

Running

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PART I

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Tuesday, August 2

Two minutes late. Again.

Jim Mitchell checked the email on his iPhone as he walked next to his 18-year-old niece, Rebecca.

“Watch out, Uncle Jim!”

He looked up just as he was about to miss the first step.

“Thanks.” Jim glanced at Rebecca, who was Tweeting about the speech Assemblywoman Delores Holcombe had just given to the Emerald Valley City Council, talking to him and still she landed perfectly on each step. “You know, you’re half my age but can do that twice as well as I can.”

“Yeah, but I’m texting like 10 hours a day and will have chronic arthritis when I’m old, like 30.”

Her 40-year-old uncle nudged her. “Very funny.” He looked back. “Let’s wait a minute for Delores to catch up, shall we? It

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doesn't matter if we get to the Rotary Club 10 minutes before the assemblywoman, since they're just there for her anyway."

Rebecca covered her eyes from the setting sun that was still scorching the faded red bricks. "It's 94 degrees at 7:30 at night. And it's so humid it feels like the laundry room when Mom accidentally closes the door. I just want to get in the car and blast the AC."

Jim pinched the front of his Polo and fanned himself. He locked eyes with Brian Coulter, the assemblywoman's chief of staff and nodded his head toward the parking lot. If they hurried, they could still make it to the Rotary meeting a few minutes before she was set to take the stage.

A former reporter and college professor, Jim was relatively new to political consulting, having worked as communications director for Holcombe for only the last two months. He wrote speeches for Delores and served as a spokesman for the lawmaker, but he relied on Rebecca, who was interning for the campaign, to improve their social media presence.

Brian leaned over to the assemblywoman and whispered in her ear. Jim drummed his fingers on the nearby railing as the pair approached. When he covered politicians at the *Southern California Courier*, Jim often made a point of confronting them when they least expected it. It threw them off their game and often resulted in the harried official revealing more than he or she desired.

Even as a professor at Foothill University, where Rebecca was supposed to start in the fall, he had been in charge of his own calendar. Class started and ended when he said so. Now, working for someone more important than he was, Jim had to

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get used to living on someone else's timetable. Jim knew patience was a virtue; it just wasn't one of his virtues.

He smiled as Delores approached. "I have your speech in the car, and I can give you a copy for the ride over."

The assemblywoman waved off the suggestion. "No, with the sun in my eyes, I won't be able to read it. Besides, I'm sure you did a fine job as always."

"Thanks," Jim said.

Brian picked up the pace. "Let's go, we don't want our wonderful Rotarians to start without us, do we?"

Rebecca poked her head into the conversation. "They're not going anywhere. Besides, who else do they have to listen to, right Uncle Jim?"

Jim's quick grin was unfazed by the glare Brian shared equally with the two. "Be that as it may, us arriving late might make them pause before breaking out their checkbooks, and the race is too close for us to risk that."

Since both were right to a degree, Jim decided to end rather than extend the dust-up. As Brian and Delores walked side-by-side, Jim hung back with his niece. He leaned over to Rebecca and whispered in her ear. "Next time, you probably don't want to go toe-to-toe with Brian. At least, not out loud."

The teen was about to respond when the shots rang out. Jim glanced up quickly enough to see the assemblywoman slump to the ground and hear her chief of staff cry out as he doubled over.

"Get down!" Jim dove on top of Rebecca and scanned the area to the west where the gunfire came from, but the setting sun obscured his view. *Not again.* In the back of his mind, Jim couldn't help but recall the shooting at his church four months

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earlier. Nobody was hurt then, but today would be a much different story.

He momentarily considered scrambling to the other side of the concrete planters to his right for protection, but that would mean he would have to get up and possibly be in the line of fire again.

Too risky.

The shots stopped and, despite the glare, Jim saw someone pop up from behind the low wall in front of the parking lot and run toward the street in front of City Hall.

As he arose, Jim saw some small spots of blood on the concrete at his feet. "Are you OK? Did you get hit?"

"My arm hurts really bad, but that's about it." Rebecca seemed shaky but not in immediate danger.

"You've got some scrapes on your forehead. Did you pass out or anything?"

"No, I'm good." She briefly rested her hand on his arm. "Listen, I'll be OK. You should go check on Mr. Coulter and Assemblywoman Holcombe."

He nodded in agreement and took charge of the situation. He saw the police officer who had been inside the council meeting rush out to offer aid. Jim was about to call 911, but noticed the officer speaking into the radio on his epaulette and figured that base was covered. Instead, he rushed over to the two victims.

Brian clutched his left arm with his right, but that appeared to be the extent of his injuries. Favoring his right arm himself, Jim rolled Brian over and loosened the man's tie, which he wrapped around the chief of staff's wounded arm and knotted to staunch the bleeding.

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He heard tires screech in the distance as he rushed to the assemblywoman. Had he not witnessed the aftermath of a mass cult suicide eight years earlier, he probably would have vomited in response to the carnage. The blood pooled on the paving stones, already flowing toward the flagpole a few feet away. The corner of her head was punctured from the entry wound. Based on the amount of blood on the ground, he suspected the exit wound was much more horrific. He remembered, years earlier as a reporter, talking to Police Chief P.J. Gibson about the different kinds of bullets and the damage they did. If his memory was correct, Jim guessed the bullets might have been hollow points, which were designed to fragment upon impact and cause maximum damage to their target.

With a single glance at her half-open mouth and glazed eyes, he knew he needn't bother checking for a pulse.

As the paramedics approached, he briefed them on their injuries.

"Are you OK, sir?"

Looking down at his Polo, the blood stains darkened the bright blue shirt. "It's not mine."

The female paramedic, whose nameplate identified her as Sarah Rose, sat Jim down and looked him over. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

As Jim patted himself down, he winced when he moved his left wrist. Holding out the arm, the paramedic gently probed the area.

"It's probably just a sprain, but you'll want to get some x-rays to be sure. I'm going to wrap your wrist and then we'll get you in a sling, OK?"

Jim nodded as the paramedic began to work.

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“Nice job with tying off the arm wound over there.”

“Thanks. I took a first-aid class just before my son was born. I never thought I would be using that part of the lesson.”

“How old’s your boy now?”

“Mark turns three next Monday.”

“Well, lucky for him you’re going to be there, even if you do have a couple scrapes and bruises.”

Jim looked over as police officers joined the paramedics who were inspecting the lifeless body of Delores Holcombe.

“Yeah. Lucky.”

Q

He approached the park bench where Rebecca was sitting as medical personnel applied a cotton bandage and wrapped her forehead. He motioned to her right arm, which was also in a sling, hoping to momentarily distract her from the carnage a few yards away.

“Look, we match.”

Her eyes widened when she saw his shirt. “I thought you weren’t shot.”

“I wasn’t.”

Rebecca’s gaze flicked over to the flagpole. “Are they going to make it?”

“Brian got hit in the arm. They’re taking him to the hospital right now.”

“What about the assemblywoman?”

Jim paused, then shook his head.

The paramedic finished treating Rebecca and left.

“We could have been killed.”

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“Yes, we could have.”

Rebecca leaned into Jim’s shoulder. “I’m scared.”

“Me, too.”

Jim’s phone began to buzz. Gingerly pulling it out of his pocket, he saw his wife’s face on the Caller ID.

“Hi, hon. I’m OK.”

“Dale called me from the office and said there were shots fired at Delores at City Hall. What on Earth happened?”

Jim exhaled as he told Melissa the events of the last half hour.

Q

Jim quickly recognized *Courier* cops reporter Dale Henzie as he arrived on the scene and went to talk to his old coworker.

“What can you tell me?”

The former reporter noticed Dale didn’t have his notepad or phone out. “Is this on the record?”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Jim thought for a moment. “I guess it doesn’t matter, since I don’t know too much. I was about five feet away when the shots rang out. Brian Coulter was hit in the arm and was headed to the hospital last I saw.”

“And Assemblywoman Holcombe?”

He grimaced as he considered what to share. “You’re going to find out soon enough anyway. She didn’t make it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.” He glanced back at Rebecca. “Listen, that’s all I’ve got for now. I’m sure I’ll have more for you later.”

“OK.”

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“By the way. Thanks for calling Melissa. I know she was scared, but I would rather have had her call me than wait until I could call her.”

“Glad to help. Listen, any idea why someone would do this?”
Jim shook his head. “Not a clue.”