



## Chapter 5. Monday, September 1, 4:30 PM: The Duck Is Trashed and a Body Found.

Andy Tilden returned to his gray-walled cubical from a late-afternoon, restroom break. He had spoken to no one either coming or going. That was the New American Standards Testing, Interpretation and Evaluation Incorporated, NASTIE Corp, way. He sat back at his workstation. His computer showed the corporate standard screen saver, the words “Have a great day the NASTIE way!” spinning through a black background.

Andy grimaced, moved his mouse, and the screen flashed back to his icicle analysis of demographic variables, survey item responses, and purchase intent vectors for beef roasts infused with a 10% solution of tenderizer, MSG, and holy water—Holy Cow. His eyes wandered from the screen, and he realized something was wrong. Ducky Do was not sitting on the right side of his monitor where he had left it. He looked over his whole desktop. Ducky Do was not there.

Andy’s phone rang. He picked it up, but before he could complete the prescribed routine of identifying himself, his section and the company, MS Ledbetter cut him off. Ms Ledbetter, Mr. Morgan’s administrative assistant, always cut him off.

“Mr. Morgan would like to see you at your convenience,” she said. Roderick Morgan—Head of the Marketing Research Section—was Andy’s boss, and with him, “At your convenience,” meant, “At once!” Andy told himself he would never make that mistake again. He told Ms. Ledbetter that he was on his way. She hung up.

Mr. Morgan’s second floor office might as well have been a cubical like those inhabited by his minions. Its walls were light gray, the carpet was light gray, and chairs were upholstered in light gray. Light gray curtains closed out any light that might have seeped in from the windows in the wall behind Mr. Morgan’s back. Dressed in a light gray suit, Mr. Morgan stared at the only object on top of his polished, gray desktop. The flesh hung lifeless on his face when he looked up as Andy Tilden entered.

“What is this?” he asked. Ducky Do looked very small sitting alone on Mr. Morgan’s desk.

“It’s a rubber duck,” Andy said. “It was my baby son’s favorite bath toy, but my daughter filled it with spit shot and water putty, and I thought that was pretty remarkable and . . .” He saw that Mr. Morgan was not interested and let his voice trail off. Morgan looked up at him again.

“What is it doing in my building?” Mr. Morgan asked.

“I thought it made a cute paperweight.”

“Are you implying that your cubicle is too drafty?”

“No sir!”

“Then a paperweight seems hardly necessary,” Mr. Morgan said, “but if one was necessary do you think a rubber duck would be the approved design?”

“Probably not,” Andy said.

“Definitely not,” Mr. Morgan said. “NASTIE Corp is a scientific company, and NASTIE science is good

science. The division for which you work is dedicated to providing the highest standards in scientific market research using surveys, focus groups, and naturalistic and behavioral observation. How would it look to a client if our workplace was cluttered with personal items like this? Does that represent the image of NASTIE hardcore science?"

"No sir!"

"So where does this rubber duck belong?" Mr. Morgan asked. His eyes dared Andy to make a bold move. Andy leaned forward, picked up Ducky Do, and carried him to a gray, circular waste can that sat next to the wall. He dropped Ducky Do in, and the toy hit the bottom with a solid, "thunk!" Andy saw the lifeless flesh of Mr. Morgan's face struggle to form a smile.

"Good choice," Mr. Morgan said, "the kind of choice I would expect from the head of the multivariate analysis section. And that can be just the beginning. A man with your kind of dedication can expect to have his own office like mine in just a few short years!"

"Thank you sir," Andy said, but he looked around the office and felt no joy in his heart. He thought of the bills and the mortgage, the company health insurance and the kids' college funds, and he knew what purgatory was. He thanked Mr. Morgan again and turned to leave.

"Oh and Tilden," Mr. Morgan said, and Andy stopped to look back. "We've been talking for ten, no, call it fifteen minutes. I can assume you will record that as break time and stay an extra fifteen minutes tonight accordingly."

"Of course sir," Andy said. *Is there anything else sir? Would you like another teaspoon of my soul to sweeten your coffee? Can I get you a straw you can stick straight in my jugular and drain me dry right here.* Defeat, but not his thoughts, showed in Andy's face as he walked back to his

cubical to do an extra thirty minutes of NASTIE work determining how best to sell beef injected with holy water. Sometimes doing science made him so proud!



**Monday, September 1, 5:35 PM**



Not a demonstrator was in sight in front of the Chaos Café Bar and Grill, and inside, the tables were filled with a mix of younger and older customers. Family groups had two of the long rectangular tables. Other tables were occupied by young businessmen still in their work suits and ties. They smiled brightly at their young women in their business dresses and tailored jacket-skirt combinations.

Circulating through the tables was a college-age mob of oddly dressed servers. Some had vests and shorts; some wore tuxedo jackets, t-shirts, and plaid pants. Each outfit was in some way unique. It was chaos punctuated by the squeal of a pig in pain whenever someone slapped the Pig of Fate.

I sat on an unoccupied stool at the quieter end of the bar and waited for Obama Bob to stroll over. I ordered a Bud and allowed him to serve it. I didn't need a glass. I asked if it was always like this at dinnertime. Bob grinned and shook his head.

"Must be the publicity," he said. "Reverend Montana really did us dirt. We're having to work way too hard." He saw Hillary walking in from her station at the front door, and he walked toward the pig of fate. I carried my beer and followed.

Hillary was carrying two menus and talking to a tall, balding man in a medium-gray suit with pink stripes. The woman that followed the man wore a purple and pink, floral jacket and dress. She had tightly curled, orange-chestnut hair and worried eyes.

“As you were told when you called,” Hillary said. “We take reservations—we have many ourselves—but we cannot guarantee a table will be available when you arrive. It’s chaos here!”

As if to make her point, one of the servers I had seen earlier walked in wearing floppy diving fins, a safari jacket, a pith helmet, and a diving mask. Making loud slapping noises with each step, he dodged two servers with drink trays, and finally slapped out the back door. Bob was grinning. Hillary threw up her hands.

“What can you expect in a place like this?” she said.

Pink-striped, medium-gray growled, “I expect my reservation to be respected.”

“I respect it,” Hillary said, “but all the tables are full. Have a drink, slap the pig, and it will pick a free appetizer for both of you!” I had learned that in addition to drinks, Obama had lists of all the menu items keyed to the wheel of fortune. If a customer couldn’t or didn’t want to decide, he slapped the pig and the pig chose.

“I also have a list of Challenge drinks,” Obama had said. I had asked what “Challenge Drinks” were and learned they were drinks like the flaming green lizard that you only drank on a dare.

“I want a table or I want to see the manager,” pink-striped, medium-gray said.

“I’m the owner,” I said, “will I do?”

“Do you know who I am?” pink-striped, medium-gray asked.

“I don’t even want to know,” I said. “I will get you a table.” Hillary looked at me with wide eyes. “Here are my keys, if there is *no other table available*, get the one in my office waiting room. There are two chairs there as well, *if nothing else is available*. Grab Barack and a couple of

servers to help, but I want a table and chairs set out here now!”

“I don’t need your keys,” Hillary said. “We do have a closer table.” She turned and strode back toward the kitchen. Pink-striped, medium-gray gave the floral-dressed women an “I told you so” look. I suggested that they have drinks on the house.

“In fact,” I said, “the whole evening is on the house. The way you have been treated is unforgivable, someone as important as you.” He wanted a double Maker’s Mark over. She asked for a Manhattan and said bar whiskey was fine. Obama Bob mixed the drinks and passed them to the couple, who had taken places at the bar.

Pink-striped, medium-gray stood next to me and told me how the idea of taking reservations but not honoring them was extraordinary, not at all in good taste. I was relieved to see Hillary, Barack and two of the servers emerge from the kitchen carrying a table and two chairs.

The wooden-topped, three-legged table was smaller than any other in the room, and since one of the legs was considerably shorter than the others, it slanted dreadfully. I had it placed in the center of the space between the other tables and the bar.

One of the chairs looked like it had come from an elementary school classroom. Fuchsia plastic, it was about half the height of a normal chair. Hillary put it at the lower side of the slanting table. The second chair was wooden, with a broad seat, and looked to be comfortable enough. Unfortunately, each of the chair’s legs was a different length. It rocked unmercifully. Barack placed it opposite the fuchsia chair.

Pink-striped, medium-gray had begun making puffing sounds as this junk pile was being assembled. I

gestured toward it grandly and said, “Your table is ready sir.” The man made more angry, puffing sounds.

“This won’t do!” he said. “This won’t do at all.”

“You will get no other table here tonight,” I said. “If everyone else leaves, this is still yours.” The man set down his empty glass and took his wife’s elbow to escort her to the door.

“You shall here from my attorney!” pink-striped, medium-gray said.

“Have him ask for Attila the Hun.”

“What?”

“One of our staff channels Attila the Hun, and he handles all our complaints,” I said. Pink-striped, medium-gray puffed his way toward the door, but before they vanished, the floral woman turned and gave me a sly smile and a wink.

As pink-striped, medium-gray left the room, a wiry young man with a blond goatee and a “Go Adisa!” t-shirt, and a blond girl in a halter top and torn jeans, who had been at the bar, said they would take the lopsided table. I let them have it, and they seemed unnecessarily happy. I told Hillary that their bill was on the house and asked if she had seen Dagwood Shepherd.

“I can’t say why, but I like him,” Hillary said. “He’s camped out in the staff room behind the kitchen.” Obama Bob stopped me before I could go back. He held out the bar phone and said it was for me. I told the mouthpiece my name.

“Mr. Eider, this is Roald Cherry. Do you know me?” The voice had a very slight Spanish accent and sounded very cultured. I imagined Zorro in his Don Diego Vega guise.

“Know you? I work for you.”

“Good, our mutual friend hasn’t called to confirm that.”

“It’s good to hear you speak with caution. Unless you are calling from a random payphone, I would be very circumspect.”

“You have reasons for such caution?”

“Our friend has the details, which may be why you haven’t heard from him yet.”

“I see,” Roald paused gathering his thoughts. “Your task may be more easily accomplished than we imagined. Our principle received a telephone call a couple of hours ago from a young man who wouldn’t leave his name.

“The young man said there had been a misunderstanding and that, to avoid trouble, a transfer could be arranged with forgiveness as the only consideration. Our principle said that everyone makes mistakes and that he would gladly give his forgiveness.

“Unfortunately, the caller was unable to suggest a method for the transfer. Our principle had only your name to give the caller, and he did so. The caller said he knew of you from the TV news and thought he knew how to get in touch. It is only unfortunate that it took so long for me to get word of this interchange. Our principle has heard nothing since.”

“And I haven’t heard anything, but I have been out,” I said. “I will keep my eyes open. You remind everyone else to tread lightly on the phone.”

“Take care, my friend,” Roald said and hung up. I handed the phone back to Obama Bob and asked if the employees ate in the staff room behind the kitchen.

“No,” Obama Bob said, “we throw their food on the sidewalk, and they fight over it like jackals.”

“You’re such a help,” I said. I finished my beer and watched Obama Bob give me the evil eye as I fished a fresh

one from the ice myself. That'll teach him. I carried the beer back to the kitchen.

I asked Jeremiah where the staff room was, and she pointed to a white door at the very back of the room. I asked if someone could bring me a cheeseburger and fries. I was well past the age when I should have asked for rice, steamed vegetables, and a broiled chicken breast, but the kitchen was lush with the rich smells of sizzling, red meat and freshly fried potatoes.

"Sure enough hun," Jeremiah said. She had called me, "Hun." I guessed that meant I was in. I turned toward the staff room door, but Casey Wright stopped me.

"Do you know who that was you embarrassed?" she asked. I said no, and she said, "That was Councilman Lieberman. He's a friend of the mayor."

"Remind me not to vote for either of them," I said. "Let's dance." I held my hands out and my arms open in invitation. Gold sparks glinted deep in Casey's eyes, and she clenched her teeth.

"Are you insane?" she said.

"For you," I said, "only for you." Her nostrils flared. She ground her teeth some more and turned away. I let myself into the staff room. It was deserted except for Dagwood reading at one of the two small square tables. I sat across from him and asked if he needed anything. He shook his head.

"You've done a fair amount of work around here today," I said, "but it's not like anyone has been keeping track of your time."

"The works themselves which I do, give testimony of me."

"That's true, but I was thinking about how to pay you," I said and told him that I wanted him to work for me, even though I wasn't sure what kind of work I would have

for him over the next few days. I told him that as part of his pay he could have the one-room apartment on the third floor. I'd looked at it. It wasn't much, but it did have a bed, a lamp, an overstuffed chair, and a private bathroom. It beat sleeping on the street or in the mission. I said he could also eat free at the Café, and that I would kick in \$150 a week under the table. I asked how that suited him.

“Blessed art thou,” Dagwood said. I said I wasn't sure about that, and I handed him one of my new business cards.

Earlier—while I was meeting with Reverend Oxford—Dagwood and Barack had, as I requested, moved the contents of my van up to my apartment on the third floor. After the meeting, I had rummaged through the boxes until I had found the leather folder where I kept my BSIS issued pocket license and photo ID card. I had also found the Taurus .41 magnum I was licensed to carry. I was tempted, but I buried it deep at the bottom of a box of old electronic parts. If I needed a hand cannon to tackle two college girls, I really needed to get out of the business.

Equipped with my license and ID, I had called a car rental agency to pick me up and was taken to the agency's office where I rented a black Dodge Avenger that was less exciting than its name. I stopped at a local Bank of America ATM and deposited a good part of my expense money before driving to the local Office Home Warehouse Printing Center—open 24/7 even on Labor Day.

The Printing Center's counter was staffed by a young woman with thick, black hair that cascaded in loose waves down the front of her thick, black-framed glasses. She had developed a tick of shaking her head to one side in order to see out from behind the hair. She told me she could help me lay out a business card, but I would have to pay extra or come back with a design in an electronic format.

She also told me that she had majored in marketing, and that I ought to rethink all my ideas. She thought they sucked. Bearing up admirably under the pressure of her admiration, I encouraged her use of Google image, and she soon found a public-domain image of the duck-rabbit—a figure that looks like a duck facing left or a rabbit facing right.



Twitching her head constantly and muttering disapproving sounds, she copied the duck-rabbit to the card's upper left corner and entered the text I had given her. I let her choose a layout and fonts. Why be more difficult? Ten minutes later, I had walked out clutching a box of 250 business cards with my name, license information and cell phone number beneath "The Reluctant Detective Agency" in a bold cursive font. Now what was wrong with that?

In the staff room, Dagwood put down his partial Bible and read the card without comment. Along with the card, I gave him the keys to my van and to my room at the Road Master Inn. I had already paid for the night, and I thought he might as well use it before packing out my luggage in the morning. I gave him \$50 for incidental expenses.

"I, at my return, will repay thee," Dagwood said scooping up the keys and the money. I told him not to worry about it. As he left, Jeremiah entered bearing a tray with a plate and a large glass of juice.

"This is not a cheese burger and I fries," I said. The plate contained a broiled chicken breast, a scoop of brown rice, and a serving of steamed, mixed vegetables.

"It's the Chaos Café," Jeremiah said. She grinned as if that explained everything.

"And?"

“And sometimes you get what you ordered, and sometimes you get what you need.”

“You’re a Rolling Stones fan aren’t you?” I said. Jeremiah chortled and walked back toward the kitchen.

I saw a small bottle of red chili oil on the tray and drizzled some on the chicken breast and rice before picking up my fork. I had finished three bites when Dagwood banged through the door.

“Make haste and come down!” Dagwood said. “They killed him.”

“Killed who?” I asked, but Dagwood had already turned towards the kitchen. I followed on his heels. He rushed through the kitchen and the main room and out the back door. He trotted across the alley to the parking lot. He stopped by my van.

In the harsh glare of the lowering sun, I could see someone slumped in the passenger seat. Dagwood pointed at the figure, but I slowed to survey the scene. There were two parking spaces between the passenger side of the van and the alley, and two cars were parked north of the van. Three cars were parked on the other side of the lot.

There was no foot traffic in the alley. A tan Malibu drifted harmlessly past on High Street, and I crossed into the parking lot. As I approached the van, I saw that the figure inside was that of a young, blond man. His eyes were open, but he wasn’t seeing anything.

“Did you touch anything?” I asked Dagwood when I saw that the passenger door was open a crack. He shook his head and handed me the keys.

“I do nothing of myself.”

“Good,” I said, “but you’d better stay close. The cops will have questions.” Dagwood shook his head. It was the first time he had disagreed with me.

“You shall seek me and not find me,” he said. Without another word, he walked around the van and turned toward the Club Street entrance by the closed Clams’ Heaven. I watched his calm and steady pace and decided I wouldn’t mention him to the police. There wasn’t a chance in a million he had killed the man.

I put my hand in my jacket pocket and used that to pull the van door open for a better look at the occupant. He had been a good-looking, young man, college age or a little older. His good looks had been marred by a blow that broke his nose and pushed it to his left. He had a cut and bruised right eye that would have swollen shut if death hadn’t stopped the process.

Death had come courtesy of a gunshot behind the right ear. My quick inspection told me there was no blood splatter on the driver’s side. He had been killed elsewhere and moved into the van.

I thought about checking for ID, but the cops would hate that. And, since the guy was not Jay Knox, Chelsea Burgess, or Betty Drake—the only major players I knew—I doubted that his ID would tell me anything I couldn’t wait for.

I knew the dead man’s name might be in the dossier I hadn’t had time to read, and I could guess he was the man who had called Senator Adisa. Expecting to recognize me from my image on youtube, he might have staked out my van waiting for me to return.

If that was the case, the guy’s being dead was not going to help me at all. Chelsea and Betty might be less than enthusiastic about giving me Adisa’s letter if they thought I had rubbed out their friend in a mob-style cleanup. I decided it might be better if I interviewed Betty and Chelsea now and let someone else find the body. I

stepped away from the van. That's when someone else found the body.

"Are you planning to leave him there?" a voice asked. I turned to see a pear-bodied, Hispanic man with light, olive skin and a cherub's plump-cheeked face. His dark eyes scowled at me; his cherub's face pouted.

The woman with him was tall and thin and had white streaks running through black hair that seemed to have given up. It fell straight down her shoebox, mid-western face. She wore a blue print dress with spaghetti straps and looked open-mouthed at the dead man.

"Nathan, Nathan, shouldn't we start CPR? Isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

"Do you know CPR Helen?" cherubic Nathan asked.

"I know the theory,"

"Well that's just great," Nathan said. "We'll get him out and do theoretical CPR on him. We'll give him a lecture on the theory of longevity." Helen was reaching for the van door. I told her not to touch it. She might destroy evidence.

"We can't do CPR, but maybe we could make him more comfortable."

"He's dead lady," I said. "He can't get more comfortable. Nobody can." Helen asked if I was sure, and Nathan leaned closer to the side widow for a better look.

"I don't know too much about these things," Nathan looked at Helen, "but I do think, that is one dead man. I suppose we must call 911."

"It's no emergency, you can just call the police business number."

"How is this not an emergency?" Helen asked.

"He's not going anywhere," I said, "and he's not getting any deader." I couldn't take it any longer. I took out

my cell phone and dialed the Café's office number. When Casey answered, I told her to call the police and report that I had found a dead man in my van and that I would like him removed. Casey said she would come down as soon as she had spoken to the police.

"I wouldn't do that," I said. "There's no need for you to be more involved, and I have company here."

"And we are staying to make sure that you stay too," Nathan said and looked at me accusingly.

I sighed. I knew I should feel bad about the dead man, and I did. His death at such a young age was a tragedy, a real tragedy. But damn I wanted a cheeseburger and fries, and being questioned by the cops was going to be so much fun. Thank you, Noble, for dragging me back into this type of work! My most fervent hope was that I was right about Noble being alive and that Noleta would find him.