

FULL CIRCLE

by

Lee Sheldon

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I un-holstered my gun and looked around. Dust hung in the air. My partner, the great Nick Lewis, was wilted against our unmarked car out front. I could see him through the revolving door. And his eyes were on me. We were both waiting.

August. Just past noon and already the heat lay on the city like a barber's steaming towel. I was sweating in the lobby of the Mulberry Medical Building, parked next to a potted bush, wondering whether I had time to duck into the drug store for a case of deodorant, when I heard the whine of the elevator and gave Nick the nod. As the elevator doors began to open, I slipped behind the bush, my right hand hanging limply at my side, the gun partially hidden by my leg.

Three people emerged from the elevator: a young woman with long, black hair and a graceful dancer's body; a middle-aged banker type, gray from his hair to the cuffs of his tailored trousers; and Marty McFee, alias "The Weasel." Small and dark with a wiry mustache beneath a prominent nose: what else could he be called? And he was number one on the list of people D.A. Max Brigerton most wanted to talk to.

The Weasel managed a string of adult bookstores for a couple of faceless, silent investors who were now

reaping profits from the virgin fields of child pornography. He'd been arrested last year for using an underage model, but the case had been dismissed. Now, however, there was enough on McFee to send him to the showers for five years. And the D.A. planned to use this information to squeeze the names of the money-men from The Weasel's furry hide.

Nick and I had been only interested bystanders in most of the investigation, looking over a shoulder here or there, spelling stake-out teams, so it was a surprise when we found ourselves in Brigerton's office being handed the task of escorting The Weasel to his interview. Larry Tuttle, the detective in charge of the case, a career cop who had been on the force since the invention of crime, was understandably annoyed by this. But the D.A. offered no explanations.

Brigerton told us to ride shotgun on McFee for two days at his apartment on the east side of the city, then when and where we were to pucker him up. Of course Nick objected to waiting, but haze we were.

The Weasel staggered a bit as he left the elevator. The young woman caught his arm to steady him. He shook her off rudely, and scuttled across the lobby, his heels clicking like claws on the marble floor. I saw the

loathing that crossed her features as she stood there looking after him.

I circled behind the bush and followed McFee. I could tell that Nick had spotted him headed toward the door, and was ready to put the cuffs on the little creep as soon as he emerged onto the sidewalk.

I remember it now as if it had happened in slow motion. As if the Almighty wanted to be sure didn't miss anything, so He reached out a benign, anthropomorphic hand, and slowed the spin of the earth on its axis. Time crawled. And I got a good, long look at the death of Weasel McFee.

Just as he entered the revolving door and pushed toward the street a teenage boy dodged into the door on the outside. Nick took a step toward McFee as he reached the sidewalk. I saw The Weasel's shoulders tense.

He let the momentum of the teenager push the revolving door with him inside back toward the lobby. As he came around, almost completing the full circle, I saw the silly grin on his face. I walked toward him, letting him see the gun hanging at my side. I looked him squarely in the eyes, and matched that grin with one of my own.

The teenager flew past me, obscuring The Weasel's face for the briefest flicker of a second. But in that instant the revolving door stopped dead.

You know how they are: four compartments like segments of a pie. And there's that one claustrophobic moment when you're in limbo, halfway between indoors and out. When you're trapped between two solid plates of glass and a cold, curving wall.

That's where he was now. A weasel in a trap. And he knew it. That's why the silly grin was gone. That's why there was a look of bewilderment on his face. That's why... But hold on. The bewilderment had changed to shock. Why is he taking it so hard, I wondered? I stopped in my tracks, dumbfounded, and watched as The Weasel slowly crumpled to the floor.

Nick reached the door first, the moment after McFee hit the ground. He pulled on the door. It was hard to move now that it was dragging that inert bundle as it turned.

I regained my senses and trotted up to the glass, but all I could do was watch as Nick bent over the body. I saw him check for vital signs. Then he looked over his shoulder at me, his face a mask of incredulity.

"He's dead!" His voice was muffled by the two thicknesses of glass between us.

"Oh the D.A.'s going to love us for this, partner," I sighed. "He sends us out to bring in his star witness, and we scare the poor slob to death."

But Nick was bending over The Weasel's body again, as a lunch-hour crowd gathered on the pavement in front of him. I watched as he unbuttoned the sport coat and pulled it open. I stared at the white shirt, particularly where it was stretched tautly over The Weasel's still ribcage. A spot of blood stared back up at me like a blind red eye.

I put my gun away and checked my watch. 12:05. I could picture the D.A. at his desk, stubby fingers drumming on the blotter. He was always impatiently tapping them on something or other. I figured that's how they got so short. I figured he'd have nothing left to sign his acceptance of our resignations with by the time he found out what had happened.

Nick was dragging the body clear of the revolving door when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to find a group of people had collected in the lobby behind me.

"Police business," I intoned in my most official voice. "Stay back."

The smartly dressed young man in front informed me that he was a doctor, and asked if he could help.

I nodded. "Maybe you can at that. But I want the rest of you to stay out of the way."

I was answered by a chorus of angry protests. They were all doctors with offices at Mulberry Medical. I covered myself by explaining that one would be enough, and followed my choice out through the now unobstructed revolving door.

An ambulance came roaring up, but I waved them off. Under the circumstances it would be overkill. In the unmarked car that was home for us eight hours minimum every day, I radioed for backups and the Medical Examiner. Then I walked back to where Nick and the young doctor stood over the body.

"What killed him?" I asked hopefully.

"I'm not sure," was the doctor's reply.

Nick scowled. "Well, I think we can safely rule out drowning, defenestration, and execution by firing squad, can't we, doctor?"

The man blinked. "Yes, of course. I just meant the wound is so small... a sword, or..." His voice trailed off.

I turned my attention to the door all around the section where The Weasel had died. The glass was intact. I was glad. I'd conjured up this image of a pigmy crouched

behind an ashcan, letting fly with his trusty blowgun. Next I assured myself of the fact that the curved wall was equally solid, and there were no booby-traps somehow wired to the door.

Patrol cars were arriving. Nick issued an imperious series of orders, and the uniformed officers began to disperse the wheelchair-confined, disease-ridden crowd.

I saw Nick signal to me, and I reluctantly joined him. You see, I knew what was coming. We'd been partners for four years, and since the beginning Nick had attempted to map out what he thought our respective roles should be. He saw himself as the brains. I was the muscle. He pointed out what doors he wanted kicked in, and I was supposed to oblige. And damn me, if I didn't most of the time.

The worst of it was, he had some justification for this. He had solved the Letterman kidnapping under the noses of the F.B.I. He had discovered who killed old Tyler out on Pier 40. As a result, the Captain turned to Nick for answers whenever he called us into his office. Nick planned to make that office his own someday on his way to the top. He'd promised me he'd take me with him., but he'd made it clear I would be just along for the ride.

Now, I hadn't done so bad in the eleven years I'd been on the job. But faced with all that white hot brilliance, I was forced to conceal my sputtering candle under a bushel.

I was itching for a chance to prove I wasn't all sinew upstairs, but too often my eagerness made me act like a rookie on his first beat. This time, I told myself, I wasn't going to slip into the well worn groove of Watson to his Holmes. But of course, because of my eagerness, I did just that.

"No sign of a weapon," I told him.

Nick smiled grimly. "That's good. If there were, we'd be in deep trouble trying to explain how the killer used it."

"Mirrors?" I ventured.

"Huh? "

"You know. Like sideshows. The lady changes into a gorilla. Mirrors could've made a section of the door look empty when it really wasn't."

He grimaced. "And where are they now? They dissolve along with the murderer? You've been reading too many mysteries, kid."

Kid? I was six years older than him! "He saw us, knew the game was up, and stabbed himself."

"And then what? Ate the knife or spear or whatever it was?"

Spears made me think of pygmies again, but instead I suggested he'd been shot with something just as he reached the door.

"The wound was in front," Nick reminded me.

"Then when he was on the street side."

"Shot with what?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. A dart gun or something."

One look told me he thought I was off on another planet. "Why would somebody do that? Just to be cute? With a grenade the killer would've stood a better chance of success."

"He couldn't get a hand grenade."

Nick laughed. He knew I was running out of steam. "Anybody who could lay his hands on a dart gun that could shoot accurately across a street, would have no problem scrounging up a few plain old grenades. No, he was alive when he entered that door, and dead when he came out." He saw Don McInerny climbing from his black station wagon, and pointed at him. "And until that gentleman tells us different, that's what we're stuck with."

I nodded unhappily, but refused to let him have the last word. "Than let's round up everybody who had anything to do with McFee since we tailed him here at eleven. We can start with the kid who went through the door."

We found him in an office on the third floor. Tommy Allen, aged 14. He was a remarkably handsome youngster with one flaw that revealed itself when he smiled urn at us from his seat in the reception room of Dr. G. Bandasai, Orthodontist. Chain mail. braces.

He didn't know The Weasel. Nobody'd told him to enter the door at that precise moment. He was running because the last time he was late for his appointment Dr. Bandasai had tightened. his braces one extra half-turn to cure him of tardiness. It had worked. No, he hadn't noticed anything peculiar about the other person in the revolving door. He hadn't noticed anyone at all. We took his address and let him go.

Dr. Don was done with his examination when we returned to the street. McFee had been stabbed with a slender, round, pointed object inserted at an angle through the abdomen up under the ribcage. In answer to Nick's question, he replied that if it had been shot from

something, whoever was holding the weapon had to have been standing in a hole, or was only about three feet high.

Nick gave me a condescendingly amused glance. I looked nervously at the nearest ashcan, but no pygmy was concealed there. Nick asked Dr. Don if he could identify the weapon., and was rewarded with a sly smile.

McInerny opened his case and plucked something from inside. He held it up for our inspection. It was about four inches long, and fit perfectly the description he'd provided of the murder weapon. It was a surgical needle. I looked up at the five stories of the Mulberry Medical building and sighed. There couldn't be more than a thousand of them in there.

I admit Dr. Don's second piece of information floored me. He told us a needle that thin, probably imbedded in some sort of handle for a good grip, slid in so easily that the victim might not even know he'd been stabbed.

I could see Nick's eyes gleam. At least that meant an invisible murderer in the revolving door wasn't the only possible answer.

"The victim would feel a blow of course," Dr. Don went on. "But that would only serve to cover the slight prick as the needle entered the flesh. There would be

little blood. Only a discomfort that could again be mistaken for the effects of the blow."

He started to list several cases from the happy history of pathology, but Nick cut him short. "I believe you, Don, but how long could he be expected to walk around mortally wounded""

"Oh, not long. It would depend. A matter of seconds. A few minutes at most."

"Not an hour?" I asked.

"No way."

I opened my mouth again, but Nick got there ahead of me. "Then the murder still took place in this building. And we can narrow it down a lot more with one interview."

Dr. Don looked at him quizzically.

"Dr. Horace Footner. The reason McFee came here today, and why we cooled our heels waiting for him to come out. The Weasel was here for his yearly physical."

We got back in the elevator and rode up this time to the top floor where Footner's suite of offices was located. We could have picked McFee up at his apartment two days ago. That's what Nick had wanted to do, but the D.A. had told us to let him have his physical. He'd said he didn't need a sick witness on his hands. But I had to think now that sick would have been. better than dead.

Dr. Horace Footner, a Professional Corporation, was an aging, prosperous looking G. P. He made us comfortable in his private office, then acknowledged that he had checked McFee over from top to bottom. While not in prime physical condition, (The only exercise I'd ever seen him indulge in was craning his neck over the high counter to make sure nobody was staining the literature at the Blue Lady Adult Bookstore.), The Weasel had no identifiable ailments.

"Of course there was no puncture wound in his stomach!" Dr. Footner exclaimed angrily. "I most certainly would have noticed it. And, I suspect, so would Mr. McFee!"

Undaunted, Nick continued his questioning. "Was he alone at any time after you. examined him?"

Footner considered. "Well, I left him while he was getting dressed, but he was only out of my sight for a minute or two."

"Could anyone have gotten into the room after you. left?"

"No."

"How about your nurse?"

"Miss Brenden? No, I was with her the entire time at the reception desk."

"McFee was alone back here? There were no other patients?"

From where I was sitting on the sidelines I could see the look that flickered over Footner's features, sensed the pause before his careful answer.

"No other patients. No."

"And there was no one else in the waiting room?"

I could see the tension leave Footner's body. Something had worried him, but now Nick, apparently oblivious, was veering away, and the doctor was relaxing.

He smiled. "I didn't say that. As a matter of fact there was someone. It was all a mix-up. Miss Brenden is usually so efficient..."

"What was the mix-up?" I managed to interject.

"A patient arrived for an appointment that wasn't scheduled.. She claimed I had asked her to come in! I didn't even know the woman!"

"What was her name?" Nick asked.

"I don't recall. Miss Brenden will know, I'm sure."

We trooped out into the waiting room. Miss Brenden did know. The woman had given her name as Lori Smith. She said Dr. Footner had called her at home the night before, and asked her to come in today at noon.

Footner said that was absurd. I could tell Nick thought he was on to something, so I let him continue. I checked the appointment book. Sure enough, McFee was the only patient listed after 11 am.

"Was she here when McFee left?" Nick asked the doctor. He nodded. "Did he act like he knew her?"

"Didn't even give her a second glance. He went right out past her. She apologized for the misunderstanding and followed him."

Both Nick and I noticed the peculiar expression on the nurse's face. Nick turned to her.

"You remember something?"

"It's funny. I only saw it out of the corner of my eye. But when Mr. McFee appeared she jumped back a little. As if she'd been bitten by a snake."

Or a weasel, I thought. This had started a train of thought I wasn't anxious to derail. Before Nick had a chance to go on, I pounced.

"She was in her mid-twenties, this Lori Smith? About five seven. Long dark hair. Wearing a green pantsuit?"

The nurse nodded. I basked in the glow of Nick's startled stare.

Back in the hall I told him about the young woman who'd caught McFee when he stumbled after leaving the elevator.

It was a safe bet she'd been in sight of him the entire time since he left the office until I saw him. That, plus her reaction when she saw McFee, moved her to the top of my priority list.

There was a phone booth near the elevator, and an L. Smith in the book that sounded like the one we wanted. Two phone numbers: one a private residence in a suburb west of the city, the second a dance studio. One call established that Lori Smith would be at home awaiting our visit. But first we agreed reluctantly a swing south to Brigerton's office was long overdue.

As we descended in the elevator, I asked Nick if he'd noticed the way Dr. Footner had danced around the question about other patients.

"I saw it, partner," he replied. "But Footner's convinced McFee left his office without an extra hole, or he wouldn't try anything tricky. We can always come back..."

He froze. I lowered my glance from the floor numbers lighting up over the door to find him staring at the floor. He knelt on the thick pile carpet and pulled a

handkerchief from his pocket. From the crack where the carpet met the wall he carefully extracted something, then stood cradling it in the handkerchief. It looked something like an ice pick, but the tip was too shiny and smooth, Nobody makes ice picks with that fine of precision. The three inches of carefully polished stainless steel protruded from a rough wooden handle maybe three inches long and a half-inch in diameter.

Nick looked at me. We both knew he was holding the murder weapon.

Larry Tuttle was off someplace, but we found the D.A. drumming on his desk like the finale to the 1812 Overture. Nick's not so subtle reminder that it was Brigerton's idea to wait until after the physical didn't help ease the atmosphere at all. But he didn't stop there. Why, he wanted to know, had we been assigned to bring in The Weasel when it was Tuttle's case?

Brigerton hesitated, then agreed we had a right to know. The reason why the investigation hadn't turned up anybody higher than The Weasel was that the bad guys had bought one of the detectives in our department. Somebody who kept steering everybody into blind alleys. He refused to tell us any names, but Larry Turtle became more conspicuous by his absence. No wonder Brigerton was

enraged. That name was another choice morsel he'd hoped to get from McFee. Our only chance now was to find the murderer so Brigerton could chew on him instead.

We bought lemonade from a sidewalk stand run by a beautiful, blonde little girl, maybe ten years old, then knocked on the door of Lori Smith's tract home.

We were barely seated in her living room before Nick went after her. "There was a man murdered at Mulberry Medical a few hours ago. His name was Martin McFee. How well did you know him?"

"I've never met him, " was her cool reply.

Nick laughed without humor. "Lady, you show up at Footner's with a story about his wanting to see you. He denies it. You look at McFee like a pike eyes a minnow, and then get on an elevator with him. When he gets off he's staggering like he's hurt. And we find the murder weapon in the elevator. How does that sound to you?"

She let the worry show now, but when she answered her voice was firm enough. "I didn't kill him."

"But you knew him," I told her reasonably.

Slowly she nodded. "I knew who he was. Telling you this isn't going to help me any, but you'll find out about it soon enough. My married name was Lori Enderlin."

I stared at her. Nick nodded. He knew who she was too.

"The rap McFee beat last year. Your ex-husband rented your daughter to him as a model."

There were tears in her eyes now.

"That's Karen out front. Sometimes when I look at her I can't believe it really happened. But she's been in therapy for eight months. She still wakes up at night crying. I'd kicked that pig husband of mine out. I guess Brad thought he could combine revenge with a way to make some money. He always liked money, but he didn't like work. McFee must have paid him to disappear before the trial. Karen couldn't testify." She shuddered. "McFee was released."

Nick shrugged. "So today you decided to get even. I can see that."

She looked at him pityingly. "I went there because Dr. Footner, or somebody calling himself Dr. Footner, said he had to talk to me about Karen. He knew the name of the clinic where she's being treated."

"But," Nick pointed out, "you left with McFee."

"I left at the same time. Not with him. He apparently didn't recognize me. I suppose that shows how little the whole thing had meant to him. In the hall I

couldn't take my eyes off the back of his neck. He seemed preoccupied. Almost excited."

I asked her if she'd spoken to him.

"Not then. I followed him down the hall to the elevator, but he didn't push the call button. There was a phone booth nearby. He went in, closed the door, and made a quick call."

"How quick?" Nick interrupted.

"No more than a few seconds. I watched him the whole time. I was repelled by him., yet fascinated. I'd even forgotten to push the call button myself."

Nick opened his mouth. I beat him to it. "You couldn't hear what he said?"

She shook her head. "No, but I did notice something. He didn't listen," She saw our puzzled expressions and went on. "He did all the talking then hung up. It reminded me of when I call up to order a pizza, and the person at the other end just takes down what I want on it. My name and so on."

Nick gave me a look that told me he thought it was all smokescreen. She continued.

"By the time he came out of the booth someone else had walked up to the elevator."

"A businessman in a gray suit?" I ventured.

"Yes. He pressed the call button. Very shortly the elevator arrived and we all got on.

"In what order?" I pursued, aware that Nick was beginning to get ticked off at me butting in on his interrogation.

She considered. "McFee pushed his way on first. The other man held the door for me, then followed. Don't you see? Except for the few seconds we walked down the hall, and the beginning of his phone call in the closed booth, we were never alone! The only time I spoke to him was when we got off the elevator in the lobby. I instinctively grabbed his arm when he stumbled. I should've let him fall. He muttered an obscenity at me and walked on. I couldn't have killed him!"

But Nick was far from convinced. I believed her. He didn't. Here might be the chance I'd been waiting for. If he tried to nail her for it, and I could prove him wrong... Visions of promotion danced in my head.

Nick shook his head at her.

"If we find this guy, and we have only your word for when he showed up, the murder weapon was so sharp, so subtle, you could've killed McFee right in front of him. Don't plan any vacations, Mrs. Enderlin. I'll have someone watching."

We left her slumped on the couch. In penance I bought a second lemonade from her beautiful, sad-eyed daughter. At the car I turned angrily on Nick.

"You had no business coming down so hard on her like that," I protested. "In order to stab McFee in the hall she would've had to run ahead, then turn on him, or attack him in the phone booth. And from the angle of the wound, she'd have to have been sitting down to do it! You can't tell me he wouldn't have seen that needle, and objected!" He started to interrupt, but I charged right ahead. "And if we find that businessman, there's no way you could make him believe a murder was committed right under his nose, and he missed it!"

I thought I'd presented my case damn well, but his eyes gleamed. He gave me that fatherly pat on the shoulder I hated.

"I'll show you. how it was done," he grinned. He motioned me to stand closer to him. I did. "The angle of the wound was never much of a mystery to me."

He stepped in close to me, and punched his hand a lot harder than was necessary up under my ribcage.

"If I'd had a four inch needle sticking out between my fingers, you'd be dead, or dying. The angle would be right, and the weapon couldn't be seen by anybody.

People stand in an elevator, their necks tilted upward, blindly watching floor numbers light up. It's a cinch."

I noticed the little girl staring at us and motioned Nick into the car. Once underway I asked my question.

"Why didn't McFee cry out? Or at least ask her why she hit him?"

"Maybe he did," he replied with a smile. "Maybe that little altercation you witnessed was the end of it, and the businessman can tell us the rest."

He radioed for an around-the-clock watch on Lori Enderlin. I drove back to the city in silence, rubbing the spot where he hit me, more determined than ever to crack the case before he did.

If Lori Enderlin' was telling the truth, (and I at least believed her), then it shouldn't have been a problem to track down the man in gray. There were only so many offices on that floor. He had to have come from one of them.

We returned to Mulberry Medical. But as the long afternoon broiled the city, fruitless questioning failed to turn up a trace of the man we were after. He hadn't had his teeth fixed. He hadn't had a broken leg set. He hadn't had

his fixations fixed by a psychiatrist. He hadn't had a baby. And he wasn't a physician himself.

I was ready to admit that maybe Mrs. Enderlin had lied after all. But as we passed Dr. Footner's office on the way to the elevator, Nick grabbed my arm. I could see by the gleam in his eye that he was on the scent. I followed him inside, realizing what his hunch must be, and inwardly cursing myself for not thinking of it first.

The doctor was with a patient,, but that was all right with Nick. He told Nurse Brendan it was she we'd really come to see. She didn't welcome this news with much enthusiasm, but brightened considerably when she realized we weren't there to snap the cuffs on her.

"Who was the man in the gray suit who waited in Dr. Footner's private office, then went out a minute or two after McFee and Mrs. Smith?" Nick asked her.

She didn't hesitate a minute.

"Oh! That would be Mr. Nethers."

"Why wasn't he listed in the appointment book?" I sighed.

"He's a friend of Dr. Footner's," she explained.

"Not a patient. They have lunch together quite often."

"But they didn't today?"

"No. Frankly both of them seemed upset about some misunderstanding. When Mr. Nethers left he was quite angry."

Nick took me aside. I agreed with him it would be better to talk to Nethers before we asked Footner why he neglected to mention his friend. Nick turned to Mrs. Brendan.

"You wouldn't happen to have his address would you?"

The ever efficient nurse came through again. Mr. Nethers could undoubtedly be found at his real estate office. The address she gave us was located in a ritzy neighborhood just north of us. Nick told her not to mention our second visit to Dr. Footner. She nodded. I thanked her. We left.

In the parking lot I saw a car that looked like Larry Tuttle's and wondered if the D.A. had assigned him to McFee's murder as well. It wouldn't have surprised me.

As we headed toward Nether's office I tried to stifle the feeling that all we were doing was going round and round. Circling the truth of The Weasel's death like vultures, but not able to zero in on it. I realized with a start that in the course of the day we had actually touched the four points of the compass. From McFee's eastside

apartment south to the D.A.'s office, west to Lori Enderlin's home, and now north to Nether's office. And at the center: Mulberry Medical. Around it we ragged rascals ran. And wherever else our investigation might take us, I felt the truth lay there.

Nethers was into real estate in a big way. Looking over the Polaroid's of homes in the window of his office, I couldn't find one price tag with fewer than seven digits.

For a successful salesman Nethers was surprisingly low key. As quiet and elegant as his suit. But he was a salesman. He almost had me believing he was pleased and gratified by our visit.

"I did have an appointment with Dr. Footner," he told us. "He called last night and asked me to come in at noon today. My secretary can confirm it. She took the message. But when I got there he denied having called me at all."

I tried to digest this. Another phone call Dr. Footner didn't make?

"I'd cancelled a rather important luncheon," Nethers continued. "He'd insisted it was urgent he speak to me."

"You often had lunch together?" Nick asked.

"Not often. Once or twice a month."

"How is it you happen to know Dr. Footner?"

He shrugged. "We belong to the same country club. We've attended some of the same parties. Why does an acquaintanceship begin? I don't know."

Nick smiled a dangerous smile. What had I missed now? "Shared interests?" Nick suggested.

"I suppose."

"Sure, and like most business or professional men, when you got together you'd talk sports, politics -- "

Nethers nodded right along with him.

"-- maybe share a few investment tips. Stay away from the market. Real estate is good. Child porn is booming." Nethers' face had become a fixed mask.

"McFee only got out one word before he died. A name. That name was Nethers. You didn't happen to introduce yourself on the way down in the elevator did you?"

Slowly Nethers shook his head. I don't know which one of us was more stunned.

"Then," Nick bored in relentlessly, "he must've been naming his murderer. And what better motive could you have than to keep him from giving your name to the police?" Nick turned to me. "Read him his rights."

"No," Nethers broke in. "I know my rights. I didn't know McFee was going to the police."

"You admit you were one of the investors in his little enterprise?" Nick asked.

"I can't very well deny it under the circumstances."

I saw the case slipping away from me. Maybe it wasn't meant to be. Watson never solved one either.

"We know you bought somebody on the force," Nick continued. "So of course you knew we were picking The Weasel up."

But Nethers just looked bewildered.

"Bought a policeman? What are you talking about? I made an investment. In adult entertainment McFee called it. He said it was perfectly legal. Why would I need to buy a policeman?"

"Child pornography is not legal, Mr. Nethers. Even in this state."

"I didn't know anything about that! Until... until... Oh, you must know already. Until that fool Footner told me in his office today. McFee had mentioned to him that the police were nosing around, and hinted that children, that... I swear to you I didn't know. Or I never

would have been part of it. It was just an investment!
Bookstores! What harm...?"

His voice trailed off.

"Is Footner the only other investor?"

Nethers nodded. "But I assure you I didn't know anything about bribing policemen. And I'd bet that neither did Dr. Footner. If it's true, it was all McFee's doing."

I jumped in. "Tell us what happened after you left Footner's office."

Nick scowled at the interruption, but said nothing.

"I walked down the hall to the elevator. McFee was coming out of the phone booth, very nervous. He saw me. My presence obviously unnerved him even more, but he couldn't say anything. There was another person there. The three of us got on the elevator. McFee rushed on first."

Nick saw his opening and regained control of the questioning.

"We think McFee was killed on that elevator, Mr. Nethers. Now either you did it, or you saw it done."

Nethers stared at him.. "On the elevator?
Nonsense! Nothing happened on the elevator."

"Did the young woman bump into McFee by accident?"

"No."

"Maybe when McFee pushed ahead of her to get on."

"No. They didn't touch. She shrunk away from him in fact."

"You couldn't have been watching them for the entire trip down. Did you hear anything?"

"Nothing. A bit of Muzak. Almost subliminal. That was all.. I certainly would have heard it if she'd bumped into him, even if I didn't see her. Besides, they couldn't have made contact."

"Why?"

"Because I was standing between them."

I radioed for a black and white to take Nethers to the station. Then we headed back to pay what was to be our last call at Mulberry Medical. Nick, admitting with a wink that McFee hadn't said anything before he died, was now convinced that Footner had killed McFee somehow and planted the needle in the elevator. And that started my mind going. A little late maybe, but I was convinced Nick was on the wrong track somehow. I'd wondered at the time about the needle in the elevator. It seemed awfully convenient. Why hadn't we spotted it on the trip up to see Tommy Allen, or on the way back down, or up again to see Footner? And who did McFee telephone?

My mind began to reel with theories. Maybe there was somebody crouched in the phone booth... I angrily chased away the pigmy who drifted by my mind's eye. Could Lori Enderlin have stabbed McFee before Nethers arrived on the scene? If so, why would she leave the weapon in the elevator? Surely she would have taken it away. Could she have dropped it accidentally? Could Nethers? Or did Footner stab him in some way that he didn't notice? What about handsome Tommy Allen? Had he been one of McFee's models? The more we found out, the more perplexing it became.

Two people, both with a possible motive to kill The Weasel, were lured to Dr. Footner's office at the time McFee was also there. If Footner didn't make the call, who did? Who would know of both their connections to McFee? The cop McFee had bribed?

That phone call... that phone call... He was excited. Did all the talking. Who was on the other end? It couldn't have been the murderer. He was already on the scene somewhere wearing an invisible cloak. That phone call...

Suddenly the black and white we'd called to pick up Nethers went zooming by us, siren wailing. Nick cursed at them. There wasn't that much hurry. He turned to say something about hotshot rookie cops to me, but I must've

had a strange expression on my face, because instead he asked me what was wrong. I didn't tell him. He couldn't have tortured out of me the idea that had just gone screaming through my head. I thought I now knew who McFee had called, and what he'd said. Another phone call would confirm it, but that one I was determined to make alone.

I made it from the same booth The Weasel had used while Nick went on down the hall to question Footner. And the voice at the other end told me exactly what I'd expected, almost word for word. I rubbed my stomach. The spot where Nick had punched me still hurt. But the pain only made me smile as piece after piece started falling into place. I made a second phone call to check an alibi, and again learned exactly what I wanted to know. The dice were starting to roll my way at last. I had Nick Lewis right where I wanted him, and then some.

Nick came out of Footner's office with the good doctor in tow. he was going to take him down to the station. He told me to round up Lori Enderlin and Tommy Allen. He had a theory about the murder, and with all the principals present he was going to spring it. Just like in the mysteries he was always accusing me of reading. I've never read a mystery in my life.

On the elevator I told him to let somebody else take Footner down. There was a black and white stationed outside. That would do. He wanted to know why. I told him to hand Footner over to them, and I'd explain. He grinned patronizingly at me, but he did what I told him to. Across the street I saw a familiar face in the shadow of a doorway. Larry Tuttle. Maybe he had been there all the time. Nick and I went back into the lobby. He patted my shoulder.

"Okay, partner, what's the big idea? You find a clue I missed?"

I admit it. I loved the startled look he gave me when I nodded.

"More than that, Nick," I told him. "I figured it out. Got it all. I know who popped The Weasel, why, and how."

He laughed. "More dart guns?"

"No. For four years you've been grandstanding, making all the big plays. But you blew this one, Nick. Right from the start."

His smile was gone. "I've had it from you, pal," he muttered at me. "I could handle your jealousy. It was understandable. As long as you kept it in control. But if you think I'm going to pull you along anymore, you're nuts."

You've been bucking me all day. If you'd been with me on it, we probably could've broken it together. But you've let your hurt feelings get in the way of our job for the last time. We're finished as partners. I know what that's going to do to your career. But you asked for it."

He started to go. I grabbed his arm. He tried to twist away.

"Don't get physical with me, Nick," I warned him.

"Remember who's supposed to be the muscle on this team. You're going to stay here and listen if I have to tie you down."

"You'll be lucky if you're still a cop by the time this is through!"

"I know who McFee telephoned, Nick. I've spoken with them, and they'll confirm it."

"All right, all right. Dig your own grave. Who did he call?"

I let go of his arm. "Parkview Memorial Hospital."

He stared at me. "What?! Why? There weren't enough doctors around here for him?"

"He telephoned for an ambulance."

"He knew he'd been stabbed?"

I shook my head. "As you said, there are enough doctors around here. No, he needed that ambulance for a getaway. "

For once my partner was speechless. I went on.

"The Weasel had bought himself a cop. And that cop had told him when and where he was going to be picked up."

"Wait a minute. Larry Tuttle was the only one there when the D.A. told us about the physical."

I nodded. "I know that. And he's outside right now. You see McFee was going to make a run for it. That's why he was so excited. And with his pal he'd planned a way to do it.

"McFee called the ambulance. It's on the hospital's log. But the call came through three minutes before McFee entered that revolving door. That's why they got here so fast.

"Sure he was unnerved to see Nethers. Nethers wasn't part of McFee's plan. He was part of the killer's. Both Nethers and Lori Enderlin were lured down here by phony telephone messages to make sure they were on the scene when McFee died. Even better, although the murderer couldn't have planned it, they went down in the elevator

with The Weasel. That's why the murderer planted the needle there.

"McFee had a very uneventful ride down in the elevator just as both of his co-passengers have claimed. He staggered when getting off, not because he'd just been stabbed, he hadn't, but as part of his escape plan. He was faking illness. As the prelude to an attack or seizure of some sort. If he'd been stabbed, or even simply punched, he would have been instinctively rubbing his stomach, or at least touching it. Like I've been doing since you punched me. But he didn't. He walked right over to the revolving door, pushed through, saw you, and started to come back into the lobby. To escape? Of course not. He was planning to escape in the ambulance outside.

"No, what he was doing was insuring that nobody could get to him immediately after he faked his heart attack, or whatever it was supposed to be, (he sure did a lot of grimacing at me), before he collapsed.

"So we've come full circle. We're back where we started. McFee was stabbed to death in that revolving door after all. In front of a crowd of witnesses. We just didn't realize what we were seeing. It must have been a little awkward for you, maneuvering in that cramped space so that your back was to me when you pretended to feel his heart. I

suppose you had the needle all ready when you slipped your band up under his coat. There was The Weasel playing opossum. I was a cinch wasn't it?"

Nick smiled grimly. "That's quite a fairy tale."

"You were the cop he bought, Nick. You had to be. When he thought you were helping him to escape, you'd already decided it would be safer for your glorious career if he died instead. You could see your two red herrings get off that elevator. What a perfect place to plant the murder weapon!"

"Not that it matters, but your case is full of holes."

"I don't know about that. After I bring the emergency room attendant who took McFee's call down to the station. After the D.A. hears the testimony from the witnesses you've so kindly collected. Somehow your deductions don't seem so wonderful anymore now that I know you set them up in advance."

But Tuttle --"

"He has an alibi for the time McFee was killed. I checked. So who does that leave? Who's the one person all of the clues fit like a prison-green suit? Don't look so surprised. A famous detective like you? You must've suspected it."

"You son of a bitch."

I grinned at him. "Chalk one up for the Watsons of the world."

He turned on his heel and headed for the revolving door. I put my hand on my gun.

"Don't do it, Nick!" I called after him, but he didn't turn around.

He reached the revolving door. Through the glass I saw Tuttle crossing the street. Nick saw him too, and his shoulders tensed.

As fast as I am, he almost beat me. He'd started to push toward the street when he whirled, his gun appearing in his hand like magic. But I got off the first shot, and one was all it took.

The bullet punched through the glass and knocked him backwards. Then he slowly crumpled to the floor. I walked over to the revolving door.

My partner, the great Dick Lewis, lay there in the limbo between indoors and out. Gunsmoke hung in the air. I looked around and holstered my gun.

Full circle.

THE END