

Mitch parked his Honda on a dark side street a block and a half from Doctor Sinfahdi's office and he and Al walked to the parking lot, where they checked the front of the building for lights to make sure nobody was working late. Once satisfied that the building was dark, they moved swiftly around the end to the back side. Both were dressed in dark clothing - black trousers and long-sleeved black pullovers - and were wearing latex gloves from the Daily Dispatch darkroom so as not to leave any fingerprints. This apparel was not ideal for a muggy July night and both Al and Mitch were sweating freely by the time they located the window of the men's room.

The window had been at belly-button level when Mitch stood inside the men's room, but now, with the added elevation of the building's foundation, it was at shoulder height for Mitch and chin height for Al - and it was not an easy climb up the clapboard side of the building. Mitch slid his fingers under the sash and found it still open. He raised the window slowly as far as he could push it and whispered, "You go first. I'll give you a boost up."

Al grabbed onto the window sill and, with Mitch pushing against his butt, got his head and shoulders through the opening.

"Suck in your gut and I'll make like a catapult down here," Mitch said. A couple of grunts later Al was through the window and landing on his hands on the floor of what turned out to be the ladies' room. "I'll have to be sure to wash my hands after using this rest room, employee or not," he thought as he pulled himself upright and turned to help Mitch scramble up. It was a tight fit, but with Al pulling and Mitch squirming like an eel on a fisherman's line (and swearing softly under his breath) they got him inside.

"Easy does it until we're sure nobody is working back where we couldn't see a light from the front," Al said as he opened the bathroom door a crack. Seeing nothing but darkness down the hall, they slipped out of the ladies' room and moved toward the corridor that led to the room with the filing cabinets. Mitch went first, shining a tiny flashlight on the floor to keep from bumping into any of the small tables and carts that stood along the walls.

"I hope the individual rooms of this rat trap aren't alarmed," Al whispered.

"It looked to me this afternoon like the front door was the only thing that had an alarm. That and probably the emergency exit - I didn't have time to inspect that before Nurse Darnell sent me back to the waiting room."

The door to the room Mitch sought was closed. It was marked "staff only" so he felt certain it was the right room.

"Time for your lock picks," he said softly. Al stepped forward with the assortment of picks and skeleton keys he had collected during his association with the private eye and began trying them on the keyhole in the doorknob. The fourth key did the trick and they slipped quickly into the room. Mitch locked the door behind them with a twist of the lever on the inside knob, whispering, "Can't be too careful."

The beam of the flashlight revealed a row of filing cabinets against the far wall, each of which was secured by a steel bar run through the handles from top to bottom and fastened to a steel loop with padlock.

"This is what's known as easy picking," said Al, opening a padlock with the first pick he chose.

"You've really got a nose for picking," Mitch said.

"Careful, or I'll pick your seat," Al said, making a jabbing motion toward Mitch's backside.

"Better pick some other time for playing grab ass. I'd like to haul ass out of here as fast as possible."

"Picky, picky, picky! Okay, let's see what's in here." Al slid the steel rod up and out of the way and opened the top drawer. Mitch pointed the flashlight into the drawer and they saw a row of hanging files with names on the tabs. The tabs also were marked with stickers of several different colors, indicating a code of some kind.

"Can you find a name we know?" Mitch said.

"These are A's and here are some B's," Al said. "Hey, here we go. Bombardier." He pulled out a folder with a red tab and the name "Bombardier, Linda M." on top. It was the file for Richard Bombardier's grandmother.

They leafed through the contents of the folder, finally coming to the bottom page that concluded with the notation that Mrs. Bombardier was deceased. The date of her death was noted and the cause of death was listed as myocardial infarction.

"Heart failure; just what Richard Bombardier said the doctor told the family," Al said. He laid the file down, took a small notebook and a ballpoint pen out of his pants pockets and wrote down the name and date of death. "Let's see if we can find some more," he said, returning the Bombardier file to the drawer.

He pulled out a file with a green tab and discovered that this patient was still being treated. Then he tried a yellow tab and learned that this patient was no longer being seen by Doctor Sinfahdi, but there was nothing about that person dying.

"Do you think all the red tabs mark the charts of dead folks?" Al said.

"Let's try them," Mitch said.

It turned out that they did. Out of twenty folders in the drawer, three had red tabs. They recorded the names and dates and causes of death in Al's notebook. Two, including Mrs. Bombardier, had died within the last two years, the other within three years.

They went down to the next drawer and found a similar percentage, two red tabs out of eighteen folders. One person had died six months earlier, the other almost two years in the past. Every dead patient's chart listed myocardial infarction as the cause.

"Amazing how many people with weak hearts this particular doctor has encountered," Mitch said.

"Let's see if we can find Uncle Charlie's folder," Al said, after they recorded the three deaths found among the charts in the third drawer. He reinserted the steel rod and slapped on the padlock. Going down the line of file cabinets, Al selected the one he thought might contain the names beginning with "J" and picked that lock, only to find that the files there only went through names starting with "H."

"On to the next," he said, locking that cabinet and opening the next one in line. There he found a red-tabbed folder marked "Jeffrey, Charles A." and pulled it out. The next-to-last sheet described Uncle Charlie's stroke and ended with the hand-written notation, "Patient released from hospital on 14 June at his wife's request and seems to be responding positively to treatment. Still unable to speak."

The last page ended with Uncle Charlie's death at home being noted on 15 June and giving the cause as myocardial infarction.

"Seems to be responding positively to treatment," Al said. "Well, he sure took a negative step the next day."

"Funny how every single one of them died of heart failure, no matter what they were suffering from," Mitch said. "Your Uncle Charlie had a stroke, Mrs. Bombardier did have heart trouble, a couple of people had respiratory ailments, but every damn one of them died of heart failure."

"We need to pass this information on to the doctor friend of your columnist buddy Granger so we can get his reaction. This could be enough to blow Doctor Sinfahdi right out of the water."

"The problem will be finding a legal way to get at these charts."

"We'll let the good doctor worry about that. He probably has access to a smart lawyer." Al was turning to slide the steel bar back into place down the front of the cabinet when they heard someone whistling a tune in the corridor outside the room.

The whistling was accompanied by footsteps, which were moving in their direction from the front of the building. Mitch quickly switched off the flashlight and they retreated to the end of the row of cabinets, where they flattened themselves tightly against the wall.

The footsteps and the whistling kept coming. The footsteps stopped just outside their door, but the whistling continued while the whistler rattled the doorknob - once, twice. Apparently satisfied that it was locked, the whistler moved on down the corridor, where they heard him trying each door in turn. While Al and Mitch listened in the darkness, the whistling went down both side hallways, passed their door again, moved to the reception room and finally was silent.

"Must be a security guy who checks the place," Mitch whispered. "Glad I locked the door behind us."

"Now that he's gone, let's get our butts out of here," Al said. "We've got plenty of ammunition, we don't need to hang around."

"It's going to be fun climbing out that window. I think I'll go feet first." Mitch flicked on the flashlight and they went to the door. They had slipped into the corridor and shut the office door, which locked behind them with a click, before they realized there was a light on in the reception room.

"Is somebody there?" said a man's voice from the lighted area. Mitch looked that way in time to see a chubby, middle-aged man in a khaki security guard uniform rise from a reception room chair with a sandwich in one hand and a thermos-top cup of coffee in the other.

"Go!" Mitch said in a stage whisper, pushing Al out in front of him. "To the right and out the emergency door on the left at the end of the hallway."

"Hey! Stop! Halt!" yelled the man in the uniform as he started to pursue them.

Mitch, who was bringing up the rear, found himself sincerely hoping that the guy was not carrying a gun.