

The Mystery in the Mausoleum

By Stephen Rocco

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Table of Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter 1: The Walk	4
Chapter 2: The Investigation	10
Chapter 3: Casey, the Mystery Man	18
Chapter 4: Casey's Plan	28
Chapter 5: The FBI Profiler	41
Chapter 6: How a Profiler is Made	50
Chapter 7: Shoshanna Adair's Murder	59
Chapter 8: Casey's Investigation	65
Chapter 9: Iraq Memories	69
Chapter 10: Casey's Regret	87
Chapter 11: Red's Puzzle	94
Chapter 12: The Trip	101
Chapter 13: It's a Hit, But...	115
Chapter 14: The Interview	122
Chapter 15: Bert's Secrets	126
Chapter 16: The Confession	130
Chapter 17: Red's Conflict	137
Chapter 18: "You weren't just like me"	143
Chapter 19: Epilogue	156

Prologue

THE STATELY WIDOW ENTERED the Ridgewood building in a white mink coat that collapsed around her ankles, and protected her from the brusque wintry chill, but not her uneasiness for today's mission. "Ma, you're doing the right thing," uttered the equally chic daughter. Her smart hairstyle exposed her right earlobe adorned with teardrop diamonds that sparkled in the blustery sunshine.

The somber caretaker of this house for the dead, Tom Ward, welcomed the mother and daughter. "Good morning Mrs. Phillips. Nice to see you again, and I presume this is your daughter, Mrs. Ludwig. I feel like we are old friends, since we have communicated so much about this day." Mrs. Ludwig put out her hand displaying carefully manicured red nails in such a way that she seemed to expect the caretaker to kiss it. Instead he vigorously shook her hand, assuring the daughter that all the plans they had discussed would be implemented.

Mrs. Joan Phillips needed assurances from the caretaker. And he complied saying, "Your

husband will be fine. We have arranged for a funeral home in Houston to inter Mr. Phillips in a Mausoleum there. Mrs. Phillips interrupted the caretaker before he could go on, "Has anyone done this before? I was raised that the dead should have a peaceful internment." In a weary tone her daughter Carissa Ludwig responded, "Ma, you know this is the right thing. Dad will be with us in Houston. It only makes sense." Her mother reluctantly nodded, "I know, I know. I just hope your dad is not angry with me." Carissa sighed, "That's why we are here Ma; you wanted to see his casket once more and make sure dad is okay."

Carissa patted her mother's hand, but her dark sunglasses hid the rolling of her eyes. This moment was the end of a long year of pleading and cajoling with her mother. Since her father's death four years ago, her mother had become more and more needy, and wanted Carissa to spend more and more time with her, despite the thousand miles between Ridgewood and Houston. Eventually, it was Carissa's husband, Sebastian Ludwig who persuaded Carissa to have her mother move in with them. Thus, today's event began the relocation of Mr. Phillips' casket from the Ridgewood Mausoleum to the Woodlawn Mausoleum in Houston.

Mrs. Phillips had insisted on making sure it was the right person being moved. Carissa could only thank God that her mother didn't want to actually open the casket. As the men prepared to unscrew the facing marble of her dad's crypt, Carissa could not help think that her husband was

right. Her father was not really here – death simply was the end of life. No need for tears or expensive funerals as the body had no more meaning. Sebastian Ludwig, an heir to the Ludwig Fiduciary Fund, one of the largest mutual funds in the world, liked to brag that he buried his dad in a pine box. Thus, Carissa believed this whole relocation was a charade simply to get her mom to relocate.

Not that Carissa would do much of the caring. Sebastian had insisted on a 3,000 sq. ft. private wing added to their Houston mansion, with a full-time caretaker for his mother-in-law. With frequent European skiing vacations and Caribbean yachting trips, the Ludwig's were away from their Houston mansion more than in it. "Well, at least the Houston high society gossipers could not allege I did not do right for my mother," Carissa told herself.

Mother and daughter watched as the last screws were removed. They watched as the men carefully unhinged the Italian marble with the template Franklin M. Phillips, 1935-2006. The gasps of the attendants drew mother and daughter to the crypt opening. Carissa's screams were not heard by her mother. Joan had fainted as soon as her eyes adjusted to the dark hole that once held her husband. Carissa's screams echoed through the cathedral like mausoleum. They seemed to defy her husband's posture that a dead human body had no meaning.

Chapter 1: The Walk

“APACHE, GET MY LEG.” A quizzical look came over the black and white Collie/Shepard mix. The just awakened Casey let out a laugh, “I know girl. You would get it if you could lift it.” That Casey believed with all his heart. In fact, he trusted his service dog Apache more than he trusted most people. If not for Apache, he might not have survived the loss of his leg. As he consciously blocked out the harmful thoughts he once had, he thought to himself, “I love this dog so much that if I had to choose my missing leg or Apache, I would take Apache.”

Chastising himself for leaving his leg across the living room, Casey slid down off the couch. As he butted himself over to his V.A. provided right leg, Casey laughed, “Thank God no one can see my ass cheeks sliding over the rug.”

In two minutes, Casey had his right leg attached to his calf, just below his right knee. So smooth was his walk that many did not know he was an amputee. Casey recalled those early days in the VA’s amputation rehabilitation program. Then it had taken him nearly an hour to attach the

leg. Today attaching his leg was as easy as putting on contact lenses.

“Come on girl, let’s go for our walk.” This was Casey’s favorite part of the day. The constant demons that he carried like a persistent wart were forgotten for a bit. Apache also looked forward to these excursions. She knew that if she got lucky, and the cemetery was empty, she might be able to run free.

On this brisk December day in 2010, Casey told Apache that their daily walk in Ridgewood Cemetery would have to be a quick one. “I got to get to work girl. Red called an early meeting.”

Casey’s home was literally across the street from the finest piece of land in Ridgewood. Some in the town found it a bit ironic that the best land was reserved for the dead, and not the living. Since it was a memorial park, it had no headstones, only bronze markers that lay flat in the ground. Visitors simply saw postcard green rolling hills surrounded by ancient willow and elm trees that resembled ghoulish living creatures in the twilight. In the center of the cemetery stood a church-like structure, a recent addition to Ridgewood Cemetery. It was the Ridgewood Mausoleum. Cemetery officials said that it was built for those in the community who wanted to be above ground. Opened in the last decade, it housed 155 decedents, but had room for approximately 100 more Ridgewood residents. Some Ridgewood folks laughed that the Mausoleum residents were starving the poor bugs in the ground.

Casey often visited the mausoleum on his walks with Apache. With its vaulted roof, stained glass, and Italian marble corridors, the magnificent building looked like a church. Casey frequently lingered in the serene building, which quieted his angst.

On this morning's walk Casey quickly observed that the cemetery was unusually quiet. "I guess no one's getting planted today, huh Apache?" Casey knew that most funerals occurred in the morning. That was why he preferred to take his walks in the early evening when those mystical trees seemed to be alive. "Red thinks I'm crazy to walk around here," Casey laughed to himself. Chester "Red" Atkins was his boss and chief detective at the Ridgewood Police Department. "But he doesn't understand; no one understands me. My two best friends are with me here." Again, Casey had to consciously remove Quinny and Ziggy out of his mind, or else he would be useless for the day.

Seeing that the cemetery was devoid of the living, Casey unleashed Apache, who was quickly sniffing the nearby elm tree. She then excitedly went over the ridge of the cemetery, and disappeared from Casey's view.

"Get this fucking dog out of here!" Casey heard the words before seeing the strange figure lying prone on the ground. Initially angered by the tone, Casey was taken aback by the sight before him. As a reproached Apache retreated to Casey's side, the man waved a metal wire brush in the air. Only seconds earlier the same brush was

vigorously scrubbing one of the bronze markers that lay flat on the ground. As the man waved the brush, Casey thought he saw a small gun fall out of the diminutive man's pocket. But the man quickly grabbed the object and put it back.

Not sure what he had seen, Casey's mind was soon distracted by something else. As the man rose from the grave, Casey could not conceal his amazement at the sight. This unusual person's head did not match his body. The body was almost elflike, just over five feet tall. There was a large hump on his back that almost pushed the man's head under his shoulders. The head seemed enormous. It resembled a large acorn with a large crown. Just below the sloping forehead were deep coal-colored eyes. The man had a crooked nose, small mouth, and a long pointed chin. He was certainly not a handsome man Casey thought, but this man had a visage one paid attention to. It was those eyes, black pearls that shown with an intensity Casey had not seen since his service in Iraq. Life or death eyes, that conveyed whatever was occurring in the brain was serious business.

As Apache tugged on Casey's trousers to run free again, or perhaps run from the strange man, Casey became curious. "Is that a loved one of yours?" The small man hesitated for about twenty seconds, his eyes never leaving Casey's before responding, "My son Benjamin – he was only six months old." Casey slowly walked over to the bronze marker, scrubbed so finely it looked like it was placed yesterday. It read: *Benjamin A. Stoop, January 3, 1998 – June 6, 1998.*

Casey said softly, “Your son?” “Yup,” said the man, retreating to his knees and burnishing the bronze that needed no burnishing. “My son died of SIDS.” He looked up at Casey as if observing his reaction to the news. Then he added, “Yes my baby left me.” Ignoring this odd comment, Casey put out his hand as the man finally rose. “My name is Casey Conley. I’m sorry for your loss.” The man with the large head remained mute, but briefly touched Casey’s hand. “I’ve seen you here before,” he responded. After an awkward silence Casey asked the man’s name. “I’m Bert, Bert Stoop.”

Finally acknowledging Apache’s frantic desire to leave, Casey said, “I have to go to work Bert, but it was nice to meet you.” Bert simply grunted as he returned to attend to his son’s grave. Casey was about to step away when he heard again from Bert. “My wife couldn’t handle it when my son died.” Casey turned back to Bert, whose dark eyes moistened. “My wife developed a mental condition and couldn’t get out of bed for weeks. One day she simply disappeared.”

What struck Casey more than Bert’s words was his tone. His tears seemed to be ones of anger, and not sadness or regret. Again, an uncomfortable silence developed between the two as Bert once more went back to his knees. Casey finally said, “I’m sorry Bert. I’m a detective with the Ridgewood Police Department. If I can ever help you with anything, please let me know.” Bert just grunted.

As Casey was about to leave he noticed a buzz of activity near the mausoleum below the bluff where they stood. A swirl of police cars and ambulances surrounded the palatial building. Bert remarked, “They might need your help over there.”

“I know,” said a dispirited Casey.

Chapter 2: The Investigation

One Year Later...

“YES, MR. MAYOR, I know these families want answers. I can imagine how I would feel if my loved one was missing for a year. And yes, I know it’s an election year.” Chester “Red” Atkins rubbed what was left of his once famous red hair, which was now a burnt orange with bursts of silver.

Casey walked into the decrepit basement of the Ridgewood Police Station and knew immediately what the Mayor was complaining about. It was nearly one year since the Ridgewood Mausoleum had been the site of the town’s most infamous crime. Someone had removed nine decedents from the mausoleum, and the crime was no closer to being solved now than the day it had occurred. The bodies still had not been recovered.

“Okay Mr. Mayor, if that’s the direction you want to go I’m fine with it. In fact, retirement is looking better and better to me.” Casey watched as Red made these comments, not in anger, but more

in frustration. Everyone knew Red would never retire without solving this crime, so great was his reputation. Even the frustrated Mayor realized he could never replace a Red Atkins, without risking his own reelection.

Chester “Red” Atkins was a living legend in the town of Ridgewood. A superb quarterback in the town’s high school, he rebuffed a Division one football scholarship to enlist in the Marines. He served with distinction in Vietnam, receiving the Bronze Star during two tours of duty. Rumor has it that he was part of the historic battle of Khe Sanh, in which 6,000 Marines successfully defended a base camp near Laos from 30,000 communist invaders. The humble Red would never discuss his war experiences. In fact, his experience in Vietnam was revealed to the townsfolk by an eager student conducting a local Veteran’s project.

Red was very supportive of all veterans. When the Chief of Police hesitated in hiring a one-legged Casey, it was Red who intervened and recruited Casey to his detective squad.

Nearly fifty-five, Red had been the Chief of Ridgewood detectives for the past ten years. His rise in the police department was meteoric, and he easily could have been the Department’s Chief of Police. Physically, he commanded respect. Nearly six feet tall, he had deep set blue eyes, a crooked Roman nose, (a gift from the football field), and a strong mouth and chin. His fair English skin now took on the ruddy complexion of a November pumpkin. The bald dome of his head matched his

visage – any “red” left, intermingled with tightly curled gray around his ears.

Red made an instant impression as a first year patrolman. Off duty, and without his gun, Red found himself in the midst of a bank robbery. With the aid of a retiree’s cane, Red successfully chased the armed suspects out of the bank. Red became a hero, and then more citations followed – rescuing Ridgewood skaters in a pond, saving an elderly woman from her burning vehicle, and breaking open a banker’s Ponzi conspiracy scheme that saved thousands of Ridgewood citizens from losing their meager savings. And as Chief of Detectives for the past ten years, Red had also identified and shut down an opioid “pill mill” operation involving crooked physicians and pharmacists in the town.

But Red’s proudest accomplishments were saved for Ridgewood’s students. He enjoyed career days and veterans’ day affairs at all of Ridgewood’s schools. His identification of the opioid problem originated at one of these appearances, when students told him about those pink pills being sold at the schools. To Red, optimistic young people could solve all of America’s ills, and he loved to fuel that malleable optimism.

Red’s personal life, however, was filled with heartbreak. Returning from Vietnam, Red married his high school sweetheart, Julia. The young couple partied hard. To Red, who never thought he would survive Vietnam, drinking and partying was

a distraction. It also distracted him from memories of close friends, who never returned from the war.

With the birth of his two children, Chester Jr. and Alyssa, born a year apart, his party days ended. Not so for his wife Julia, however. He watched as her drinking escalated to the point that her first drink started when he began his morning shift. Attempts at rehabilitation failed, and Red sought a divorce when his children were six and seven. Reluctantly he filed for full custody when Chester Jr.'s first grade teacher informed Red that his son had missed more school days than he had attended. A protracted and personal custody battle ensued. Many friends and family members were stunned when Julia received custody. She immediately moved to her parents' home fifty miles away, in the town of Oxford.

Red's battles with his former wife left his children as casualties. In their rare visits with their dad, both children blamed him for the divorce, even blaming him for their mother's alcoholism. Eventually Chester Jr. and Alyssa refused to see Red, and he often returned home alone from Oxford, despite having weekend visits. Red was faithful in supporting his children, never missing a child support payment. Now that they were both in college, he paid for that too. Despite this, he had not seen his children for five years, and his twice yearly letters to them were returned unopened.

Red had never remarried, and had not had a drink in thirty years. Occasionally, he dated, but the lingering distaste of his marriage often sabotaged any relationship that grew intense.

Instead, Red plunged himself into his police work, and this was the reason the Mayor would never fire him. Chester “Red” Atkins was revered and respected by all.

After his talk with the Mayor, Red focused his team meeting on the mausoleum mystery. Addressing his team with renewed fervor Red exclaimed, “Team, we are missing something! I’ve decided to start from scratch, and rework this mausoleum investigation.”

Red’s words triggered a collective recall of the chaos of those first few days of the investigation. Following the realization that Franklin Phillips’ body was missing, all 155 crypts were examined. It was found that seven other men and one woman were also missing. Since all nine decedents had been in their respective crypts at least two years, the detectives immediately inherited a cold crime case.

Family members, cemetery workers, lawyers, and multiple news media sources, even national stations, were present as the crypts were opened. Most of the bereaved were relieved. But the eight other families whose loved ones were missing, suffered like Joan Phillips; their grief compounded by the mystery as to why their loved ones had been removed.

Sensing the same sentiments as his staff, Red said, “I hear from these families almost every day.” He added ruefully, “Or from their attorneys, who allege we are maliciously negligent.” Trying to shield his staff from these accusations, Red had all queries from anyone about the case referred to

him. Casey and Kim were happy that at least the media had moved on to the next sensation. This would make their investigation easier.

Red continued, “These poor families deserve to have their loved ones returned.” The detectives nodded their heads in unison. On the team besides Casey was Red’s senior detective Kim Davis. Kim was a seasoned officer who recently turned fifty, and had been a detective for twenty years. She was astute and street smart. In fact the “pill mill” case was solved largely through her undercover work as a middle aged patient with a slipped disc. The matronly Kim fit the part perfectly, and was given more and more opioids without examination from a crooked doctor. Red knew that behind her thick glasses was a savvy investigator.

“I couldn’t agree with you more boss,” said Kim. “From the first day I think we all recognized that this was such an unusual crime. The thing I struggle with is the motive: Why would someone do something like this?” Casey, largely silent, nodded his head in assent to Kim’s comments.

“Let’s look at the evidence again,” said Red, as he displayed all the photographs and evidence that overwhelmed their small office. “From day one we have been hampered by a lack of videos in the mausoleum. Casey piped up, “Now they have more cameras than a Hollywood movie set.” Kim agreed, “I guess no one ever thought people would rob a mausoleum.” Red gave a sad laugh, “I know every mausoleum in the country has them now.”

Red refocused the meeting. “Let’s look at opportunity and means. Who would have access to

the mausoleum, and how would they do this? The way the person or persons did this was pretty sophisticated. They somehow removed the marble from the crypt and opened the caskets and removed the bodies. This took some planning.” Casey offered his assessment, “Boss, I believe this took a team of people. They had to remove the body, get it on some type of stretcher, and then put it in a vehicle.” Red thought about it, “I’m not sure. It could be one really capable person.”

Red turned to Kim, “Kim, you have interviewed many of the people at the cemetery. What do they think?” “Unfortunately Red,” said Kim, “they said it’s not that difficult to access the crypts containing the bodies. You just need a couple of tools to remove the marble and open a casket. With a simple stretcher one person could roll a decedent to his vehicle.”

“I see,” said Red. “I’ve also talked with medical examiners and funeral directors who said the deceased would have been well preserved, given the atmospheric conditions in the mausoleum.” Kim responded, “Does that mean the bodies would deteriorate outside the mausoleum?” “Well, that depends,” said Red. “They told me in the right dry or cool conditions the embalmed body would remain intact.”

“What else do we have here?” Kim asked. “We have no forensic evidence. Whoever did this was very skilled at leaving no fingerprints or DNA evidence.” Red sighed, and waved his hands over the evidence. “I just feel we are missing something. Kim and Casey, I want you to re-

interview all the personnel again – from the superintendent of the cemetery to the gardener. Look at anyone who had access to the building. They had both the opportunity and the means. Kim, I want you to start with that superintendent Tom Ward. I think he could be more forthcoming – he is only interested in saving his job. Casey, you re-interview that Jim Boyd guy. He is definitely eccentric enough to do something like this. All of his co-workers identified him as the most likely.”

Casey sighed, “No problem Red. I really don’t think that it was him though. Maybe some of his co-workers have something to hide.”

For once Red showed a bit of that Celtic temper, “Well, re-interview all of them then! These loved ones are in pain. This case is getting colder and colder. I can’t let that happen. Somewhere there are bodies and we have to find them!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Rocco is a third-generation funeral director in a funeral home outside of Boston. In addition to working as a funeral director over 40 years, he was a family mediator. He was an instructor at Mt Ida College for many years and Co-Director of its National Center For Death Education. Stephen and his wife, Lidia, have been blessed with four children and three grandchildren (and hopefully many more).

