garage door, hot-wired the ignition, and backed out onto the street. As I did, a police car turned facing me into the street. I looked behind me. Another police car was there. Their lights started flashing.

It turned out that the family had left Granny at home, and she had called the police to report suspicious sounds from the garage.

I didn't rat out Wheels or Pickett. The cops tried to sweat it out of me, but I insisted that I did it on my own just to see what it was like to drive a fancy car.

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I worried that because the car belonged to an affluent family, the cops would make the connection between their newly captured car ~~theif~~ thief and the "gentleman cat burglar." But they didn't.

Because I was eighteen, the city prosecuted me as an adult. But because I had no priors, the judge gave me the minimum sentence in a minimum-security facility near home. With good behavior, I was out in less than a year, back on the streets, a one-time loser with a rap sheet, not long enough to be considered a "usual suspect," but sufficient to make me a "person of interest" whenever a luxury car was stolen.

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Chapter 11

Besides printing my book, Bob of Bob's Printing and Engraving became a lead. He printed invitations for most of the high society functions in Philly. Weddings, balls, charity cotillions, and so on. Bob knew when and where there would be a function and who was invited. The upper crust never addressed invitations by hand. The print shop engraved the envelopes, too by using a list that the client provided.

Bob would tip me off so I'd know who was due to be out hob-nobbing with their high society acquaintances and at what time. I particularly liked weddings, because the whole family was invited, which meant an empty house. Most household help did not live on the premises, and they usually took time off when the family was out.

The unfortunate part of those society leads is that much of the better jewelry goes out with the lady of the house. But nobody takes silverware, coin collections, and large amounts of cash to a wedding reception, and no woman of prominence would dare be seen wearing

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the same baubles at two functions in a row, so there was always plenty left at home for me.

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Chapter 12

My mother died when I was about twenty-one. I still lived at home, and that was a tough day. I came home one morning and found her on the kitchen floor with bacon burning on the stove.

The doctor said her heart just quit. I could have told him that. She was dead. But I never knew the underlying cause, and, I guess I didn't need to. She was fifty-four, too young to go.

After the funeral, my sister Susie and I sat in the old house going through her things to see what we wanted and what we could give to the Salvation Army. When it came to the house itself, we decided that I'd live there and take care of it while Susie went to college. Mom left no money to speak of, so I agreed to pay Susie's way in exchange for keeping the house. We didn't sign any papers.

"Is your book selling that well?" she asked.

"Runaway best-seller," I said.

"No accounting for the tastes of the masses," she

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said. Susie was very bright and a bit of a snob. I think she knew what I was doing but didn't want to ask.

The house was in a quiet neighborhood and had a detached garage. I moved into the master bedroom, kept Susie's room intact for when she came home, and converted what had been my room into a study.

I planned to live a quiet life as a nocturnal burglar and spend my days at home reading and planning. And so I did for a several years.

Then I met Alice.

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Chapter 13

It was 1963. I was hanging around a civil rights demonstration in a park in downtown Philly. Someone had told me that many liberal but wealthy people showed up at these protests because of the general state of civil rights in the country. I wanted to see who they were and where they lived. I thought maybe I'd recognize someone among the protestors from my other scouting expeditions in the rich neighborhoods. Those protests and marches went on for days, which could make for easy pickings at the houses of affluent protestors.

Do I feel bad about robbing social activists while they're out trying to fix the world's problems? Not in the slightest. Many of them just wanted to get their pictures in the papers so the world would believe they cared about the plight of the downtrodden. But while the real protestors slept on sidewalks and in doorways, they'd go home to their posh houses at sundown. Sanctimonious hypocrites if you ask me.

All that notwithstanding, I'd have to go into their

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houses during the day while they demonstrated, something I hadn't done since stealing and returning Mrs. Winslow's brooch when I was a boy. I was a night owl. Darkness was my friend.

I was leaning against a hot dog stand, watching the demonstrators and passing time with the hot dog vendor when this cute little doll in a loose, ankle-length house dress, lots of beads, and bare feet came walking back and forth, looking at the hot dogs and at the vendor. I knew what she was doing. As soon as the vendor got preoccupied, she was going to grab a hot dog and run off with it. I figured she was hungry and didn't have the coins. She held my attention too because she was braless, and the breeze kept pushing the housedress against her bosom. Enough about that.

As she went by for the tenth or eleventh time, it was clear she wasn't going to score. The vendor had his eye on her, too. I grabbed her arm, and she swung around as if she was going to hit me.

"Hold on," I said. "Are you hungry?"

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She looked around as if to tell whether any of her hippie friends could see her talking to an establishment person.

"Yeah," she said. "What of it?"

"Tell the man what you want," I said. "My treat."

She went home with me, presumably to have a roof over her head that night. A thunderstorm was coming, and the streets would be inhospitable. Susie was off at school, so Alice could use her room for the night.

We sat up half the night drinking apple wine, Alice smoking a joint, and together solving the social problems of the world.

Needless to say, Alice didn't sleep in Susie's room. Two months later we were married by a judge in city hall.

Alice was a junkie. I should have realized it when she lit up that joint. But that was just marijuana, and everyone knew it wasn't addictive. I didn't know she did the hard stuff too until much later when my pre-launched cash reserve began to come up short.

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We went through it all time and again. Alice would take some money and connect with a pusher. Then when I'd catch her, she'd swear it wouldn't happen again, I'd forgive her, and the cycle would start all over.

I asked her once how she supported her habit before she met me. She said it was from panhandling. I hoped it was true.

She tried counseling, rehab, cold turkey, and even did a month in jail one time when she was picked up for holding. While she was away, I built my secret stash.

From that point on, Alice would never get her hands on any of the proceeds from my burglaries. I'd fence the goods and put all the cash away, holding out only what we needed to get by. We might have lived to a higher standard, but that could have drawn attention to me. And it was better than feeding my wife's destructive habits.

Pickett had taken a liking to Alice from the first time he met her. She'd ride with me to visit him when I had things to fence, and he always had a bauble or some

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kind of appliance to give her. I don't know what she did with those gifts, but he enjoyed giving them to her, and she liked the attention and the way he flattered her.

"Cat, how'd you latch on to such a pretty girl, you being so homely and all?" and, "You ever get tired of her, you just drop her off here one morning."

He had to know that being nice to Alice was good business. It endeared him to her, and she didn't want me using any other fence.

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Chapter 14

In 1965 Alice had a baby boy. We named him Stanley after my father. Alice doesn't like my real name, and she didn't want her son named Cat, Junior.

During her pregnancy, Alice cut way back on the drugs. She didn't want the baby born with a addiction, so she stuck to marijuana and cheap wine. But she still couldn't quite kick the habit, so she'd get high from time to time. After Stanley was born, she was back on the hard stuff.

I was as good a father as I knew how. I didn't have a lot of experience, my own father working all the time and then dying before I really got to know him. But I did my best, figuring that natural paternal instincts would serve me well.

How good a father can a criminal be? There was always the chance that I'd get caught and have to do time. I wondered what my son would say in years to come when other kids talked about what their fathers did for a living.

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There was one advantage to my occupation. I was home all day long to tend to and play with my son.

I was a good father. But only for two months.

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Chapter 15

I did the crime that made me a two-time loser on my thirty-third birthday. Having done time for that care-less car theft fifteen years before, I had always had all my targets well-cased before going in, and I stayed within the parameters of what I knew and what had proven to be successful.

But just like the first time, I got caught because I abandoned my proven modus operandi and took a risk on what should have been a big score.

It was a night club, not my usual kind of target. My lead, a plumber, had said that the establishment hosted illegal gambling in the back room. He'd fixed a leaky pipe in the wall, and he saw the whole setup. It was a cash business--poker games mostly--and they put the house proceeds in a safe as the night went on. As far as he could tell, they took the money out once a week on Saturday mornings.

I would have a ten-hour window of opportunity to get in, open the safe, take the cash, and get out of

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there. If I did it on Friday night, I'd get the biggest payoff.

The only risk as I saw it was that the owners might be connected. Apparently they had strong protection from city hall, which was why they were allowed to operate. My lead didn't think they were mob-related, but you can never tell.

This entry was outside my realm of experience. I was more comfortable going into houses. But the lead said he saw them put stacks of fifty and one hundred dollar bills into the safe on a Friday night when he was working late.

I also had little experience in safecracking. Knowing I'd want all the details, the plumber had made a note of the size, make, and model of the safe.

I called on Thumbs to ask him about it. He had one of the same model in his shop.

"This one's a piece of cake, but it takes some time and you'll make a lot of noise."

"Do you want in on the heist?" I asked.

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"Not in your wildest dreams. It's a professional gambling organization. I'll take my chances with the cops, but those guys have nasty ways of getting even."

He showed me how to knock the dial and hinges off with a sharp chisel and hammer. Do that, and the door falls off the safe.

I looked his safe over. "I'm not sure I'm strong enough to crack those hinges," I said.

"Well," he said, "You can always blow it."

"How?"

"Drill a one quarter inch hole here." He pointed at a spot diagonally from the dial's upper right quadrant and about a quarter inch away from the edge of the dial. "That's a pilot hole. Then use that as a guide to countersink a one inch hole. Stuff some of the plastic into the hole, put a cap and fuse on it, and light it. Get the hell away from the safe and cover your ears. After the big pop, the door should swing open."

"Got one I can practice on?" I asked.

"Hell, no. You'll get all the practice you need when

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you get in there. Who knows? Maybe you'll get good at it, and I won't see you no more."

Thumbs gave me the tools and blasting materials I'd need, and I went home to plan the entry and exit.

I hung around the nightclub for several nights and watched the comings and goings at the rear door. Friday night was busy, and I saw several well-known men and women, local politicians and businesspeople, going into the casino.

I walked around the building after hours and checked for ways to get in. Besides the main entrance, which was locked and barred when the night club was closed, there was a back door. I staked it out from across the street in my car. Sure enough, each night from two to five, the rear door would open and patrons would come out and go to their cars, which were always parked in the lot behind the building out of sight from the main thoroughfare.

Close inspection of the back door indicated that it was heavily barred from inside. The plate bolts came

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through the door to the exterior and were welded in place, a good indication that the door couldn't be opened from the outside when the bar was in place, which it would be after closing.

If I could become a regular patron in the gambling club, I could case the inside. The night club bartenders were getting to know me pretty well. I always carried my backpack filled with library books, and I'd sit and read while I sipped my drink and tried my best to look like a college student hard at work. One evening I came right out and asked Jake, one of the bartenders, "How does a fellow get into the back room?"

Jake looked at me and hesitated. "You have to know somebody."

"I know you," I said. "Are you somebody?"

He looked doubtful. "I can get you in there, but it's a thousand dollar stake to take a chair. Cash."

"I don't have that much with me. How about tomorrow?"

"Sure. Come by then. I'll get you in."

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I said goodnight and went into the men's room. It was a one-holer, so I could lock the door from the inside while I was in there checking it out. There was no window, but the room had a dropped ceiling with rectangular fiberboard tiles suspended in a grid of metal channels. I stood on the toilet and pushed a tile up. There were rafters with plywood forming makeshift floors above the tiles. Perfect.

The next evening I went to the casino and sat at the bar. I had the thousand in my pocket, but I didn't plan on losing much of it.

When Jake came on duty, he nodded to me and gestured for me to follow him. He took me in the casino and introduced me to the doorman, who patted me down, searched my backpack, found only books, and directed me to a seat at a poker table. The game was five card stud. I put my thousand on the table and joined the game.

As I played, I cased the room. The safe sat across the room against a wall. It was open. Too bad I wasn't a stickup man. I couldn't see much security other than the

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doorman who wore a pistol on his belt under his jacket.

Every now and then a dealer would take piles of money from his table to the safe. The house took a percentage of each pot, so they were guaranteed to make money no matter how the cards fell.

I won a few bucks and lost a few bucks, back and forth, up and down. These guys weren't great poker players, but neither was I. When I was down about two hundred, I excused myself, said goodnight to the players and the dealer and left. I knew now how I was going to empty the safe and get away.

On Friday I went back. I had my tools in my backpack covered with books. When I got there, I sat and had a drink at the bar. Then I went into the men's room and hid the tools in the ceiling, after which I came out and went to the casino again. The doorman patted me down and showed me to a table. I played until a few hours before closing time, and as before I lost a couple hundred.

The open safe was stuffed with money, just as my

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lead had predicted. I said goodnight to the dealer and other players and went out to the bar. Jake poured me a draft beer and went in the back. There were about three customers still there and no staff in sight. I went in the men's room, left the door unlocked in case anyone else would need to come in, and hoisted myself up into the ceiling, replacing the tile below me on its frame.

I waited for what seemed like forever, frequently checking my watch with my penlight. Then, not long after four, the lights went out. I could hear the sounds of people leaving and doors closing. I waited another half hour. Then I put my tools in the backpack, left the books above the ceiling, and lowered myself to the floor. Not making a sound, I opened the door into the bar. It was dark. Using my penlight, I found my way to the casino door, opened it, and went in.

The safe was closed. Just for the heck of it I pulled on the handle. It opened. The idiots hadn't bothered spinning the dial to lock it. That saved me at least an hour and a lot of noise.

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I took the money from the safe and put it and my tools in the backpack. Now all I had to do was get out of there.

I went to the back door and lifted the bar. The door opened, I went out, and walked to my car, looking around to make sure no one was watching. I drove home and went to bed.

On Saturday morning I put the cash, which was about thirty grand, in my secret stash. I figured I was in the clear. There was nothing about the robbery in the morning newspaper. It was an illegal gambling operation, and I guess they didn't need the publicity.

Then the cops came. They put the cuffs on me and hauled me to the station for questioning. I got a public defender lawyer because I wanted to act impoverished and not like a guy who had a big stash in reserve, and he had a confab with the cops. He came to my cell.

"Why did those guys call the cops?" I asked him.
"Aren't they afraid of being busted?"

"Nah. They've got half the force on the take. They

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want their money back."

"How did they find me?"

"Well, first, the bartender remembers you. He made you from a mug shot."

Terrific. The very ploy that got me into the place got me busted.

"Okay, so I was there. How do they know I robbed the place?"

"The thief left library books in the bathroom ceiling."

"What about them?"

"One of them is checked out to your wife."

Wouldn't you know it. In my haste to get my stuff together, I grabbed up one too many library books. I had stolen the others from the library.

"How did they know to look in the ceiling?"

"The cops look ~~everw~~ everywhere. They figured the only way anyone could have pulled it off was by hiding on the premises until after closing. That ceiling was the only place in the building where anyone could hide

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without being noticed."

The best laid plans...

"You can cop a plea on this," the lawyer said. "But they want two things."

"What are they?"

"You don't testify about what goes on in there."

"What else?"

"They want the money back."

"I don't have the money," I said, which was almost true. It was hidden away where nobody would ever find it. "I used it to pay off a bookie," which was not true.

They always tell you not to lie to your lawyer. But this guy was part of the same city hall establishment, some members of which were on the take. I couldn't let him know the truth.

I knew I was caught, but I figured I had them where I wanted them. "Here's my offer," I said. "I plead this thing down, get short time, and don't testify about the goings on in the casino. If that's no deal, I call the newspapers and take the stand."

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They agreed to my offer, and the judge sentenced me to five years.

Things were not going my way. I had a three-month-old son, a junkie wife, and I was going to prison for a long time.

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Chapter 16

I got a shocking piece of news on the first day that Alice visited me. She was expecting again. We talked about it for a long time. She was still using, but she said that like before she'd quit until the baby was born so it wouldn't be born with an addiction. She couldn't make any promises after that. But this time she'd quit using altogether. Or so she promised.

The preacher had offered to help her find good homes for the baby. He already had a family for Stanley if we agreed. A young couple who couldn't have children of their own wanted him. It was a difficult decision, but I agreed to give up my children for their own good. No kid deserves to grow up with a junkie for a mother and a father who steals for a living and serves time. I spoke at length with the prison chaplain about it. He convinced me that it would be best for the children.

If everything went according to what the preacher had said, I'd never see my child and would not know

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what had become of it. I'd probably never see Stanley again, either.

When my second son was born, he was taken right away. Alice never even held him. She said that if she had, she couldn't have given him up. She cried when she told me about them. I cried too.

If anything good came out of that experience it was that Alice learned she could get along without drugs. She had kept her promise and stayed clean during her pregnancy. From that she learned how much better things are without the monkey on her back. As far as I know, she has never used since.

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Chapter 17

Prison life was not easy. I was a young man, and there are predators in prison that take advantage of what they call "new meat." I won't provide details about some of the atrocities I saw there, but I got lucky. Real lucky.

My cellmate Larry was a big man about six, four with muscles in places most guys don't have places. He worked out every day. Nobody messed with him.

Larry was in for killing his wife, something he said was unintentional. Apparently the jury disagreed, and he drew a life sentence. He was not interested in me as a love partner, but he liked having a friend, someone to play chess with and to share his passion for reading. The other convicts left me alone. They didn't want to have to deal with Larry.

Larry helped me in another way. Word was that the proprietors of the casino wanted me taken care of. Two things kept them from following through. First was the money. They didn't believe my story about the bookie,

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which meant that I was the only one who knew where the money was. Second was Larry. The casino's boys on the inside were afraid of him.

I did my time, kept my nose clean, and was out in four long years.

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Chapter 18

After I came home, I returned to my old ways. I should have been rehabilitated and found an honest job, but I was bitter about having lost my two sons, and I blamed society instead of the real culprit, which was me.

Back on the streets, I was bound and determined not to go outside the parameters I had set for myself. Both times that I had tried something new, I got caught. For me it would just be upscale residences from now on. I'd stick to what I knew.

I wondered about my victims from the casino. Guys in that kind of business are mean and unforgiving, and I figured I'd be looking over my shoulder for a while. Pickett told me not to worry. A new District Attorney had come into office with a tough-on-crime platform. That was getting big around about that time, and it was the only way a politician could get elected. He sent cops in to raid the casino, and the guys who owned it were now doing their own time.

I went by the former casino one night. The restau-

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rant and bar were still open. I couldn't help myself. Curiosity got the better of me, and I had to see what it was like. I went inside and sat at the bar. Jake was still there. He stood and stared at me, his head cocked to one side as if he wasn't sure. I kept expecting him to call the bouncer. Then he spoke.

"I never thought I'd see you in here," he said.

"Yeah, I paid my debt to society. Learned my lesson. Got rehabilitated."

"What did you do with the money?"

"Everybody asks that. My wife spent it while I was away. You know how women are."

"You still breaking into casinos?"

"No." I gestured towards the casino door. "What's in the back now?"

"Storage."

"You lock your safe every night?"

He laughed. "I guess so."

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Chapter 19

Melvin Lohr was my neighbor across the street, and we became close friends. Alice and I played pinochle with Mel and his old lady, whose name was Millie. They were a few years older than Alice and me. Mel was a construction worker.

After we'd known each other for a while, Mel told me that he used to boost car parts when he was a kid. Hub caps, radios, fender skirts, and like that. The longer we talked, the more adventurous his stories became. I wasn't ready to spill what I'd been doing. His stories seemed just like a way to get me to talk, like if he was a stoolie for the cops and wearing a wire. He didn't tell me any details but said enough to make me wonder.

He knew I'd been in the joint. He'd say, "What are you doing now, Cat? You go out and stay all night. Back to your old habits?"

Apparently he'd been watching my comings and goings. I didn't tell him, though. I'd just smile and say I

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was a night owl.

But his bragging raised my curiosity, so I asked Pickett about him.

"Lohr? Hell, yes, he was the real deal. Don't believe that car parts stuff. Maybe when he was a kid. He specialized in stickups. He lived here and worked in New York. Rode the train back and forth. He'd stick some guy up in broad daylight, head for Penn Station, and come home. The cops would be scouring the City looking for a guy who fit his description, and he'd be sitting at home counting his money. I used to handle the watches and jewelry he'd take off his victims."

"He still doing it?"

"No. Almost got caught. Stuck up a judo instructor near Times Square. The guy took his gun away from him, kicked the crap out of him, and went looking for a cop. Melvin came to, got out of there, and never went out again, he was scared so bad."

So, I sat with Mel one afternoon on his porch and asked him if he was interested in some spare change.

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"Sure. Doing what?"

I told him what I did for a living without providing details and explained that I needed another lead.

"In your work you might come across a likely place or two that I can take."

He was all for it.

And so Mel and I formed a partnership. I paid him a fixed amount for each job. He seemed satisfied with that because I was generous and he would make his fee whether I scored anything or not.

Occasionally he would go with me on an entry, usually one that promised a bigger haul than I could carry in one trip. But not often. I prefer to work alone. I should have kept it that way.

Mel wasn't the bravest guy I knew. He'd run at the first sign of trouble even when running was more dangerous than holding your ground.

My usual procedure when capture was likely was to not run but hide until the threat passed. I'd hide where whoever was looking for me wouldn't look, often in the

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very house I'd broken into.

But hiding unexpectedly meant always having a hiding place picked out just in case. It could be up a tree, in a closet, a storage shed, wherever my pursuers might overlook me. One time I spent hours in a neighborhood church waiting for things to calm down and the cops to leave. The deacon thought I came there to pray. I did.

In one particular entry in which I took Mel along, we were coming out the back door of the house when one of the residents, a young man, was coming up the front sidewalk from wherever he'd been. The fellow saw us and ducked in the house, I guess to call the cops or get a gun or something unpleasant.

I had my carry sack filled with loot, and Mel had another sack similarly filled. This had been a productive entry, and I wouldn't give it up easily.

My chosen hideout for this caper was the vacant house next door with a For Sale sign in the front yard. When I was casing the job, I noticed that it was unlocked.

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As soon as we realized we'd been spotted, I told Mel, "Follow me." He didn't. He dropped his sack and took off running. The sack was filled with silver, and it made a loud clattery noise when it hit the ground. I flattened myself in a dark spot against the wall, and the resident came running out the back door with a flashlight. He almost tripped over Mel's discarded sack. Mel ran down the street with the resident in hot pursuit. I slipped over to the vacant house and went in the back door.

Soon the cops were there interviewing the resident. Mel had escaped, but our take was half what it would have been if he hadn't panicked.

I waited for the coast to be clear and vamoosed.

The newspapers reported that the "gentleman cat burglar" had escaped but that I had dropped some of what I had stolen. The report of what I had gotten away with was, as usual, worth a lot more in the newspaper account than what I had actually stolen. And in the insurance claim too, no doubt.

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Mel didn't earn his fee that night, so I didn't pay it, much to his chagrin. But I did lecture him on having to follow procedure when something goes sour. He was full of excuses. Nothing was ever his fault. But he was an effective partner when things went right, so I continued to use him as a lead and as a partner when I needed help. As it would turn out, that was a big mistake.

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Chapter 20

Mel and I operated successfully for about eight years, with him providing leads from his day job and me doing the burglaries, mostly solo. We developed a mutual trust and a fixed routine for how we worked. It became a smooth operation.

One day in early 1974 Mel brought me an enticing prospect. One of the US Senators was running for re-election, and he was spending most of his time on the road stumping his candidacy. His family traveled with him from town to town. His house was usually unoccupied. It was big, and I'd need help.

Mel had been working in the Senator's house on a renovation project. He was installing drywall, trim, and paneling. The project proceeded while the Senator was out stumping, so Mel's boss had a key, which Mel had managed to lift long enough to make a copy. He also had the run of the house, often the only worker in there, so he was able to case everything.

He knew the alarm system and how to turn it off.

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They had given him the code so he could come and go on his own.

There was no safe. Apparently the Senator kept his cash in the bank. But there was plenty of jewelry and silver. Mel had heard the Senator tell his wife and daughter not to take any finery; he wanted to impress his heartland constituency with his down-to-earth values and his loyal, thrifty family.

The perfect heist. Easy entry, occupants out of town, no safe to crack, valuable possessions, and full knowledge of the layout. They don't come any easier than that.

We went in at night as usual. Mel opened the door and reset the alarm. He led me to the bedrooms where the ladies kept their jewelry. I took it all. Then he took me to the dining room. With my flashlight held under my chin, I picked the finest pieces and put them one by one into my carrying bag.

Then sirens broke the silence, and the darkness lit up with spotlights and the flashing lights of patrol

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cars. A bullhorn bellowed, "You in there! Come out! We got you surrounded!"

I ran to the back door. The cops were out back too. With no other options, we opened the front door and showed ourselves, hands raised. More cops than I had ever seen in one place at one time. They descended on us and we were surrounded by blue. Actually, they ascended on us because they had to climb the front porch stairs to get to us.

They took our carry bags and ~~our~~ flashlights, put us against the wall, and frisked us. To my horror, Mel was carrying a concealed pocket pistol. I didn't know he had that. I would never have allowed it.

When they put the handcuffs on Mel, he broke down and cried. That made me ashamed. If someone is willing to take these risks, they should at least take it like a man when they get caught.

They took us to jail in handcuffs. Neither of us had any idea how we'd been caught. We didn't get to talk it over because they put us in separate cells.

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It turned out that the Senator's teenaged daughter was at home when we broke in. She had a cold and had opted out of yet another strenuous campaign trip. When she heard us come in, she had run downstairs to the basement recreation room and called the cops.

I will always blame Mel for us being caught. If he had done a proper job, he would have known about the daughter, and we would have gone in another time. If he hadn't carried that gun, both of us would have drawn lighter sentences. He should have known better.

The newspapers blasted it all over the front page, "GENTLMAN CAT MONROE CAPTURED."

Everyone now knew who the "gentleman cat burglar" was and what I looked like. I was famous. Or, more precisely, infamous.

This time I got my own lawyer instead of counting on them to provide one. This time I could afford it. He said the prosecution would accept a plea bargain like before if I'd reveal where I'd stashed all the loot I'd taken over the years.

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But the Senator wouldn't hear of it. As far as he was concerned, his home had been violated, his daughter had been frightened out of her wits, and his tough stance on crime was at risk. Besides, he hadn't lost anything. We were stopped while we were going out the door, loot in hand. The Senator was adamant. No plea bargain for the Cat.

So, to keep them from hassling Alice about my stash, I told them I had gambled away all the money over the years. They didn't believe me, but what could they do? I wasn't talking.

The trial was brief, the verdict swift, and the sentences harsh. Because the daughter had been home, the crime was not a simple breaking and entering; it was "burglary of an inhabited dwelling," which drew more time. But the big jawbreaker was Mel's pistol. The crime accelerated to "armed robbery" simply because he had a gun on his person. It didn't matter that he had never taken it out. The fact that I was unarmed was irrelevant, too. I was equally guilty just for being there.

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Mel drew one to ten years. But being a three-time loser, I drew twenty-five to life.

Like before, Alice was expecting when I went in.

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Chapter 21

Prison life was a little tougher this time. I didn't have Larry to protect me. But I wasn't a fresh young kid, either, new meat for the perverts, so they mostly left me alone, and I even made some friends.

From the first day I came in, I had to deal with people who want to know about my stash, the location of my buried treasure (figuratively speaking of course). My reputation had preceded me. Everyone--cons, screws, and administrative staff--knew I was the infamous "gentleman cat burglar" and that none of what I had stolen had ever been recovered.

When they brought me here, the warden wanted to see me. He dismissed the guard and he and I sat alone in his office. It went like this:

"Monroe, looks like you'll be with us at least twenty-five years."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you will, anyway. I don't plan to be here that long."

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"No, sir."

"According to your record, the last time you were in, you were a model prisoner."

"I tried to do my time, sir, and keep my nose clean."

"You know, your stay here could be a lot easier if you'd cooperate."

I knew what was coming. "I plan to be very cooperative to the extent I can, sir."

"I'm not talking about just doing your work and staying out of trouble. Reports say that over the years you stole several million dollars worth of valuables and cash."

"I doubt that it was anywhere near that, sir."

"Maybe, maybe not. But none of your take was ever found."

"I used it to live on, sir. And I gambled a bit."

"Others believe you have a good portion of it stashed away. The investigators tell me you didn't live all that high on the hog and that they found no evidence of any gambling."

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"My bookie was discrete, if nothing else."

"They believe that you hid a lot of it away for when you get out."

"They're mistaken, sir."

"I see. You understand that you will be assigned a work detail here. Some jobs are close to hard labor, others are a lot easier. We have a laundry, a motor pool, an industrial shop, and other places where the environment is uncomfortable and the work is grueling. We also have unsupervised farm details, a forestry camp, flower gardens, and other outdoor assignments. Some inmates are on the household staffs of the executive staff members. Gardeners, house boys, cooks, and such. Those are easy assignments, which become available when you attain trustee status."

I sat in silence, knowing what was coming.

"If you will reveal to me where certain valuables might be hidden away, I can see that they are returned to their rightful owners as ~~riste~~ restitution, and not only will your assignments reflect your willingness to

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cooperate, but your sentence can be dramatically reduced."

It was all I could do to keep from laughing. "That would be very generous of you, sir, but the truth is, I have nothing of value stowed away anywhere."

"Very well, Monroe. If you happen to remember something later that you've forgotten now, bring it directly to me. Don't tell anyone else."

"Thank you sir."

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Chapter 22

Cons who are established in the inmate pecking order have to maintain their turf and assert their seniority. New guys get roused so they know their place. And when the cons learned I was the famous "gentleman cat burglar," they had to test me.

It wasn't much of a fight. Three guys beating the crap out of me in the yard. But we all went in the hole. Screws--our name for the guards--don't mess around establishing fault and blame when a fight breaks out. They toss everybody involved into the hole.

I didn't know how long I'd be there. They don't tell you that. After two days, they let me out and sent me out to the yard. First offense they said. If I got in another fight, I'd draw longer time in the hole.

The other three cons came out after a week. I guess it wasn't their first fight. They came right up to me, and I braced myself for another beat-down. Not at all. They pounded me on the back and welcomed me into the club. I guess it was a kind of initiation. I always won-

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dered whether the screws were in on it.

My first job was in the laundry working every kind of menial laundry-related job one could imagine. After I'd been in a while and stayed out of trouble, the jobs got easier, even though I never relented on telling about my stash. I was the janitor in the admin section and infirmary for a while and dishwasher in the galley.

The only way to keep the better jobs in prison is to stay out of trouble. Make no waves, avoid fights, and don't complain about anything. The screws control how a con spends his time outside his cell, so if they don't get upset with a con, his life can be a bit easier.

The screws interrogated me every now and then about my stash, always suggesting that I'd get better jobs. When I insisted that there was no stash, they'd threaten to set some of the meaner cons on me. When I wouldn't be intimidated, I'd do time in the hole.

But because I was Cat Monroe, the famous gentleman cat burglar, the younger cons paid deference to me.

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Many of them wanted to learn my secrets and techniques. They were always hatching escape plans and figured I could help, given my knowledge of locks. I always declined. They never came up with a plan that would work.

Other cons who were close to being released tried to pry the secret of my stash from me the same as the warden and screws had. I didn't even tell them where I had lived much less where I hid the loot. I didn't want any of them pestering Alice about it. All they knew was that I was from somewhere in Philly.

I tried to do my time without much complication. I tried to appear rehabilitated, too, because that would be the only chance of ever getting out of there.

But I didn't get religion. I'm not one of those cons who goes all repentant and remorseful and finds Jesus only after he's been caught. I got stupid and complacent and wound up here, doing my time. I make no excuses or apologies for anything I've done.

Alice came to see me every visiting Sunday, which

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was once a month. Each trip she was bigger. We decided to put the baby up for adoption with the pastor's help as with the first pregnancy.

Alice gave birth to a girl in 1975. She told me that our daughter would be raised by the family who had taken Stanley. That's all she would say, and it's all I know.

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Chapter 23

After I'd been inside about five years, we had a riot. A small group of cons got themselves worked up over something, I forget what, and they jumped a guard, tied him up, and took his keys and nightstick. Then they ran through the cellblock, opening cell doors and letting everyone out.

It wasn't a large-scale riot like Attica's in '71, though. It was confined to one cellblock. And, if I could help it, it wasn't going to last as long, either.

My first concern was that prison officials would think I was part of the riot, since I was one of the cons they let out of the cells. If these guys killed the hostage, a lot of cons would be in a lot of trouble.

As soon as I figured out who the leaders were, I got them off to one side and talked to them, trying to pound some sense into their heads. They all respected me and listened to what I had to say. I tried to convince them that all that would happen was that the guards would break in and probably kill a lot of them.

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The cons had no weapons other than the nightstick and whatever shanks they routinely carried. Guards patrolling cellblocks don't carry firearms for obvious reasons. Consequently, the hostage was all the leverage the rioters had. They vowed they'd kill him if their demands weren't met. The only problem was, they didn't know what their demands were. They hadn't gotten that far.

It was chaos. Convicts yelling and banging anything they could find against the bars of their cells and the officials on the other side of a locked door, not willing to break in, rush the cons, and quell the riot because of concern for the hostage.

After a lot of palaver, the cons appointed me their spokesman. I went to the door and the guy with the keys let me out. The warden and about fifty armed guards waited on the other side of the door. The first thing they did was grab me and put me up against the wall.

"Warden," I said from my pinned position, "the cons are confused. Most of them don't even know why they're

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there. They don't know what they want. But one thing is sure. If you go in there, they'll kill the guard and anyone else they can get before you get them. It won't look good in the press. You need to appease them."

"Turn him loose," the warden said to the guards. "Do you have any recommendations?" he said to me.

"Yes, sir," I said, breathing hard and brushing myself off after having been manhandled. "Let me talk to them, try to calm them down. Give me something that you'll trade for the hostage."

"Like what, Monroe? What do they want?"

"Meals is a big issue, sir. Can you promise anything about making the meals better?"

"What's wrong with the meals?"

"Good grief, sir. Have you ever actually sat down and tried to eat that slop you serve here?"

He squinted at me. "Can't say as I have, Monroe."

"Then here's what I suggest. If they'll release the guard and go back to their cells, you promise you will eat with them in the chow hall every meal every day

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for a week. Then you promise that you'll put into effect whatever changes it takes to make the food palatable."

"I can promise that, Monroe. I can even do it. But will they trust me to keep my promise?"

"I'll put it this way, sir. You go back on your word, then you better not let any guard walk around the cellblocks or the yard without lots of protection. Ever."

"Do you know who the ringleaders are?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will we know who they are when this is over?"

"Not from me, sir. But the hostage guard knows. You have to give them assurances that there will be no reprisals. It's the only way they'll release him unharmed."

He thought for a moment. Then he said, "Okay. Consider it done."

"Thank you, sir. Now, if you'll just put it in writing on prison letterhead with your signature witnessed

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by me, I think we can get things back to normal."

The warden glared at me, but he did it. I took the agreement back into the cellblock and showed it to the leaders. They couldn't believe it. The warden was going to eat with them for a week. They laughed and pounded one another on the back. They hoisted me on their shoulders and carried me around the cellblock. They gave me the nightstick and keys and returned to their cells. I untied the guard and gave him the keys and nightstick. Then I went to my cell.

The following week, the Warden ate breakfast, lunch, and supper with us every day. He was surrounded by guards to protect him.

After a couple of meals, he said to his bodyguards so everyone in the chow hall could hear him, "Maybe you boys ought to go protect the cook. Because I'm about to go in there and kill him."

The convicts broke into laughter, cheers, and applause, and after that the meals were better. Not four-star, but better than before. Marginally acceptable, you

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might say. And the warden made a point of eating there at least once a month, coming in without notice to ensure that he was eating the same chow the inmates got.

And I became a trustee.

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Chapter 24

At this point, my book becomes more of a journal and less of a collection of memoirs, although if anyone ever reads it, that will be in the future, and they will be reading about past events and deeds. I'll tell about prison life and about the people and things that I think are interesting.

When I became a trustee, they gave me the library job, the best job in the prison for an inmate like me because it involves no physical labor, is peaceful and quiet, and I can read whenever I'm not busy. The former librarian had just been paroled, so I got the job.

I deliver and pick up books and magazines, going cell to cell. The cons don't all have access to the library facility, so I push a cart among the restricted cellblocks, dropping off books and taking requests.

Back in the library, I put the returned books on the shelves and pull the ones for the next delivery. It's an easy job that gives me lots of spare time, which I've used so far by writing this book. That's another advan-

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tage to the job. I have access to the library's typewriter.

One of the screws asked me the other day what I was typing. I told him it was an inventory of library books. He wouldn't know the Dewey Decimal System from a racing form, so he shrugged and walked away.

I have begun another writing project, a technical manual for breaking and entering. It will contain procedures and diagrams for my tools and techniques. I hope that it will be comprehensive, and I hope not too outdated. There have been technical advances in locks and security systems since I came here almost fifteen years ago. But I don't have access to that kind of knowledge because they don't allow the literature in here, and I'm not out there working the field. If anything, the manual will be a brief historical record of the craft. But, more to the point, it will describe the tools I've built and how to use them.

Alice smuggles the pages out under her dress on visiting Sundays. We have to be careful. There are

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events described in this book that the authorities would like to know about. Unsolved cases, for example. The statute of limitations has expired on everything, so I'm not worried about further prosecution, but I still don't want them poking around and bothering Alice, looking for the proceeds. And there are prison events written about here that they wouldn't want reported on the outside. If the guards learn that I am writing about what goes on in here and smuggling it out to be published, not only will I be back working in the laundry, but the quality of my time will be seriously compromised.

I do not have a supply of typing bond, which is why this manuscript is typed on the cheap stationary they give us to write letters. I can get all that I need.

The library has virtually no budget. All the books are donated, usually worn-out public library books, obsolete textbooks from public schools, and books brought in by inmates' family members.

The magazines are out-of-date, usually donated by

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staff. The stickers with the subscribers' names and addresses are cut off so cons won't know where their favorite screws live.

Part of my job is to screen donations to ensure that a book is appropriate for a convict to read. That in itself is a major responsibility to entrust to a con, even a trustee. I get to see what we aren't supposed to see. But having me do it is no warm affirmation of their trust in me. It's just one more employee they don't have to pay.

Mostly we can't have reading materials that give us ideas about escaping or anything with violent or sexual content. The guidelines are pretty clear. They leave it up to me and don't monitor what I allow the cons to read.

As a result, I have a personal, well-hidden collection of Playboy Magazines. Several of the screws know about it, and they are regular borrowers. It could get me a day or two in the hole, but the good will of those few guards is worth the risk.

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One of the donated books is "Treasure Island," which was my favorite book when I was a kid. My dog-eared copy of it is still at home in the bookcase. I was delighted to see that the donated copy is the same edition as the one I had growing up. I did not add it to the library's inventory. I don't want some careless con checking it out and ruining it with cigarette burns or anything. Instead, I keep it in my personal reserve.

With my cart, I also serve as the unofficial mailman for cons who wish to exchange notes and items among each other. I'm the only con who gets up close, face to face with a other cons in their cells most every day, able to pick things up, hand things off, and carry items around undetected.

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Chapter 25

Cigarettes are currency in stir. I don't smoke, never did, so I don't have use for cigarettes except as something to barter with. Thing is, there isn't much I need to barter for. I don't do drugs, and I never drink the "shoots" they make here.

Cons get their cigarettes from the commissary or as gifts from visitors. We get work credits as wages, and the commissary accepts them for merchandise--cigarettes, candy bars, sodas, and other non-essentials.

Each cellblock has a con who maintains an inventory of cigarettes, getting them one way and another, and selling them to other cons at a profit. They have a monopoly, and god help the con who tries to cut in. When cigarettes come my way, usually from Alice, who brings them to me for their barter value, I give the cigarette cartel first right of refusal, then I trade what's left for candy, gum, and sodas.

Once Alice brought me a box of Cuban cigars, which for some reason, the staff let her bring in after they

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searched the box. She said Pickett gave them to her for me. That made me a popular con for a while.

The cigarette guys weren't interested. But the older cons all know a good smoke when they get it. After that, I had her bring me those cigars for as long as she could get them.

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Chapter 26

Drugs are widely available here. Marijuana, which we call maryjane, cocaine, and heroin are the drugs of choice. Heroin is a problem because you need paraphernalia--a syringe, a spoon, something to wrap around your arm--and the screws like to find that kind of contraband when they toss the cells.

Visitors smuggle the drugs in, and occasionally a con will get a pharmaceutical care package in the mail. You can hide an ounce of weed in the lining of a book. The mail screeners only do a random check, anyway, and the cons play the odds. If they get caught, they get punished.

Speedy Gonzales, a lifer in for felony murder, was busted recently for peddling maryjane to the other cons. His brother brought him a carton of cigarettes every visiting Sunday. Turns out the fags were tobacco at either end and had weed in the middle. Speedy was selling the reefers to the other cons. A screw found them in Speedy's cell, and he did some time in the hole

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for it.

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Chapter 27

The "hole" is solitary confinement. Some cons are there for the duration of their sentences for having done some really bad deeds. Others spend days or weeks in the hole for punishment, usually for fighting or contraband. I spent a couple days there when I first came in and those other cons jumped me.

I spent the two days looking at the walls, because that's all there is to look at in the hole. No windows and a pad to sleep on. A four by eight cell with an overhead naked light bulb they never turn out. Not even a crapper. They come in once a day and exchange the bucket for an empty one, which is rarely a clean one. I never know who had used it ahead of me, only that it had been dumped.

We get one meal a day in a tin plate slid under a slot at the bottom of the door. First, we slide the plate out from the previous day's meal. If any food is left over, nothing is sent back in. A con in the hole learns to eat everything.

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I am told there are guys in the hole who will never come out until they are carried out. Cons who seriously hurt other cons and are repeat offenders get extended time in the hole. If they kill someone, they get prosecuted and draw another sentence. If it's at this facility, it's usually in the hole.

Cons who harm or kill screws don't make it to the hole or to another trial. The screws see to that. Usually a prompt beating or knifing ends the sentence of a con who hurts a screw. No mess, no investigation, no inconvenience. Swift and sure.

The only ~~exception~~ exception to that rule was the riot of '80, and that was because the warden gave his word and signed the agreement. The screws weren't going to go back on the warden's word. They were more scared of the warden than they were of the cons.

My initiation wasn't the only time I spent in the hole. I mentioned earlier that the screws would toss me in the hole for a day or two as retribution for not telling them where my stash was. That became routine,

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and I lost count.

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Chapter 28

I mentioned "shoots" before. That's an alcoholic beverage that inmates manufacture. I say "beverage," but that's being kind. A con has to be really desperate to drink it. The stuff is not only potent but it tastes foul.

The test of a con's mettle is whether he can drink a cup of shoots, sipping instead of gulping and without holding his nose. As far as I know, nobody's ever done it.

Shoots is a fermented substance made with fruit, sugar, catsup, bread, water, and whatever else they can use. This motley concoction has to ferment, which means it needs to be heated for specific lengths of times at specific intervals, usually by mixing the pulp in a sealed plastic bag and submerging it in hot water. Inmates' cells don't have hot plates or hot water. They couldn't get away with distilling shoots in their cells, anyway. It's horrific odor would call immediate attention to it.

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The only places with access to hot water are the showers, the galley, the infirmary, and the laundry. The showers won't do. We get showers too infrequently to smuggle in the ingredients and cook it. The recipe calls for intervals of cooking and darkness. And the infirmary is out too. The nurses keep an eye on everything. But the laundry is perfect. You can smuggle the ingredients in by hiding them among the dirty clothes and linen, and the smell is not noticed so much. The laundry already smells bad. Lye soap and a couple thousand sets of dirty convict underwear sees to that. Throw a bag of pulp into a washing machine for the right length of time at the right intervals, and you get fermentation.

When I worked in the laundry before the riot, I made the best shoots in the system. You could actually drink it without gagging, and it was about fourteen percent alcohol, plenty enough for a buzz. I never drank it myself. I couldn't get past the smell.

The most difficult part of the process is getting

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plastic bags big enough to hold ten oranges and the other stuff. But cons are inventive, and plastic bags are easy for a lady visitor to smuggle in tucked into a girdle. The rest is ingredients, which come from the chow hall, and time, which a con has plenty of.

You read stories of inmates drinking shoots and going nuts from the toxic alcoholic content. But that's just made-up stories concocted by guards to justify beating up a con. It just isn't strong enough. And there's the foul taste. Nobody can drink enough shoots to get falling-down loaded.

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Chapter 29

Before we had a TV room, every Saturday night they'd show us a movie in the prison theater. The movies were usually pretty good, although only the G-rated ones were allowed, and the selections were dated. Not a problem since most of us haven't been to a real movie theater in a long time.

You had to be on good terms with the screws to be allowed into the movies, and you had to sit still and be quiet. A screw stood at either side of the theater at the back to keep an eye on things.

One week the feature was "Gone with the Wind." It was a great book and a great movie even if it was almost forty years old. We watched the show in silence as usual, sitting upright attentively in the stiff-backed chairs.

The movie got to the scene where Rhett Butler scoops Scarlet O'Hara up in his arms and sprints with her two steps at a time up the mansion's grand staircase. You could've heard a pin drop in the theater. The

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scene faded at the top of the stairs, leaving our imaginations to fill in what happened next. When the scene faded back in, it was morning and the camera zoomed in on Scarlet, sitting alone in her bed with a knowing smile on her face.

Out of the silence, one of the cons in the middle of the room blurted out, "She sucked his dick!"

The room fell apart with laughter, stomping, whistling, and cheering. Even the screws struggled to suppress their laughter. The projectionist turned off the movie and waited for the room to come to order before he restarted it. It took about ten minutes.

I never saw anything like that happen again at the Saturday evening movie. But it's still being talked about.

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Chapter 30

There are always plenty of weapons in stir. Anything that can be sharpened can become what we call a "shank," and they are everything from tableware stolen from the chow hall to tools from the industrial section and wire hangers from the laundry.

Every now and then the screws shake down a cell-block at random. They usually come up with any number of shanks, and for a day or two the inmates are unarmed. Before long, though, the arsenal of shanks is back to what it had been.

Most killings among the inmate population happen in the yard, and killers mostly use ~~shaks~~ shanks. Beating a guy to death takes too long and needs an isolated location where the screws won't interfere. Motives range from the con being a rat to a hit commissioned from the outside. A lover's quarrel can get a con killed, too.

A con who doesn't have a shank is vulnerable, unable to defend himself. Or, like me, he has no enemies in or out of stir. I don't own one and never felt the need. If

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they found one among my things, I'd lose privileges and do time in the hole. Since I get along with everyone and my reputation holds their respect, I don't think I need a means to protect myself.

Ace Willis, on the other hand, needed protection. He was a card cheat. I myself had been his victim twice, after which I just wouldn't play in a game that included Ace. He was caught once too often. Which means he was caught once. He was dealing seconds in a game with the wrong cons at the table. His hit went down as follows.

One day not long after Ace's misdeeds had been revealed, the population was in the exercise yard for our afternoon break. I don't usually take a break, preferring to stay in the library and work on this manuscript, but on this day I wanted to be there. Word was something was going to happen. I didn't know exactly what. A con never knows unless he is part of the action, but you can't mistake the undercurrent of suspense. It always seemed like the only con who didn't see it coming was the intended victim.

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Not knowing what was going to happen or where, I sat in a bleacher where I could review the entire field. It was also a good alibi position. The screws could see me sitting up there alone pretending to read a book.

Ace was shooting hoops by himself. A large group of cons kind of gathered around him, coming in from all sides, ambling along as if on Sunday strolls. They circled Ace. The screws on the wall didn't know what was up. All they saw was a bunch of cons in a group. The cons started making loud noises meant to sound like they were cheering Ace on, but really to mask any screams he might make if he saw it coming. The designated killer, one of Ace's poker victims, moved in and left his shank shoved up to the hilt in Ace's gut just right of center where a kidney ought to be. The crowd slowly dispersed, revealing Ace, face down, a puddle of blood oozing out around him.

The siren went off, and the screws descended on the yard. We were all rounded up and taken into a large holding cell to be questioned. They took us one at a

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time. The investigation was for show. The screws knew that nobody in their right mind would rat out the conspirators, but they had to make a show of trying to identify and punish the perps. The questioning was conducted by a homicide detective from the State police.

My interrogation was short and simple. A shank, which I assumed was the murder weapon, lay on the table in front of the detective. It was a sharpened toothbrush with layers of electrical tape wrapped into a handle that provided traction and accepted no fingerprints.

"Monroe," the detective said, "did you see what happened in the yard today?"

"Not really, sir. I wasn't all that close, and I had my face buried in a book."

"Did you see anything at all?"

"I heard guys yelling, looked up, and there was Ace, spilling blood on the tarmac."

"Did you see a crowd of cons around him?"

"No, sir. By the time I looked up, the crowd had bro-

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ken up."

"Can you identify any of them?"

"What do you think, sir?"

"I think not. Have you ever seen this before?" He held up the shank.

"No, sir can't say as I have."

"I didn't think so. Okay, Monroe, you can go."

Whenever a con is interrogated, the other cons worry about what he might have spilled. He is, at least for a while, regarded with suspicion. If the screws charge out and haul off the perp right after a con comes out of interrogation, that con's life is on the line, whether he ratted anyone out or not. The screws can exact retribution on a con by doing just that. If they already know who the ~~perpetu~~ ~~perpert~~ perp is, they'll wait to pick him up until just after the con they want punished has been interrogated. The other cons take care of their problem for them.

Fortunately, I hadn't made anyone mad recently. I came out of the session clean as a whistle.

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And the Ace Willis case was never solved.

There's no such thing as honor among thieves, but dishonor just isn't tolerated. The population concluded that Ace got what was coming to him, and to disagree with that consensus would have been less than healthy.

One of the nurses told me that Ace was a registered organ donor. Somebody didn't get a kidney that day.

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Chapter 31

Escapes were not common at Rockview, but they happened. Cons were known to walk away from the farm detail and the forestry camp. They escaped from inside by scaling the iron stockade fence. Most escapees were captured within a few hours and brought back to spend some time in the hole and to face charges of felony escape, which adds time to a con's sentence.

Even so, escape was not difficult for a resourceful con with access to some materials, help from the outside, and a modicum of ingenuity and brains. I could have walked off any number of times, but it would have been futile to do so. My face had been plastered all over the news when I was caught, and most people knew me by name, face, and reputation. I couldn't have gone home, and Alice couldn't have joined me in my flight. That would have made her an accessory. By staying in I got to see her once a month. If I escaped, I'd never see her again.

Cons who wanted to escape often came to me for ad-

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vice. I knew locks, and they figured that would give them an edge. I tried to explain that my specialty was breaking into places when occupants were away and not out of them when guards were on duty, but they kept pestering me about it. To them, locks needed to be open, and I knew how.

One day two convicted dope peddlers, Fester Fagin and Elbow Prentice came to me with a plan. To escape, they would have to remove handcuffs, and they asked me to teach them how.

"Where are you going in handcuffs?" I asked.

"To testify in court about our drug connections," Fester said.

Apparently they had agreed to roll over on their supplier. Their plea bargain depended on it, but they didn't want to go through with it. The guy they were going to rat out had inside connections and would see to it that they were punished for their disloyalty.

They were to be handcuffed and taken in a prison van to a county jail to wait in a holding cell.

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"We're going to take the van away from the driver and guard."

"How far do you think you'll get in a prison van," I asked.

"A couple miles where my cousin will be waiting in a car," Fester said. "So, how do you bust out of handcuffs?"

"The best way is with a key. Can you get a handcuff key?"

Every prison has one inmate who can get anything for a fee price. Cons put in their orders, and he gets their stuff. Nobody ever knows how he does it--he doesn't want to encourage competition--but he does. Rockview's con for getting things was Manny Randall. He often used me and my book cart to make deliveries.

"Ask Manny," I said. "If he can't get one, I'll show you how to make one out of a length of wire coat hanger."

"How do we smuggle a key out," Fester said. "They search us."

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"Here's how Houdini did it," I said. Then I explained how Harry Houdini would hide a lock pick in his mouth and palm it and move it around on his body--under his armpits, up his butt--and so on, as they searched him.

"You have to practice with the key," I said. "Get that first, and then I'll show you how it's done."

Manny got them a key. They were easy to get on the outside. Any law enforcement supply store has them. He had one smuggled in and brought it to me. Then I sat with Fagin and Prentice at a table in the TV room and demonstrated.

"Put the key on the table and look away," I said. They did and I palmed the key. "Now, search me."

They did as complete a search as they could manage, and I did the Houdini thing. When they were done with the search, I said, "Now look away."

When they looked back, the key was on the table.

"Simple sleight of hand," I said. "Uses misdirection, but it takes practice. Here's how I did it." I showed them the moves. "Choose one of you to hold and hide the

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key and the other pretend to be the guard. Then practice until you've got it perfected. Take turns. You should both know how in case you get separated. Do it right, and the guards will never catch on."

I stood up to leave.

"Aren't you going to wish us luck?" Fester said.

"Luck won't help," I said. "You need skill, which takes practice. Now beat it and get to work."

We learned over the grapevine that Fester and Fagin had unsuccessfully tried the escape. Not only had the guards thwarted their efforts, but the State Police had grabbed Fester's cousin at the pickup point.

The natural conclusion was that someone had ratted the pair's plan to the screws. The cons concluded that it had to be either me or Manny.

I knew it wasn't me, but I couldn't imagine Manny doing it. It could have been someone on the outside, perhaps one of Manny's contacts. It is only speculation, but I'm guessing somebody out there needed to trade information for leniency.

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Maybe the cops knew a key was going in. The screws knew who would be wearing cuffs. Or a con informant on the inside reported it. Prentice and Fagin weren't all that discrete about their intentions.

The other cons didn't think it out that deeply, and nobody was listening to me. I was a trustee--someone the screws and warden trusted--so that made me a prime suspect. I was respected and popular among the veteran inmates, but the younger cons were quick to forget their former respect for my accomplishments and blame me for the failed escape. They knew the code of the yard, and, as far as they were concerned, I had probably violated it.

And there is no such thing as "reasonable doubt" in stir. If they think you might have done it, that was as good as an iron-clad conviction.

I knew I'd have to watch my back and not go anywhere alone. But with whom? In prison, who can you trust? A marked man is always alone even when he's surrounded by his closest friends.

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Chapter 32

Along about this time, the screws stepped up their questioning about my stash. Word was out that the younger cons were going to get me. If I got snuffed, my secret would die with me.

They hauled me in and sat me across the table. Always the same two screws, Juarez and Feeney. Often they left me sitting alone for a long time without food, water, or a restroom break. Then the questioning began.

"Monroe, you know the young bloods are out to get you," Juarez said.

"So I've heard."

"They think you ratted out Fagin and Prentice."

"Hell, man, everybody knew those bozos were going to try that break. They bragged it up all over the yard. It could've been anybody."

"But the young guys think it was you."

"Why?"

"I guess 'cause you're a trustee."

"Why don't you guys set them straight."

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"We could. If you'd cooperate," Feeney said.

"Cooperate how?" I fidgeted in my chair. Here it comes again, I knew.

"Easy, Monroe. Tell us where the stash is."

"I've told you time and again. There is no stash."

"Of course, if you don't tell us, and they off you, your widow is going to be getting callers."

"Waste of time. She doesn't know anything. There's nothing to know."

I'd have to tell Alice the next time she visits to be careful. Mail wouldn't do it. The censors would see me suggesting the screws might come calling to find the stash. That'd never get past them.

"Be a shame to have all that money go to waste just because you're being stubborn," Juarez said. "We'd see that she got to keep some of it. You know, whatever couldn't be traced back to its rightful owner."

Yeah, right. I could just see that. But I didn't let on. "That would be kind of you, sir, but there's really nothing to find."

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These questions went on for hours. Then they threatened me.

"We can put the word out on the yard," Feeney said. "Whoever does you in gets a free pass. Maybe some extra incentives. Like maybe your job."

"Yeah, sure. Go ahead," I said. "Then you'll never find anything."

"Don't get smart with us, old man," Juarez said. "Or we'll do it just because you mouthed off. Maybe a few days in the hole will loosen your tongue."

And I went in the hole yet another time.

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Chapter 33

Today Toby Parsons, one of the older cons who's been here longer than me, approached me in the yard. He held out his hand. He had something palmed.

"Take this, Cat, and keep it with you."

He slid a shank into my hand.

"What do I want with this?" I said. "I wouldn't know how to use it."

"Word's out, Cat. You're on the list. Stay away from the young guys. They come near you, start yelling for a screw."

"Fat lot of good that'll do. The screws already said they wouldn't protect me."

"Which screws?"

"Juarez and Feeney. Whoever's after me will wait 'til one of them is on the wall. They'll look the other way."

Alice visits tomorrow. I'll give her what pages I have finished. My burglary manual is done. She can take the rest of that, too.

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Monday I'll pick up where I left off.

Epilogue

Cat Monroe died of stab wounds at the age of fifty-five. He died without finishing this book. Clues provided in this manuscript suggest an official conspiracy and cover-up, although until recently, no hard and fast facts had ever surfaced with respect to that theory.

My recent interview of an ex-convict, who shall remain nameless, revealed that correctional officers Juarez and Feeney were Cat's assassins. They killed him as a message to other convicts about the consequences of non-cooperation with authority.

Juarez was charged and convicted two years later of bringing drugs into the prison and selling to inmates. Shortly after his sentence started, he was killed, presumably by other convicts. Feeney died of natural causes about a year after Cat's death.

Had he lived, Cat would have served at least fourteen more years, and fewer if he had been granted time off for good behavior, although that would have been unlikely given his unwillingness to cooperate with respect to the location of his coveted stash.

The mystery surrounding that legendary stash has never been solved. Or, if it has, the solution has not been made public.

Cat's wife Alice lives in comfort in a Baltimore condo. She moved there to be closer to her children and grandson. When

asked how she can afford that, she makes a vague reference to having sold during an up market and bought when prices were down. She refuses to discuss Cat's career, referring instead to this book, published posthumously in its original form without edits or corrections.

Stanley Bentworth, 2012