GROUNDS FOR MURDER

A MYSTERY JIGSAW THRILLER WITH A SECRET PUZZLE IMAGE

STORY BY JOHN LUTZ
Julie Belson served a caffe latte to Will Jones, the plainclothes detective from the nearby Twelfth Precinct House. Will smiled at her, as he often did, and she suspected he was watching her as she walked back behind the counter and looked out through the windows of Coffee Anytime at the afternoon sun glinting off traffic on Twentieth Street.

Coffee Anytime was a small coffee bar on the corner of Twentieth and Grant, next door to Mo's Motors, a used car lot specializing in high prices and low financing. The regulars, a small group of frequent customers with whom Julie had become friends, either lived or worked in the neighborhood.

As she wiped down the counter with a clean towel, Julie looked at the regulars sitting around two of the small tables they'd pulled together. Will was there, of course, sipping his coffee and listening carefully and politely, a conscientious cop of few words but plenty of integrity. Dora Dennis, at sixty-five a spry, retired schoolteacher, was also listening as talkative and skeptical Mo Carter, who owned Mo's Motors, was remarking on whatever Charlene Dupont was saying. Charlene was in her mid-thirties, curious and confident, a moderately successful mystery writer whose next novel, The Cozy Killer was going to be published in the fall. Julie, who was slightly younger than Charlene and attended night classes in criminology at nearby City College, liked and envied Charlene and hoped Mo wasn't being too hard on her. The four regulars were good friends, and all of them, except perhaps Mo, were interested in crime and criminology.

Mo, a greasy haired, nattily dressed bantam rooster of a man, raised his cup of decaf and grinned at Julie. She lifted the glass pot from its burner and walked over to the group.

"How's business?" Mo asked, as Julie poured decaf into his cup. "Same old grind, I bet."

No one laughed.

"You should at least give Julie a chance to deliver the punch line," Will said. Then he looked at her more closely. "Something on your mind, Julie?"

Julie leaned back with her hip against one of the tables. "There's a woman who comes in here about twice a week," she said, "who always sits at one of the tables near the back and orders a cappuccino. A little while after she sits down, a man joins her. It's always one of three different men. Each time they talk for a while, then the man presents Rita—I heard one of the men call her that— with a gift. Sometimes it's in a sack, sometimes a box. They talk a while longer, then the man leaves. Rita finishes her cappuccino, then gets up and buys exactly half a dozen of our one-pound bags of gourmet beans." She motioned with her head toward the display of Coffee Anytime paper bags displayed near the counter. The top of each bag was folded over twice and stapled to preserve freshness. "Rita always has me grind the beans," Julie said, "then leaves with them."

"So she's a coffee connoisseur," Will suggested. "There are more and more of them. That's
why you’re doing such a good business.”

“But why does she always meet the three men here?” Julie asked. “Why do they always give her a gift of some sort? Why does she always buy half a dozen bags of gourmet coffee?”

“It’s not a crime for a woman to keep three different men on a string and accept presents from them,” Will said.

“It looks suspicious, though,” Charlene said, “with all the rest of it—the same three men, the same routine every time.”

“I’m suspicious that something illegal is going on,” said Julie.

“Sounds suspicious to me, too,” said Dora.

“I wish one of the men would buy her a car,” said Mo.

Will laughed. “I think you’re all suspicious characters.” He stood up. “Now I’ve got to get to work and catch some real criminals. People who break laws instead of hearts.”

Julie watched him walk from the coffee bar. He was good-looking in a tousled, rumpled way. The way he dressed—brown suits, scuffed wing-tip shoes, tie always a little crooked—made her think he looked more like a high school biology teacher than a cop.

“Typical policeman,” Charlene said, when Will was out of earshot. “Crime can be going on right under their noses and they don’t see it because they’re wrapped up in whatever they’re working on.”

“Like mystery writers?” Julie said, a bit accusingly.

Charlene smiled. “Like mystery writers,” she conceded.

The next afternoon, after the lunch crowd had departed, Rita came into Coffee Anytime. It occurred to Julie that whether it was morning or afternoon, Rita always showed up when there were few, if any, other customers.

Julie picked up her order pad and walked over to where Rita was sitting. “Cappuccino?”

Rita, a dark and attractive woman in her thirties, had her thick hair pinned back today and was wearing a cream-colored dress with a low neckline. She glanced up at Julie. “Cappuccino will do just fine,” she said, in her flat midwestern accent.

Julie served her the cappuccino, then busied herself behind the counter, filling Coffee Anytime one-pound paper bags with gourmet beans, labeling them, folding the creased tops of the bags over twice, and stapling them closed.

As she expected, one of Rita’s men entered within five minutes, a handsome Latino who looked as if he was about Rita’s age. He had dark eyes, a head of thick wavy black hair, and the kind of profile that might be found on a museum coin. Julie could understand why Rita might be attracted to him.

The man leaned over and kissed Rita’s cheek, then sat down across from her. They did seem genuinely glad to see each other. The man was clasping Rita’s right hand between both of his when Julie walked to the table. “It’ll be okay, Enrico,” she heard Rita say.

The man looked sternly at Rita, and they were both silent until Julie had taken the man’s order and walked away.

After serving the espresso Enrico had ordered, Julie resumed bagging coffee beans. She glanced over and saw Rita stroke the back of Enrico’s forearm. Maybe Will was right, and all that was going on here was romance. A romantic square if not a triangle.

Enrico finished his espresso, then reached into an inside pocket and handed Rita a bulky brown padded envelope. Rita looked inside, smiled at him, and he smiled back. Then he turned to Julie and made his usual writing pantomime so she’d know he wanted the check.

When Enrico unfolded his wallet, she glimpsed his identification: Enrico Mora. She also glimpsed a thin leather strap across his chest, near his left shoulder. And she saw what looked like a lump beneath the armpit of his well-cut suit. A gun in a shoulder holster, she guessed.

“Something wrong?”

The man’s voice made her body jerk. She forced a smile. “Sorry. Daydreaming, I guess.”

Enrico smiled at her. “That’s all right, a pretty young girl should dream.”

Rita glared at Julie and gripped Enrico’s wrist, and Julie quickly turned away.

By the time Julie returned to the table with change, Enrico had left Coffee Anytime.

Rita stood up and walked over to the display of gourmet coffee.

“I want six different kinds,” she said—as if that would be news to Julie.

“If the man was carrying a gun,” Mo said, “that puts a different complexion on things.”

“Different complexion is right,” Dora said, placing her espresso cup dead center on its coaster. “That seems to make it almost a certainty that something illegal is happening right here in Coffee Anytime.”

“Phrases like ‘almost a certainty’ don’t carry much weight in court,” Will said.

Charlene shot him an impatient look. “We’re not in court. Will. Court is where a lot of guilty people are acquitted.”

“We’re not in one of your mystery novels,” Will pointed out. “Sometimes circumstantial evidence points in the wrong direction. Some of those people who are acquitted are actually innocent.”

“But a gun,” Dora said, favoring him with her schoolteacher’s look of tolerance for a slow student. “That makes it quite serious. And you must admit, Will, the young woman’s actions have been suspicious.”

“But not necessarily criminal. Maybe this Enrico Mora has a permit to carry a gun. And remember, Julie didn’t actually see a gun.”
"That's true," Julie admitted. Sometimes in the face of Will's cautious logic she felt foolish.
Charlene was the last of the regulars to leave that morning. On her way to the door, she veered
to the counter where Julie was replenishing the napkin holders.
"Julie," she said, leaning on the counter, "I can't help feeling there might be something in
this Rita business I could use in one of my novels."
"I guess you're always on the lookout for new crimes," said Julie.
"And when they come to me, I feel duty bound to investigate. Will you phone me at my
apartment next time Rita comes in? I live close enough to be here within minutes."
"Okay," Julie said. "I'll phone you." She smiled. "How about another cup of coffee to go?
And maybe a piece of this great new chocolate cheesecake?"
Charlene made her return smile conspiratorial as she reached into her purse. "Julie, you're
criminal!"

Rita entered COFFEE ANYTIME at two o'clock the next afternoon. Julie greeted her politely,
brung her a cappuccino, then phoned Charlene. Within minutes Charlene arrived and sat at
a table near Rita's, so that Rita's back was to her. She raised a forefinger to her lips briefly,
suggesting to Julie to act like they'd never seen each other before today.
The man was late this time, and Julie could see that Charlene was getting nervous. Or
maybe it was her third espresso making her seem that way.
Finally, the man arrived.
Enrico Mora again. He kissed Rita on the lips and sat down. They gazed at each other like
lovers.
Mora ordered an espresso. When Julie brought it to him, he and Rita fell silent. Back
behind the counter, Julie could see Charlene leaning slightly in her chair, straining to listen as
Rita and Mora talked. Mora gave Rita a plain white box about the size of a cigar box. Rita
looked at its contents, smiled, then closed the lid, but her body had shielded the box and its
contents from Charlene's gaze.
After Mora had gone, Rita got up and walked over to the display of gourmet beans. She
placed her purse and the box on a nearby table and studied the display of beans.
"Half a dozen?" Julie asked with a smile. She saw Charlene stand up in the background.
"Yes, please," Rita said. "And ground medium coarse."
Rita pointed to each type of coffee she wanted, and Julie opened the bags and fed the
dark beans through the grinder. The rich aroma of the coffee was one of the best parts of her
job. She tried not to look at Charlene, who had silently moved close to Rita. Then Charlene
catched Julie's attention and made an upside-down motion with her hand.
Julie understood. When she opened the next bag—a rich, almond-flavored Colombian
blend—she deliberately spilled it. Beans scattered across the counter and bounced everywhere.
"Oh, no!" Julie said. "I'm sorry!" Trying to keep Rita's attention.
"It's all right," Rita said, "as long as that wasn't the last bag."
"I have several more," Julie assured her, watching as Charlene raised the lid of the white
box and peeked inside. She saw Charlene's eyes widen. "I'll clean it up later," Julie said,
terified that Rita might turn around and see Charlene.
Rita said nothing, but continued to watch Julie. Behind her, Charlene quietly returned to
her table and sat down again.
Rita accepted her six bags of coffee, paid Julie, then walked out of COFFEE ANYTIME.
As soon as she was gone, Charlene stood up and hurried over to the counter. "There's
jewelry in that box!" she said. "Pins, necklaces, bracelets. Expensive looking." She glanced
toward the door. "Listen, I want to follow Rita. Come over to my apartment after work tonight,
and I'll tell you what I found out."
Julie started to answer, but Charlene was already running toward the door. As she began
cleaning up the Colombian blend, it occurred to her that it would be ironic if Rita were to be
arrested because she, Julie, had spilled the beans.

That evening at six, Julie turned COFFEE ANYTIME over to Mandy, the nighttime waitress, and
walked down Twentieth toward Charlene's apartment building. No, who was trying to sell a
used stationwagon to a man in a gray suit, glanced over at her, and waved as she strode past
his lot.
She rode the elevator to the third floor, walked down the hall, and knocked on Charlene's
door. On the second knock, the slight pressure of Julie's knuckles caused the door to swing
open.
Julie took a tentative step inside the apartment. "Charlene? It's me, Julie!"
There was no answer. The apartment was dim, but a faint light was glowing in the alcove
off the living room. Julie took a few more steps and saw that the alcove, partly cut off from
the rest of the apartment by a folding screen, was used as an office. She could see a file
cabinet and the corner of a desk.
When she took another step, she saw Charlene slumped over the desk in front of her
glowing computer monitor.
There were a few papers scattered on the floor, and the silver glitter of spilled paper clips.
A dark ribbon of blood trailed from Charlene's chair onto the floor.
Julie ran forward, thinking she might be able to help somehow, but it was obvious that
Charlene was dead. Julie's hand moved toward the phone on the desk, then stopped. She was
a criminology student, she reminded herself. She touched nothing, retraced her steps out of
the apartment, and used a neighbor's phone to call the Twelfth Precinct.

Within five minutes, Will Jones arrived along with half a dozen other officers. Very much in charge, he gave a few clipped orders, then took Julie into another room and got her story. He looked angry. "Charlene shouldn't have followed Rita. If something crooked is going on, she should have left it up to the professionals."

Julie looked at him in disbelief. "How can you doubt now that something crooked is going on?"

"Charlene appears to have been stabbed to death," Will told her, "but it might not have anything to do with Rita."

"Some coincidence—if it didn't," Julie said angrily.

A plainclothes detective opened the door and stuck his head in. "The M.E.'s here, Will."

Will thanked him. "I've got to get to work, Julie." He surprised her by patting her shoulder. "You can go home now."

She went with him into the living room, where the medical examiner was bent over the body. Police technicians were scouring the room for evidence. Julie watched a tall, redheaded man dusting for fingerprints. "Will, do you mind if I hang around and watch this?"

He looked impatient. "Please, Julie, no more amateur stuff!"

With a backward glance at the busy crime scene, she told him good night and left the apartment.

"Charlene must have learned something she shouldn't have," Mo said, the next morning at Coffee Anytime. "Unless there's no connection between her death and the fact that she followed Rita yesterday."

Dora looked astounded over the rim of her cappuccino. "How can you even think there might not be a connection?"

Mo started to explain, but fell quiet as Will entered the coffee bar. His brown suit was more rumpled than usual, and he looked exhausted. Julie brought him his coffee as he sat down.

Everyone started talking at once, and Will raised his hand.

In the silence that followed, he said, "The medical examiner confirmed that Charlene died of stab wounds. Residents told us she'd argued with the building's superintendent, Roy Emmons, the day before the murder. Charlene lost her temper and threatened him. Then Emmons threatened to kill her. We think he made good on his threat."

Julie stared at him. "That's it? An argument Charlene had with Emmons?"

"A death threat," Will reminded her. "Also, we found the murder weapon. It was in a trash can behind the building, almost directly across from the back door of the super's basement apartment."

"Maybe the real killer ditched it there," Dora suggested.

Will took a long sip of coffee, then said, "We arrested Emmons this morning and charged him with Charlene's murder."

"Did he confess?" Mo asked.

"No, his lawyer advised him to be silent." He looked at them and shrugged. "I'm sorry, but that's how police work is in real life. Unfortunately, it seldom turns out the way it did in Charlene's fiction. If she'd realized that, maybe she'd still be alive." He asked Julie for a lemon Danish, then said, "Now, that's all I can tell you, because this is still an active homicide case."

And he was true to his word, even though Julie tried to bribe him with another Danish.

Julie followed the case in the papers and on TV news. Emmons still wasn't talking, and his lawyer was maintaining that the building super was innocent. The victim of coincidence. He'd happened to argue with Charlene the day before her death, and the real killer had happened to get rid of the knife by dropping it in the trash can near his door. The knife. Julie read, yielded no fingerprints.

A few days later, Rita entered Coffee Anytime and behaved as if everything were perfectly normal. She ordered her cappuccino, met one of her three male companions, received her apparent gift, then purchased her half dozen bags of gourmet coffee and left. As soon as she'd entered, Julie had phoned Mandy, who'd agreed to fill in for her if necessary. Mandy arrived five minutes before Rita left.

This time Julie followed Rita.

Not far, as it turned out.

At the corner, a black stretch limousine with darkly tinted windows swerved smoothly to the curb. Without hesitation, Rita opened a door and climbed in the back of the limo. As soon as the door closed, she disappeared from sight behind the dark windows, and the limo pulled away and stopped two blocks down for a red light.

In desperation, Julie ran to Mo's Motors. Mo was watching a worker hosing down a car.

He noticed her. "Julie! What's wrong? You been running?"

"I need to borrow a car, Mo. I'm following Rita!"

Mo frowned. "Like Charlene did?"

"Mo! Please! She's going to get away!"

The kid with the hose stood staring as Mo handed her a set of keys and said, "Okay, take that blue compact. It'll run fine; I was gonna drive it home myself."

Julie thanked him, grabbed the keys, and ran to the car.
"Be careful, please, Julie!" she heard Mo shout behind her. She wondered if he was talking about her safety or the car's.

The light had changed and the limo was gone. Frustrated, Julie slammed her fist against the steering wheel, cut over to the next street where she knew there would be fewer stop signs, then sped in the direction the limo had driven.

She caught sight of it as it turned onto the ramp leading to the highway, barely avoided being struck by a pickup truck, and fell in behind the limo.

On the highway she dropped back several car lengths and moved over a lane. The limo was traveling at the speed limit and was easy to tail. Her heart was hammering. This would be something to tell them in surveillance class next week.

Within ten minutes Julie knew where they were heading. Sure enough, she followed the black limo down the exit ramp, then through the curving approach to the airport terminal building. The limo pulled to the curb near one of the terminal entrances. A chauffeur who looked more like a mugger got out of the limo and opened a rear door for Rita, who climbed out and stood with a blue carry-on slung by a strap over her shoulder. Then the chauffeur reached in through the same door and dragged out three suitcases and set them on the walkway near Rita. He swaggered around to the driver's side and got back into the limo. Rita began carring her luggage to the terminal entrance.

A horn blared behind Julie. She pulled into a glaringly marked no-parking zone, hoping Mo would understand if it got towed. Then she hurried into the terminal and saw Rita standing in line to check in at the World Airways counter.

After the suitcases were checked, Rita, still with the carry-on, walked quickly toward the International Concourse. Julie followed and watched Rita board a flight to Paris, France.

Curiouser and curiouser, she thought, as she hurried from the terminal and was relieved to see that Mo's car was still where she'd parked it.

Two days later, Julie again followed Rita from COFFEE ANYTIME. And again Rita was picked up at the corner by the black limo and driven to the airport, where she boarded a direct flight to Paris.

Now Julie was ready to present her evidence and theory to the regulars.

The next morning, when everyone out of place at the airport was present, Julie finished serving the coffee and stood where everyone could see her. She told them about Rita and the limo and the flights to Paris.

Dora and Mo were clearly impressed. Will merely looked blankly at Julie and said, "So what do you think it means?"

"It's obvious," Julie said in exasperation. "Rita's smuggling stolen jewelry—the kind Charlene saw in the box. Enrico Mora gave Rita. There's your motive for murder. Mora must have been looking in through the window when Charlene peeked into the box, then he must have seen her follow Rita to the airport, or at least to where she was picked up in the limo. Then he followed Charlene to her apartment and killed her to keep her from talking. You've got to arrest her, Will! Or have Customs search her and her luggage at the airport."

Mo and Dora began excitedly agreeing, trying to talk at the same time.

Will raised his hand like a cop stopping traffic. "Calm down, please. There's no real evidence Rita's smuggling stolen jewels, and Roy Emmons is in custody for Charlene's murder. This is what I was afraid of. We meet in here almost every day and talk about crime and criminals, and your imaginations have run away with your common sense."

For the next hour, they tried to get him to change his mind, but he was adamant. "Police work," he said, "isn't following people to the airport and deciding there's something criminal in flying to Paris."

After the others had left, Julie approached him. "If you won't alert Customs to what Rita's doing, will you do me a favor, Will?"

He smiled. "If I can, Julie."

"Let me go to Charlene's apartment and look around."

"We've already done that," he said, frowning. "Do you expect to find something the experts have missed, like on TV cop shows?"

"I don't know. Just let me look. Is it still an official crime scene?"

"No, we're finished. The building manager's waiting for Charlene's sister to have the furniture and Charlene's belongings moved out."

"Then let me look. Please."

He grimmed and shook his head. "Sure. Why not? But you've got to promise that if you find nothing, you'll forget about your jewelry smuggling theory."

"It's a deal," Julie said, crossing her fingers behind her back.

It felt weird being in the apartment. Julie couldn't keep her gaze from wandering to the desk where she'd seen Charlene's body. She walked around the apartment, looking at everything, not knowing exactly what she was searching for but hoping that, whatever it was, she'd find it. The other rooms yielded nothing, so she found herself where she knew she probably should have begun her search: Charlene's desk.

No doubt the police had been through every drawer, but Julie searched them anyway. She found nothing other than paid and unpaid bills, a checkbook with a small balance, copies of letters to and from Charlene's editor, copies of book reviews, exactly what one would expect to find in the desk.
Discouraged, she switched on the computer. She was familiar with the word processing program Charlene used, so she easily keyed up the chapter Charlene had been working on when she was killed, then scanned to the last page. The rather lurid prose was broken off when the knife had entered Charlene. But there was a final, puzzling word, the last word Charlene had typed, probably while she was dying: toy. It seemed to have absolutely nothing to do with anything else on the page.

Julie decided to print out the last page, so she switched on the printer and pressed the "Print" key.

The printer gurgled and whirred and typed, but the paper didn't move from its feeder. Julie lifted the plastic top of the printer and examined its works. What was wrong was immediately obvious. A small, dark object was jamming the paper feeder—a coffee bean.

Excited now, Julie removed the bean, printed Charlene's final page, and left the apartment.

Will, who wasn't on duty that evening, agreed to meet Julie at Coffee Anytime. They sat at the table where Rita and her male companions usually sat, and after Mandy had brought them coffee, Julie told Will about what she'd found in Charlene's apartment. He listened carefully and politely, now and then sipping his caffè latte and frowning.

"We knew about the last word she typed," he said, when Julie was finished. "We interpret 'toy' to be a misspelling of 'Roy.' Charlene was attempting to name her killer."

Julie felt her heart fall. She hadn't considered that connection.

"We didn't know about the coffee bean," Will admitted.

"I think the bean is Charlene's dying message," Julie said. "I recognized its aroma. It's one of the beans I deliberately spilled so Charlene could chance a peek inside the box of jewelry. Beans bounced everywhere. One of them must have lodged in a fold or cuff of Charlene's clothes. Maybe she found it and placed it on the desk, and after she was stabbed, jammed the paper feeder with it to tell us that her murder was connected to Coffee Anytime."

Will seemed amused. "Julie, that's the sort of thing that happens only in crime fiction."

"But Charlene wrote crime fiction!" Julie fumed. "And it's certainly no less substantial than the word 'toy.' She learned across the table toward him. "Listen, Will, I'm sure Charlene was murdered because she knew about Rita smuggling stolen jewelry. Won't you please alert Customs so they'll stop her and search her luggage next time she tries to fly to Paris?"

"All right," Will said.

Julie was amazed. "What?"

"I said all right. If it will make you and the rest of the amateur sleuths happy, I'll alert Customs. I don't like it, but I'll do it."

"Thank you, Will. And I'm right about this. You'll see!"

He looked dubious as he finished his coffee. "I hope so, Julie."

They didn't have long to wait. The next afternoon, Rita entered Coffee Anytime and was later joined by Enrico Mora, who presented her with a gift, as usual. After Mora kissed her goodbye and left, Rita bought her customary half dozen one-pound bags of gourmet beans then walked from Coffee Anytime. This time the police followed her.

When Will entered Coffee Anytime the next morning, he looked miserable. Julie brought him his coffee, then stood and watched him, along with Dora and Mo, waiting to hear what he had to say.

He explained to them that Customs had acted on his tip and stopped Rita at the airport, a few minutes after she'd purchased a drink at a snack stand. She had indeed checked in a suitcase containing jewelry concealed in bags of gourmet coffee.

"Then what's the problem?" Julie asked.

"The problem," Will said, "is that she had bills of sale for the jewelry and claimed she transported it buried in the coffee to hide it from potential thieves. Now she's threatening to sue the government for harassment."

He reached into his suitcoat pocket and showed the regulars one of the series of photographs taken by Customs of Rita's opened suitcase.

Julie studied the photo for a minute then smiled. "Your worries are over, she told Will. "Rita is guilty."

What does Julie think Rita is guilty of? Charlene's murder? Or is there more to the mystery than her original suspicions? Assemble the jigsaw puzzle to find the startling answers.

The Solution:
Grounds for Murder

"Arthur Ellis Parke. And from the looks of the place of the house or the circumstances before it, I'm assuming that"

"the police had to go through some hoops to get permission to enter the property, or at least to explain the reason for going in.

"I'm not aware of any other suspects. The only other person I've seen is Arthur Ellis Parke, who was last seen leaving the property.

"I believe he might have been involved in some way.

"I'm still working on the investigation. I'm not sure what the motive could be, but I'm working on it.

"I appreciate your understanding, and I will keep you updated on any developments."

"Thank you for your cooperation."