

Leslie J. Adkins©

“Rhode-dead-ron”©

by

Leslie Adkins

The day I found Mr. Timken dead in his apartment, a row of dominos began falling against each other, one by one, through my life.

No, dominos were too nice, too child-like. It was as if someone put a bunch of metal trash cans in a row down the street and hit the first one, manically laughing as they fell against each other, spilling garbage and making a racket that woke all the neighbors.

In the beginning, I wasn't all that upset about his death. I mean the man was 80 years old, lived alone, and was the grouchiest soul I ever had the displeasure to meet. As far as I could tell, he had been hoping “to go” ever since he moved into Evergreen Manor Apartments four years ago. The day he died disrupted my pleasantly quiet life with a flurry of fire engines, people with questions, and unsettling happenings. Things would never be the same.

I had just returned home from the grocery store, having finished my weekly trip to stock up on necessities, including my essential supply of Diet Coke. Carrying the heavy plastic bags from my car at the curb to my apartment always proved to be a chore. I was too stubborn to make more than one trip. I'm a writer so I sit a lot and rarely exercise (my mother says I'm just a ‘sedentary person’). Despite what some say, I can think positive--I consider the trek from street to apartment with my groceries my weekly aerobic activity.

I stumbled up the five cracked concrete steps from the street to the front of Evergreen

Manor, stubbing my toe in the process. The case of pop I was carrying banged against my leg creating a future bruise. I'm not a very graceful person.

It was a somewhat warm April Sunday in our little town of Shoreview, Washington. The rays of sunshine being as stubborn as I, pushed their way through the gray muck that filled the Northwest sky. At least it wasn't raining. Carrying grocery bags with an umbrella in hand is even more challenging and looks ridiculous, but I've done it.

Ezekiel, my friend and neighbor, met me at the top of the stairs, a large frown extending from under his bushy black mustache. "Hello, Ms. Manager. Looks like you have quite a load. No wonder you have back trouble."

"No lectures please, Reverend."

"Beautiful Jennifer, I will offer to help if you bought beer."

"I did, but I left it in the trunk."

"Humph." Ezekiel grabbed the stretched-out-handles of two of my plastic bags, swinging them at his side as if they were full of feathers.

Ezekiel is a 35-year old student at the University of Washington, who has been going to school on and off for years. He can never quite seem to finish. His real name is Norman Sands. He changed it when he got into TV evangelism, his 'real' job. If he knew, that I knew, that his name was really Norman, I'd surely be sacrificed.

Now, I'm not knocking Ezekiel's religion, such as it is. He had never even been to church before he was cast into the part of a Reverend in a local community theater production of *Inherit the Wind*. He felt so comfortable with the role that he didn't sleep until he had talked a local station into putting him on late night as Ezekiel, Minister to the Common People. The rest is, as they say, history. Now he's on every day, twice on Sunday and even has his own church.

He has a sizeable following of “Common People” who, if they knew where he lived, would probably storm our building looking for salvation. But there is very little of that at Evergreen Manor.

A cool wind gusted off the Sound and ruffled strands of my long, light-brown hair across my face. My lungs screamed as I stumbled along the walkway, not used to strenuous activity. Ezekiel looked unfazed. He is one of those sickening people who actually think exercise is fun.

“What are you doing home on a Sunday?” I asked breathing hard.

“Taking a break between shows. You know, no one uses plastic bags anymore,” he said turning back toward me, frowning. “You should bring your own canvas ones.”

“I re-use them for garbage can liners and lunch bags. That’s recycling isn’t it?”

“I guess. I’ll let you off this time.” He smiled his TV smile.

Ezekiel pulled ahead of me as we moved down the sidewalk to my apartment on the west corner of the complex. Evergreen Manor is an older brick building with 12-units; a two-story “U” shape with a garden courtyard in the center. I use the term “garden” very loosely. We residents call it the Courtyard of Doom--it fits. In the winter, it’s mostly brown weeds, in the summer the grass overgrows the flowers and pops through the cracks in the pavement. I always intend to get out and clean it up but more pressing matters seem to surface. The courtyard does have a wide concrete area that works great for lawn chairs and barbecues during the rare months the weather is nice.

Evergreen has few redeeming qualities, but one is the giant rhododendron bushes that surround the property. During the late spring, we enjoy a spectacular splash of color. Red, pink, white, lavender, you name it. Each resident could pick a flower a day for their kitchen table and no one would ever notice. But mostly, they don’t.

Ezekiel and I finally made it to my door. I sat down my grocery bags and fumbled in the pocket of my Levis for my keys. Ezekiel placed his bags next to mine, blocking the screen door.

“Well, I’m off to church. ‘TTFN’.” He walked back toward the street, his tall muscular frame throwing a giant shadow on the walk. “Oh, by the way, Ms. Manager,” he said turning back toward me for a moment. “You’d better check on Mr. Timken. He hasn’t been out today and he left early from our poker game last night. The old man may well have passed away.”

I had just fished out my keys and positioned them toward the lock. “What?” The keys crashed to the ground. “I just saw him...Friday.”

Ezekiel, who was genuinely unemotional except on television, looked slightly worried. “I peeked in the window. Doesn’t look good. I’ll give last rites if you want.” He strolled down the sidewalk toward his car.

I hustled my groceries inside, quickly putting away those things that needed refrigeration, then scurried down to Mr. Timken’s apartment, 1E, at the end of the building across the courtyard from mine. My tennis shoes crunched through a pile of sunflower seed remnants someone had dumped on the walk. I made a mental note to talk to Billy-Clyde, the likely offender.

Each unit at Evergreen has large floor-to-ceiling windows to one side of the front door, facing the courtyard. Mr. Timken’s faded curtains were cracked just enough to see in but not really see anything. I thought I could make out his body slumped in his chair, but it was hard to tell. The room was shadowy and dim. Then I noticed the flies. There were dozens buzzing around the windows and numerous dead ones on the sill. I felt a twinge in my gut. Mr. Timken was old, but it still made me sad to think he was dead. I looked at the flies again and switched back to my managerial role. No way I was going in there. Not a chance.

“They don’t pay me enough for this,” I said aloud as I walked back to my apartment. Inside, I hurried to the phone and dialed 911.

Grabbing a Diet Coke from the refrigerator, I flopped down on my old indigo colored couch. What was keeping the police or fire department? I guess since the guy was already dead (I told them about the flies); they weren’t in too much of a hurry. I closed my eyes and remembered Mr. Timken, hoping he was in a better place.

I always believed that the need to write, the passion, the overwhelming desire to write shaped my life, became my driving force, and when I died I would be remembered as one of the great writers of my time. It sounded like a very noble, worthwhile pursuit until Ezekiel told me that my passion was bullshit and I was really afraid of living. He summarized my life as a series of escapes--running away--not facing reality. The way he said it was so powerful that I almost believed him. “Jennifer,” Ezekiel prophesized. “You’ve got to get out and experience life if you want to write about it. You are much too reclusive to be a really good writer.”

Sitting around waiting for the fire truck and police to arrive, I thought about my life and tried to convince myself this was something worth experiencing, although I couldn’t imagine writing about a skinny old dead guy in a dreary apartment. I had always aspired to write something deep--literary, prize-winning stuff, revealing true human nature, though I didn’t know exactly what that was.

Reclusive or not, writing is the one thing I really enjoy. Occasionally, I even publish something, articles mostly. Once in a while a poem or a letter to the editor. But my dream is to write a novel. Until that happens, I keep my job working part time at Cup-a-Java, a small

coffeehouse, and being an apartment manager at Evergreen. The combination keeps me in Diet Coke, barely.

Despite my meager wages (the rent discount for being a manager helps), I consistently put 10% of every paycheck into a savings account, just as I have for the last 16 years since I had my first job at age 14. My father (who had very little influence in my life) taught me about the slippery quality of money--how just when you think you've got it made, it disappears like a quarter rolling down a drain. His money slipped away to the liquor store, a habit that eventually killed him.

Mr. Timken had been a grumpy old man, but I would miss him. As one of my residents (the new politically correct term--we don't say tenant anymore), he was part of my community, and, no matter how odd, one of my friends. I was going to have to tell the others!

To say that the people who reside at Evergreen are eccentric would be putting it mildly. Ezekiel and I are the least interesting people who live here. For example, a little old lady named Peggy Sue lives in 2F. She is often referred to as the cat lady because, depending on the time of year, she may have as many as twenty cats living in her apartment. The fact that Evergreen Manor has a "No Pets" sign dangling out front does not trouble her (I haven't actually seen the California-based owner in years).

In exchange for picking up kitty supplies at the local warehouse store, Peggy Sue helps me with research for my writing. She's a former librarian who has an instinct for finding exceptionally interesting tidbits on any subject. It may sound like I got the easy end of the deal with Peggy Sue, but have you ever tried to get four 50-pound bags of cat food, not to mention cat litter, into a two-door Toyota Corolla? Peggy Sue may be strange, but I like long-term residents. I haven't had to rent an empty apartment in over a year. Makes my job a bit easier.

I had put away all my groceries and had started to pace the living room when I finally heard the fire truck pull up in front of the building. I rushed to the door to meet the firemen who were coming up the walk. Fire-persons, I should say; one of the three was a woman. They wore crisp blue uniforms and carried small red cases, presumably full of first aid equipment.

“Hello,” I said trying to sound professional. “I called.” Suddenly, I noticed the peeling paint on the little fence out front and the cracked sidewalk. It had been awhile since we’d had formal visitors.

One of the men stepped forward. He was tall, blond, and very handsome, sort of a Don Johnson twin (I’ve secretly been in lust with Don since Miami Vice reruns). The lines around his eyes said he was probably at least my age and he laughed a lot. I have never been interested in “serious” men even though I think of myself as somewhat intellectual.

My instant attraction to this man with the laughing eyes startled me. In recent times, I’ve become something of a hermit and was considering joining a celibacy support group. Now, suddenly, Mr. Timken had “passed on” in his apartment and I was standing on the sidewalk ogling a guy. Mr. Gorgeous Fireman extended his hand.

“Lieutenant McIntire.”

I found his hand warm, soft, and very comforting. “Jennifer Dodge.”

“You’re the manager?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Which apartment?” he asked.

“Mr. Timken is in ... was in ... he’s in 1E. Follow me.”

The three trooped along behind me until we reached Mr. Timken’s door. I fumbled with my key ring, pulling out the master and slipping it into the lock. “I don’t have to go in do I?”

Lieutenant McIntire smiled. “No, we’ll handle it from here.”

“Great. I’ll be back home... in my apartment.”

He nodded, smiled, and opened the door. I felt an urge to stay and gawk, but the smell that drifted through the doorway sent me hurrying back across the courtyard to wait.

Evergreen Manor sits on a hillside, in the town of Shoreview just north of the city of Seattle in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. From some vantage points, the apartments have small views of Puget Sound-if you crane your neck. I’ve been the resident manager at Evergreen for six years. Being manager sounds much more interesting than it is. I don’t really do too much since the residents are all long-term. Mostly I receive a discount on my rent to be around. Since I don’t work full-time, I’m around a lot. Sometimes I fix things, but mostly I call repairmen and send the bill to California.

Evergreen isn't fancy, but it’s a simple comfortable place to live. My two-bedroom apartment is spacious, if somewhat plain--beige carpet, small living/dining room, views mostly of a neighbor’s yard, except for minuscule views of Puget Sound. I sleep in the first bedroom, but the second bedroom, my office, is the one I live in.

Being a writer, I have a love for books, an addiction. I love the feel of them, the weight of them, the smell of them. I read a lot, everything from the current best sellers to obscure literary novels to mysteries and sci-fi. As a result, my office is dominated by three tall bookshelves. If I ever move, I’ll have to weed out my collection but for now the sight of those full shelves is comforting. I only wish I could get my book up there.

My current non-fiction project is an off-the-wall humorous jab at Seattle coffeehouses.

There isn't really much of a market for it, but I'm still looking. My dream of writing a novel is stalled--I haven't gotten past page 50.

I stood in my office running my finger along the book backs on one of my shelves, considering whether or not to reorganize them, when there was a knock on my door. I went to the living room to answer it.

Gorgeous, tan, blond haired, blue eyed fireman McIntire stood on the doorstep. Behind him, his co-workers were pushing a covered stretcher down the walk. Leaning out, I could see an aid car, two police cars, and a small crowd of looky-loos (including Peggy Sue with two cats in her arms) had pulled up out front. Our little building was quite the spectacle this afternoon.

“Mr. Timken is... gone, isn't he?” I asked.

“Yes. One of the officers will want to talk to you. Routine.” He smiled.

I gulped. “The police? Does that mean something?”

“It appears he died of natural causes, but...”

“As opposed to what? Are you saying he could have been killed?” Tension hung between us, but it wasn't stressful. Actually it was kind of interesting.

“I can't say exactly. That's for the police and the coroner to decide.”

Hearing the word coroner sounded creepy. TV is one thing but this was real life. I shivered. “Do you need anything? What can I do to help?”

“We're good. Our part is about finished. The police are scouring the apartment, but I think they'll wrap up soon.”

“Good.” I shifted nervously from one foot to another. “So you think he died ... peacefully? I mean he was old, but did he ...suffer?” Unexpected tears pressed against my lids. Poor Mr. Timken.

“I don't know. I wouldn't think so.”

“I'm glad for that,” I said sniffing. Lieutenant McIntire paused, on the verge of leaving but hesitating. Then he slowly extended his hand and I moved mine out to meet it. I swear there was electricity in the air (fireworks was a bit to cliché), but after all, I am a writer and my imagination tends to run a bit wild.

“We've cleaned up some. We'll leave the windows open to alleviate the... odor.”

“Thanks.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Jennifer Dodge. Maybe under better circumstances next time.”

He smiled and walked away. My heart thudded against my chest as I shut the door. Either from the giddy feeling of a cute guy at my door or the possibility of murder at Evergreen. When someone knocked on it just a moment later, I swung it open with anticipation. But instead of Lieutenant McIntire, I stood face-to-face with Billy-Clyde Branson from 2B.

Billy-Clyde is my age, 30, but judging by his actions, you'd guess he was about eight. His curly brown hair hung limply over one brow and looked like it had been hacked at with garden shears, which knowing Billy-Clyde was a certainly a possibility. His plaid flannel shirt, white T-shirt, and jeans hadn't seen a washing machine in weeks. His feet sported size 14 athletic shoes with no laces.

“Hey, Jenny. Some excitement, huh?”

“What do you want, Billy-Clyde?”

“What did that fireman say? Is Timken dead?”

“Yes, it seems so.”

“Poor old fart. Hah!” he said slapping his knee. “I owed him 20 bucks! Guess I won't

have to pay! All those games he always won. And we won't have to put up with that smelly salsa crap he always ate. I'm surprised it didn't kill him before." Billy-Clyde laughed and spit a slobbery mouth full of chewed-up sunflower seeds on the sidewalk. I glared at him until he used the side of his shoe to brush them into the flowerbed.

"Your sympathy is charming."

"Ah, Jenny..."

"I'm really busy, Billy-Clyde. I've got to go. The police are coming by ..."

"No shit? The police? Cool! Can I stay?"

"No way."

"Ah, come on Jenny."

"Not a chance. How come you're not working today? I thought you had a job that worked all weekend?"

"Well, I was on this here roof job but the thing was going really slow. I didn't like hauling all the trash, you know. Anyhow, I think I've got a line on a painting gig."

"Great. Rent's due in a week," I said.

"I knows it. But thanks for the remind. Gotta run. See ya." He sauntered off toward his apartment, a foul odor trailing behind him.

CHAPTER 2

I shut the door and sighed. For a basically keep-to-myself type of person, this day was turning into a social challenge. I suddenly felt exhausted. The afternoon had leaked away and the sun had begun its descent behind the Olympic Mountains. Shafts of light filtered through the wispy clouds, promising a sunset. I stood at the kitchen sink and gazed out toward The Sound through my tiny view of the harbor and ferry dock from that window. The last few rays of sunshine reflected off the water and lit up the tiny strip of beach that stretched off to the right of the yacht club. I love that view. Somehow, it settles my soul to see it, no matter what the season.

I was picking at a bowl of cold leftover spaghetti and thinking about Mr. Timken, and everything that I hadn't gotten done that day, when I heard another knock on my door.

Using a pink paper napkin, I swiped the sauce from the corners of my mouth and moved to answer it.

"Hello," I said to the man standing outside.

"Hello ma'am. I'm Sergeant Bierwagon." He pulled out some kind of badge and showed it to me. It looked very official. "Are you the manager?"

"Today, I wish I wasn't." He didn't crack a smile. "Yes, I am. Sorry. It's been an

interesting afternoon. Do you want to come in?"

"Yes, of course. I guess I expected ..."

"Someone else?"

"No, just someone ... Oh bother, it's nothing."

I swung the door open wide and Sergeant Bierwagon strode in. He was a large man with broad shoulders and a thick spare tire around his waist. He wore a neatly trimmed mustache and beard that showed hints of gray, as did his short black hair. His dated-looking suit looked presentable but worn. My curious nature made me look for the gun I assumed he was wearing, but it wasn't visible under his jacket.

"Have a seat," I said gesturing to the couch and trying to remember if I had cleaned the house anytime in the last week. I hadn't been expecting visitors.

"Thank you. I'm here about your neighbor, Mr. Timken."

"I figured."

He cleared his throat. "Did he live here long?"

"Four years." I sank into the recliner chair across from the couch.

"Did he socialize much?"

I shrugged. "Not really. He was really kind of a grump. We didn't talk much. He did play cards with a group of the other residents."

"Do you have files on the tenants--emergency contact information and the like?"

"Sure. Oh God, you'll have to tell his daughters!"

"Yes. I will. But if you could help direct me to them, I'd appreciate it."

"Hold on a second." I got up, walked into my office, and pulled open the top drawer of the file cabinet. The metal runners creaked and groaned from too much abuse. Mr. Timken's

file--all the other resident files--were pushed to the back behind my writing notes. I pulled it out and returned to the living room.

“I haven’t looked in here for a long time. I only keep copies. The originals go to the building owner in California.”

“Who is the owner?”

“His name is Wayne King. I haven’t seen him in years. He’s some kind of hotshot real estate guy in LA--owns a number of buildings. Evergreen isn’t one of his high priorities.”

Sergeant Bierwagon nodded and thumbed through the thin file I handed him.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Even after the words were out I realized my beverage selection was minimal at best. I didn’t have a bean of coffee in the house, maybe some tea if I was really lucky, but only the tea fairy would know how old it was.

“No thanks. I won’t be long.” He scribbled notes on a small spiral-bound pad, the cheap drugstore kind. But the pen was expensive--Cross, gold.

“Why go through Mr. Timken’s apartment? That’s not standard for a guy who died of old age, is it?”

He looked at me and frowned. The kind of frown your parents or your teacher gave you that says they’re in charge and why are you questioning them. “It’s routine. Especially for someone of his... wealth.”

“Hah!” I laughed out loud. “Mr. Timken was no Bill Gates. He lived here didn’t he?”

Sergeant Bierwagon stood up and handed the file back to me. “Let’s just say he lived below his means. I am going to attempt to contact his daughters. It says here that he has two.”

“Yes. Deirdre and Charlotte. I’ve met them a couple times.”

“If they contact you before I reach them, please refer them to me.” He handed me a

business card with a bright blue and white mountain logo, Shoreview Police.

“Okay, sure.”

“I’m going to speak to the other tenants if they’re around.” I nodded. “If anyone asks any questions, like the media, refer them to me.”

“The media? You mean like television? Why would they care about Mr. Timken?”

“Ms. Dodge, whenever a person of Mr. Timken’s wealth dies it seems to be news. They like to dredge up the past and make some kind of circus out of it.”

“Wealth? Are you serious?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No,” I said feeling stupid.

“Timber dollars.”

“Wow. I didn’t even know he was anybody special.” After I said it, I realized how mean and heartless it sounded. “I... I didn’t mean ... I didn’t know.”

“Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Dodge. I’ll be in touch if I need anything further.”

He handed the file back to me, then walked toward the door in a slow, lumbering gait. My imaginative mind started visualizing old gun shot wounds. His large hand on the doorknob, he paused.

“You’ll probably want to notify the owner about this.”

I stood up. “The owner!”

“Like I said, there could be media attention.”

“Well, I’m sure I can handle a few reporters. Right?”

He nodded. “If you need anything, give me a call.”

“I will.”

He paused again. "You aren't what I expected, Ms. Dodge."

"What did you expect?"

"Here? Someone less ... Oh never mind. It's silly, an old stereotype."

I chuckled. By the way he was blushing, I got the feeling he was trying to compliment me. I watched him wander over to Peggy Sue who was still standing in the courtyard, holding her cats and staring off into space. A ray of sunlight slipped from behind a cloud illuminating her thin form. Like a spot-light, Ezekiel would have said. Was that some kind of weird sign? Who knows. I went back inside my apartment.

Wow! Mr. Timken was loaded! I wanted to talk to someone. I had so many questions. This time I didn't dawdle after I shut the door. I ran straight for the phone and dialed Ezekiel's number. Needless to say, the Reverend wasn't in. He had a canned recording that told me so. The tin voice instructed me to leave a message--short and sweet.

"Hey Rev, call me as soon as you get in. Better yet, come on over."

My mother taught me to be responsible, so I reluctantly put a call in to Wayne King, Evergreen's owner. Again, a machine picked up and I left a message.

Flopping on the couch, I picked up Mr. Timken's file. The first thing I noted was his given name was William, something I hadn't remembered. He had always been very proper--he liked being called Mr. Timken. His original application listed two previous residences, both of which were on Lake Washington and, if I wasn't mistaken, were in the Medina area, one of the area's ritziest neighborhoods.

Income wasn't listed and most of his financial data including his credit report had been

shipped off to California. However, upon close examination of our extensive one-page application, I found the spot where he had listed his bank accounts. Four different banks were mentioned with one checking account having an average balance of \$10,000. To a struggling writer, that's a lot of cash.

The rest of the file revealed nothing interesting. Under employer he had only said "retired." How did he earn all that money? Sergeant Bierwagon had said something about timber. Was it family money? Who was his family?

An overwhelming feeling of guilt hit me in the gut. I leaned back and put the application aside. This man had been my neighbor for four years and I knew nothing about him. What could I have done differently? The guilt was genuine, but I could do nothing to repair the past. Give yourself a break, Jennifer. The man wasn't a very social person. He barely acknowledged a hello on the sidewalk much less an engaged in conversation.

I thought about Timken's daughters. I had met Charlotte when she came by to visit. She was a quiet person, in a shy sort of way, but friendly. Plain, plump and practical Charlotte. Deirdre, the eldest daughter, on the other hand struck me as a bit wild. She was certainly a flashy dresser--lots of color, lots of jewelry, lots of hair spray. That's the only reason I remember her at all. She had come by only once or twice since her father moved in.

For some reason, knowing so little about my resident made me feel lousy. I should find out more, I thought. Maybe I should do something for the family. What if they asked me to say something at the funeral? I'd better do some homework. Maybe I could write an article about him. A productive idea that helped me justify my trip to the library, without admitting I was just plain curious and more than a little nosy.

The Shoreview Library took up most of a two-story building in the heart of town, right off Main Street. The parking lot adjoining the building was full, so I cruised the street looking for a parking space, just missing one in front of an escrow office when a giant space ship on wheels beat me to the space. I cruised through the lot again and lucked out when an old red pick-up pulled out. Luckily for me, a bond measure had passed last year that kept the library open on Sundays.

For the next hour, I poured through back issues of newspapers and local periodicals. I recorded the sources I wanted to peruse, and then appealed to the resource librarian to find them. I prepared to do some digging, but the name William Timken popped up right away. Frequent references to him appeared with cross-references to Timken Inc., d.b.a. Timken Timber Sales. I executed an Internet search and printed out the first few responses.

The library was quiet and stuffy, comforting after the turbulent day. I pulled up a chair to the long conference-style table in the non-fiction section, spread out my notes, and sorted through what I had found. Mr. Timken was a lumberman. Shows how much I knew about one of the Northwest's largest (and lately controversial) industries. Timken Timber Sales was an old firm, a big player in the local timber industry until the last few years when it had diversified to other ventures including buying a small computer software firm.

The company had been started by a Delfore Timken, probably my neighbor's grandfather judging by the dates. There were a few articles about William Timken's wife, Celeste who died five years earlier. She was involved in several charities, but information on her was minimal. Their home on Lake Washington made Sunset Magazine more than once. Deirdre and Charlotte were mentioned briefly in several articles and there was a small hullabaloo in 1978 when Deirdre

received a DUI citation for drunk driving.

Someone dropped a book and the thud rang through the silent room. I stood up and stretched my back and neck ached from exhaustion, stress, and leaning over the table too long. I glanced at my tarnished silver watch, a small inexpensive Walmart timepiece, and was shocked to realize I had been reading for well over an hour. I quickly photocopied a few of the better articles on Timken and hurried from the building.

Dark had descended on my town. The streetlights and headlights from passing cars threw odd shadows across the parking lot. The small square lot had four rows of parking spaces divided neatly with white lines that seemed to glow in the dark. I fumbled in my purse for my keys suddenly wishing I had pulled them out before I left the safety of the library building. Shoreview is small by most standards and usually I feel very safe. I know people. When I take walks, people smile and say hello. But I'm not naive. I know crime is everywhere. And this dark lot made me insecure, as if crime was all around. I almost wished I wore a sign that said, "Starving Writer--I have nothing to steal."

A breeze whisked off the Sound and across the parking lot rustling the azalea, rhododendron, and other bushes surrounding three sides of the lot. I imagined other spooky sounds and small animals hiding in the dark. I had to stop and look into the depths of the oversized bag I call a purse (has to fit a notepad and whatever book I'm reading). Shaking the bag a few times, I heard the familiar jingle of my keys. Finally my fingers closed around them.

I was about six feet from my car door when I noticed a man standing in the shadows under a burnt out street lamp. I could see the glow at the end of his cigarette when he inhaled. He's watching me, I thought, as I hurried to my car, unlocked the door, and jumped in.

I jammed my keys into the ignition with one hand and locked my door with the other.

My heart pounded with fight-or-flight energy--ready for flight. I threw a backward glance into the back seat hoping no car thieves were lurking there, though what they would want with my banged up, on-its-last-leg car, I didn't know. I had to turn the key four times and pump the gas before the engine, long over due for a tune up, turned over. I shot out of the parking lot and headed home without looking back.

Home was only five minutes away, up six blocks and over two. My old Toyota fit like a foot in a shoe into a small space in front of Evergreen. I hurried to my apartment, opened the door, and slammed it shut locking the dead bolt. Did they call it that because it kept you from being dead? Leaning against the scratchy wood door, I took my first deep breath since leaving the sanctuary of the library.

“Well, it's about time. “

My heart leap into my throat and I screamed. “God, Ezekiel, you scared the shit out of me!”

He sat on my rumpled couch, flipping through an old copy of Writers Digest magazine. “Such language, especially in front of a man of the church.”

I shook off my sweater and went directly to the refrigerator for a Diet Coke. “You know churches are against my religion.”

“Such a shame. We could use you in the choir.”

“You haven't heard me sing.”

“Oh, but I have. Remember the time my apartment flooded and I had to sleep on your couch? You sang in the shower. You have a lovely voice.”

I frowned and popped the top of the cold can. What a comforting sound. I flopped down on the couch next to Ezekiel and took a large swig. “How'd you get in here?”

“You gave me a key, remember?”

“For an emergency.”

“Well, your message sounded rather urgent.”

“My message? Oh! That’s right. Guess what?” I exclaimed and removed the folded photocopies from my purse. “Our grumpy neighbor, our now dead neighbor I am sorry to say, was one wealthy dude.”

“Yes, he was,” Ezekiel said waving away my paper offering.

“You knew?” I asked, disappointed.

“Sure. Didn’t you? You are the manager aren’t you?”

“It’s not like he talked about it.”

“How long have you lived in the Northwest?” Ezekiel stretched his long legs out in front of him then hefted his feet onto my coffee table.

“All my life.”

“And you’ve never heard of Timken Timber?”

“I may have heard it somewhere. I just didn’t connect it with him. You know I don’t watch much television or read the paper.”

Ezekiel shook his head and gave me a perfect “I told you so” glance.

“Don’t start,” I said holding up my hand and almost spilling my drink. “I know, I know. I should get out more. You’re right. I don’t even know much about my neighbors. Am I that anti-social?”

“Pack your bags, she’s goin’ on a guilt trip.”

“Ezekiel, I’m serious.”

“My dear emotional friend, nobody knows their neighbors anymore.”

He got up and switched channels on the TV. The sitcom we weren't watching changed to a news show. I looked away.

"What about that new computer of yours?" he said. "Weren't you going to go on-line and open yourself up to the world?"

"Yes, I was, but I kind of got hooked on these chat rooms. You wouldn't believe the people out there! Too weird, so I quit. Hey! I can do a more thorough search on the Internet and see what I come up with on Timken."

"Why the sudden burst of curiosity about your neighbor?" Ezekiel got up again to switch channels. Some kind of lawyer type show came on. "When are you going to get a decent TV with a remote?"

I ignored the television remark. He knew perfectly well that I could no more afford a new TV than I could a new car. I'd be paying on the computer for years.

"I just feel bad that I didn't know more about Mr. Timken. His daughters will come by to get his things. I don't want to come across as stupid or uncaring. And then there was the policeman who visited me this afternoon."

"The police came?" He looked up. His mustache twitched.

"Yes. They say it's routine but... Why do you care about the police?"

"I hate the police." His face was hard.

"Why? Sergeant Bierwagon was a nice guy."

"Bierwagon?" Ezekiel snorted. "Sounds like a cop." Strains of music from Phantom of the Opera began to ring through the walls.

"Mrs. J is starting early," I commented.

Ezekiel nodded absently, his mouth still tight.

Mrs. Johnson lives in 1B. A beautiful, sexy, intelligent 40-something lady, she could probably be married to a Senator, CEO, or other bigwig if it weren't for her nasty little habit of drinking large quantities of tequila every evening. She drinks until she's drunk, which is obvious because when she reaches that magical point she pounds on her piano and belts out show tunes. The few men I've seen her bring home usually hit the door running when she starts to wail the theme to *Hello Dolly*. Last night she did a medley of songs from *Singing in the Rain*--one of her better performances.

"I heard she is having some trouble at work."

"How do you know that?"

"People talk to me, Jennifer. I'm a trusting soul with a good ear."

"And you're full of shit."

He winked mischievously. "What is it you were so excited about this afternoon?"

"This afternoon?" I drained the last of my pop. "When I found out about Mr. Timken's money, I ... I mean ... I don't know. It seemed significant." I sighed dramatically.

Ezekiel rose and tugged on the bottom of his blue, high-end Rugby shirt pulling it over his slight paunch. "Old news, Jennifer. Don't worry yourself about it. There will be some minor media flurry then we'll all go back to our old quiet ways. Timken hasn't been a real player in the market for years. He didn't have any sons and his daughters have no interest in the business. Besides, the timber industry is in trouble with all the environmental regulations. He sold most of his company to some young guys who want to get out of the tree business." Ezekiel stretched, then moved toward the door.

"I'm going home," he said. "I'll stop by and check on Mrs. J before I go to bed."

I nodded feeling stupid because I hadn't known what it seemed everyone else knew.

“Do you want to fill in?” Ezekiel said as he tried to open the front door.

“Huh?”

“Mr. T’s place in our card game. We’ll want another player.” He fiddled with the dead bolt, which seemed reluctant to unlatch. “What are you protecting yourself from with this silly thing anyway?”

“You never know.” I paused. “Sure, I’ll play until you find someone else, but not if I lose too much.”

“Cool. Tuesday at eight.”

“Bye, Ezekiel.”

“Bye, Jennifer. Take it easy. God loves you.”