

# FALSE BOTTOM

A Seamus McCree Novel

James M. Jackson



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DEDICATION

*For Squirt. You go girl.*

# ONE

I DRY-SWALLOWED TWO MORE ASPIRIN, suppressing a gag as they scraped down my raw throat. The lawyer was late, and my body used the inaction to remind me of the abuse I had caused it. Circus elephants danced in my gut. My head throbbed from a hangover such as I had not had in decades.

Mom leaned in to prevent the receptionist from hearing. “Seamus McCree, no one forced those drinks on you. Just because they were free—”

“Mom,” I said. “I’m the one who paid for Uncle Mike’s wake.”

She patted my knee. “Then it was stupid and a waste of your own money. You *should* suffer.”

The lawyer saved me from further parental abuse. He ushered us to one end of a conference table suitable for a G-20 summit and offered refreshments, which we declined. We sank into upholstered chairs large enough for Henry VIII. At the head of the table, the lawyer fussed with his paperwork. Mom and I sat on either side of him. The room reminded me of executive offices I used to frequent years earlier when I worked on Wall Street as a bank stock analyst: deep pile carpeting, expensive hardwood furniture, a hint of lemon in the polish, and flowers that someone had to dust.

“The estate plan is simple as simple can be,” the lawyer said. “Mr. O’Malley directed Seamus to be his executor and trustee of the living trust he devised. Consequently, we have no probate issues. Once you sign the papers today, you’ll have full responsibility for the trust—unless you refuse?”

“Happy to do it,” I said.

“The terms of the trust are also simple. It gives Seamus full investment powers. You may reasonably compensate yourself. It provides small bequests for each of his nieces and nephews. They all live abroad? No local family?”

Mom tapped the table with her left thumb—the thumps indicating her impatience. “His parents returned to Ireland with his sisters,” she said.

“Mike and his brother stayed. The brother died in Korea. Both sisters have passed, and one was a nun. All he has are the nieces and nephews, whom he met once during a trip to Ireland.”

“I figured there was a story,” the lawyer said. “The remainder of the trust is for your benefit, Mrs. McCree.” He cleared his throat and straightened the papers in the folder. “Did Mr. O’Malley discuss this arrangement? It’s unusual—”

“Because Seamus has to approve everything?” Mom said. “I’ve spent time in the looney bin. Mike structured it to avoid screwing up Medicaid if I need it. Seamus has managed my finances for years. What else do we need to know?”

I smiled at the lawyer’s shocked expression. “You’ll learn Mom doesn’t feel the necessity for idle chitchat. Are you aware of Uncle Mike using an accountant or where he kept his records?”

The lawyer reverted to business mode. “We have the inventory of the assets he originally put into the trust, nothing more recent. Our staff can help you in understanding—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Mom said, “Seamus is well-versed in financial matters. Mike kept records of everything, including his bowel movements. I’m sure he has a folder at home with whatever Seamus needs. Anything else?”

Mom pasted a smile on her face. She wasn’t fooling me. The way she perched at the edge of her chair, her tapping thumb, and her use of hyperbole meant she felt uncomfortable. I wasn’t sure if she was worried about getting ready for the funeral or impatient with the lawyer or pissed at Uncle Mike for getting himself killed.

“Mom, I need to read through the legal mumbo-jumbo before I sign. Nothing’s stopping you from leaving.” The lawyer nodded agreement. “Remember, the limo will fetch you first at two o’clock and then collect the rest of us at our hotel. Oh, can I borrow your key to Uncle Mike’s apartment?” At her look of annoyance, I added, “I know, you told me to take the spare set from his apartment. I forgot, okay?”

The lawyer snapped his finger. “That reminds me, on your behalf, we took possession of your Uncle Mike’s belongings from the police. His wallet and keys are in our safe. My assistant can collect them for you.”

“So you don’t need my keys,” Mom said.

I gave her cheek a peck and watched her escape.

After I read and signed the various forms, the lawyer extracted two sealed envelopes from his file. “Mr. O’Malley’s instructions were to give these to you in private. He didn’t tell me what they contain. I’ll wait outside.”

I read the sticky note attached to the top envelope. In Uncle Mike’s backward-slanting handwriting it said, “Seamus, make sure your sister gets this.” Under the sticky note, the envelope bore my sister’s name in heavy block letters: FIONA McCREE. What the hell was Uncle Mike up to? The last time I’d heard her name pass his lips was forever ago. She would turn sixty later this year and hadn’t used that name since she’d obtained a court order to change it thirty-three years ago.

I laid that envelope next to the trust material and slid my finger under the flap of the second envelope, which bore my name, and tore it open. I hoped the envelope addressed to me contained an explanation. Inside was a scrap of paper torn from a spiral notebook. Same backward slant.

*Seamus—People you haven’t met are counting on you. I know you’ll do the right thing.*

No date. No signature. The note in my hand said people not my sister. How did this note relate to Fiona’s envelope?

I called the lawyer in. “Nothing else?” I gestured to the material in front of me.

“Nothing, other than Mr. O’Malley’s effects.” He handed them to me.

Uncle Mike’s wallet contained eighteen dollars, his driver’s license, three credit cards, Medicare and supplemental insurance cards, and two scraps of folded paper. The blue slip I had given him. In chart form, it showed which credit card he should use to get the biggest rewards based on the month and purchase category. I unfolded the second scrap and tears flooded my eyes. In Uncle Mike’s careful printing—the form of writing he preferred whenever he used special care—he’d written “In case of emergency call Gertrude McCree” with my mother’s phone number.

I blinked my eyes clear and checked the key chain, finding his house key, car key, and a third key I didn’t recognize. Its silver teeth worn from use, it contained no serial number or other identification. What did it open?

## TWO

GERTRUDE ANSELM MCCREE—TRUDY, AS she preferred people to call her—wanted time to steady herself before leading the collected McCrees to their seats in the first pew. Seamus brought her to a spot where unobserved they watched Boston’s Cathedral of the Holy Cross fill with current and former cops. A few ex-cons rubbed shoulders with the men and women in blue. Most of the dress uniforms sported City of Boston badges. Other delegations from across the state also honored Captain Michael O’Malley (Ret.). At the visitation she had spoken to many retired police officers; some had flown in from their retirements in Florida and Arizona.

As the massive Hook and Hastings organ filled the air with deep, somber notes that resonated in her bones, politicians by the score gathered across the center aisle from where she would lead the family. Present were the governor, Boston mayors past and present, and councilmen out the wazoo.

When her time came, she hoped Seamus tossed her into the ground and ignored the folderol. The Boston Irish were still a close community and knew how to celebrate their dead, and the man lying in the closed cherry casket had a large following. Most came to honor Uncle Mike. The closed casket might disappoint those few who wanted to make sure he really was dead.

She laid a hand on her son’s arm and nodded for Seamus to escort her to the front pew. She’d debated with herself whether wearing the same black dress she wore to Abigail Hancock’s funeral twenty-four days earlier created additional angst for Seamus. It didn’t matter: Seamus had been so consumed by grief the day they buried his former bodyguard-business partner-lover, he wouldn’t remember what his mother wore. Seamus chose the same blue pin-striped suit and a different tie. Following two steps behind, her grandson, Patrick McCree, held his daughter’s hand. Trudy had argued that funerals were not appropriate for three-and-a-half-year olds. Her parents had been firm that death was part of life and overruled Trudy. Patrick’s wife completed the family grouping.

Seamus dipped his head to his ex-wife, who sat in the second row. In the third row Trudy recognized three retired Boston cops Uncle Mike had

recruited seven years ago to help find her after she'd been kidnapped. They'd introduced themselves last night; for the life of her she couldn't remember their names. She'd bet Seamus couldn't either. Next to them was Leominster's Chief Riley, another old pal of Uncle Mike's she'd met several times.

The Catholic mass flowed over her in remembered rhythms and responses. The priest called Seamus forward. Such a handsome man, her son, and persuasive. He had convinced the priest to allow him to offer most of the words of remembrance. She wondered if that's how her Gairden would have looked had he lived to be fifty-five. Seamus stood silently at the lectern, as though gathering strength for his oration.

He cleared his throat. "I apologize," he said. "I wrote my message so I wouldn't speak overlong or forget what I wanted to say." He removed his glasses and scraped tears down his cheeks with the heels of his hands. She wanted to walk up and give him a hug. He raised the well-crafted message overhead with its double spacing and sixteen-point font. "I can't read a bloomin' word."

With a flourish of his hand, the papers fluttered to the floor. "Last night you shared with my family and me your stories of Captain Michael O'Malley. Today I'll tell you a story about the person I called Uncle Mike. You'll pardon me if I have to stop to control my voice."

He removed a linen handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. "God acts in mysterious ways." Behind Trudy came lots of chuckling from the pews. "Uncle Mike was not a blood relative. He was more important than that. He was my father's best friend. They were fellow sergeants, officers in blue, as are most of you. After my father died in the service of this great city, Uncle Mike stepped in to guide me to manhood.

"Not long after we laid my father to rest, he bought me my first beer. I was ten. The bar maid at Kavanaugh's brought me a stout. The statute of limitations has long expired, right? Some of you guys might have been there. A show of hands? How many of you ever tipped a pint or two with my Uncle Mike? Don't be shy."

He paused for the hands to rise before continuing. "For those near the front who can't see, a third of the hands went up. It's why I chose Kavanaugh's for last night's visitation. Back in the day, it was the Irish cop's bar—now, as we proved last night, they'll let in everyone." More laughter rippled through the crowd. Behind Seamus, the priest wrung his hands in religious concern.



“Seamus,’ he says. He drew my name out if he wanted my full attention.” That got another chuckle. Trudy relaxed in her seat. Her boy had their attention. He’d do well. “‘Shay-mus,’ he says, ‘Your ma and your sister are gonna be all right. The community will take care of them fine. Your father, God rest his soul, told me that if something happened to him, I was to keep my eye on you.’ He laid out three rules that day.

“I was to respect my mother. ‘It’s a commandment they teach you in catechism,’ he said. ‘Maybe you’ll burn in hell if you don’t. Maybe you won’t. But, I’ll tell you this: I ever hear of you disrespecting your ma, I’ll beat the living shite out of you.’” Seamus said to the priest, “Begging your pardon, Father, but compared to the hand of Uncle Mike and the rod of Sister Superior, hell looked like a pleasant day at the Cape.”

Trudy smiled. That Sister Superior was one to match the dragons.

“Uncle Mike’s second rule was to stand up for what I believed in, even if it meant some big kid beat the crap—sorry, Father—beat the stuffing out of me. Better that than to back down, which I never saw Uncle Mike do. One reason he never became Chief O’Malley. Am I right?”

Trudy looked sideways at the political rows and saw many heads nod.

“His third rule was never drink alone. ‘You ever need a drink,’ he said, ‘come to this place. Talk with friends. Drink what you need. Someone will see you get home safe.’ Remember now, I was ten, sipping this bitter, dark stuff.

“I didn’t always follow Uncle Mike’s three rules. I earned my crooked nose the time some of you caught me in a gang brawl. Uncle Mike took me off your hands and administered a thrashing whose reminder I carry.” Seamus grabbed his nose and tweaked it from side to side. “And if I didn’t treat my mother with the respect Uncle Mike thought she deserved, I felt the lash of his belt on my behind. Not that my mother needed Uncle Mike’s help for that.”

He was pointing at her; a smile bathed his face. She returned his smile to show support even though the more Seamus spoke about Uncle Mike the more her rage grew at the person who had taken his life.

“I carry my father’s name, but Uncle Mike is the man who made the most difference in my life. After the service we’ll commit his physical body to the ground, and you’re invited. If you prefer to celebrate Michael Paul Joseph O’Malley’s life with bent elbows, I’ll have a tab running for another couple of hours at Kavanaugh’s, where no one will have to drink alone.

And if you're like me and suffering from a wee too much of last night's celebration, I have it on good authority they also serve seltzer water. Now I believe the priest wants to get us on track and conclude the mass."

To a long round of applause, her son returned to his seat and gave her a quick hug.

She participated in the Eucharist, ignoring the sin of the black smudge of rage growing in her heart. At the service's conclusion, an honor guard marched forward to carry Uncle Mike's remains from the cathedral. The congregation rose. Leaning into her son, she whispered, "I want the bastard dead, Seamus. I will not have rest until he is burning in hell."

"They'll catch him, Mom."

With a harshness that surprised even her, she said, "I hope not. Massachusetts doesn't have capital punishment."

# THREE

**FOLLOWING THE BURIAL, I SHOWED** my face at Kavanaugh's, returned to the hotel with enough time to change clothes and bid my son Paddy's family goodbye before they headed back to Chicago. With Mom otherwise occupied for the evening, I decided to move my stuff into Uncle Mike's apartment. No reason to keep paying Boston hotel rates if I could stay somewhere for free while I straightened out his affairs.

I checked out, caught a taxi to Uncle Mike's apartment complex in Waltham. As we pulled in, the taxi driver said, "This is where that guy was ambushed. Terrible thing. Were you around?"

"I wasn't here." I pointed past his shoulder. "Next one, please."

He thanked me for the tip and did a U-turn in the parking lot. I waited until he left before approaching Uncle Mike's Crown Vic. The killer had ambushed Uncle Mike as he walked to his car. Management had hosed the parking lot, and I saw no evidence of the crime.

Uncle Mike left the police at his mandatory retirement age and bought two identical blue Crown Vics tricked out with spotlights, scanners, everything other than flashing lights. The first one died a year ago, and he transferred its plate to the one he'd kept in storage. Its odometer recorded three thousand miles. The glove compartment contained his registration and insurance, an owner's manual, and a pack of spearmint gum. I'd have to get the registration and insurance changed to Mom. She didn't have a car, and I didn't see her driving this boat around Boston. The decision wasn't mine, but for now, I could use it while I was here. The interior was pristine, not even an umbrella tucked under a seat.

I popped the trunk, expecting to find a jack and a spare. Filled with heavy-duty jumper cables, an emergency kit with reflective triangles, flares, a first-aid kit the size of a small suitcase, and a tool box, the space couldn't take an extra lug nut. Typical Uncle Mike: prepared for any emergency—except for some asshole's ambush. With all this stuff covering it, I wondered if he ever checked the air pressure in his spare. I laid the contents on the ground to guide my reconstruction of the trunk and uncovered a full-sized spare. When had I last seen one of those for a car?

Repacking the trunk, I sent a prayer heavenward that everything fit, and listened to the solid thunk as the trunk closed. The car was so old I had to lock the doors by hand—or had Uncle Mike not trusted key fobs because crooks can steal the electronic signal? I'd look for key fobs while I inventoried his apartment.

Approaching the front door, I mentally cataloged the two wrought-iron chairs and a small table decorating the patio. Uncle Mike never opened the drapes for the sliding glass door. I'd pointed out that no one could see in unless they were standing right there. He hadn't minded the dark living room, but I did. At the threshold, I sucked in a big clearing breath and pulled my shoulders back so far the nuns at school would approve.

"Just do it," I told myself and slotted the key. The lock opened with a satisfying click. I pushed the door open and stopped mid-step. Something disturbed me.

I belatedly remembered that burglars sometimes targeted the deceased's residence while family and friends were attending the funeral and cemetery. Uncle Mike's obit included time details. I held my breath and listened for any movement inside the apartment. Nothing but the pounding of my heart against my ribs.

I inventoried the living room from the door. Nothing out of place and his expensive flat screen TV still hung on the wall. I was imagining things.

Still wary, I walked through the living room and looked into the kitchen. No open drawers. Everything on the counter was where I remembered. Upstairs was the same. Everything as it should be.

I squished Uncle Mike's methodically spaced hangers together to make room in his closet for my clothes. Anything of mine not needing to hang could stay in my suitcase. Time to inventory Uncle Mike's stuff. I found a pad of paper in his office and listed everything in the living room. Not much and the only thing of value was the TV. I tackled the kitchen next. To do the job, I needed to empty the dishwasher and put clean dishes away. Mom and I had last been here to grab a suit to bury Uncle Mike in, and we'd put dirty dishes into the dishwasher and started it before we left.

I had grumbled at the trip. Burying Uncle Mike in a suit seemed stupid. With his face blown off, he'd be in a closed casket. Mom insisted, and it wasn't an argument I could win.

I stooped to open the dishwasher door. Before I had engaged the trigger

release, the door moved. Not fully latched. How was that possible? I had heard the dishwasher kick in before we were out the door.

The hairs on the back of my neck tingled. *Oh, for Pete's sake, Seamus. What is your problem?*

The panel lights were off, so no error. I opened the door. The dishes were clean. Maybe the last step for this model was to unseal the door? Whatever.

I stowed the silverware and plates in their assigned spots and left a candy dish for last. I guessed it belonged in the cupboard above the refrigerator—no room. Looking for alternative places, my glance swept past the side of the refrigerator. The hook that held Uncle Mike's spare keys was empty.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Someone had been in Uncle Mike's apartment and stolen his keys. I hadn't paid attention to what he kept on the keyring. Apartment, car, and two or three others, I thought. They hadn't stolen the car, and nothing could have been missing from the trunk. Did they want something from the car's interior or the glove compartment?

Was this the same person who had killed Uncle Mike? That person could have stolen his keys after shooting him. Were they too jittery to remember or too worried about getting caught to pry them from Uncle Mike's hand?

The patio door dowel was still in place to assure no one opened that door. Same with the door to the deck. The front door locks were old and scratched to hell. Did someone have keys to the apartment or did the thief pick the locks to gain entry?

Either way, I needed to get a locksmith to change the locks. I found a card on the refrigerator with an office number for the apartment complex. Yes, I could change the locks at my expense, provided I gave them a set of keys. Fair enough. I was glad to pay extra for an immediate house call by the local locksmith.

While I waited, I made a careful search for other evidence of theft. His TVs and laptop—stuff easily hocked—were present. He wasn't a Rolex kind of guy. Timex was his style. Years ago, he kept a gun, but now he didn't have a gun safe in his apartment or his car. I had about given up and was questioning myself whether the keys had even been on the refrigerator when I opened his file cabinet.

Uncle Mike had used the same precise spacing for his files as he had for his shirts. Now the files were smushed together.

These thieves were not ordinary. They wanted a particular something. What was that something and had they found it? Because of Uncle Mike's cryptic note, I rejected calling the police—it wasn't like they would dust the place for prints.

The doorbell's ring announced the locksmith and forced me to put my concerns on hold.

He appeared delighted with my choice of his most expensive locksets. Swaps made, I paid the guy once he was done and had a thought before letting him go. "Maybe you can help me. Any idea what this key might be for?" I handed him the unknown key from Uncle Mike's keyring.

He peered at the writing on the key. "Garage door? One of those storage units people get once they've filled their attic and garage with stuff they'll never use? We got a bunch in town. You might try them."

# FOUR

I AWOKE WEDNESDAY MORNING, THE last day of August, to the ringing of the phone. But it wasn't my cell phone, and by the time I put on glasses and trundled downstairs to the kitchen to answer Uncle Mike's landline, the ringing had stopped. I picked up the phone anyway. Three beeps preceded the dial tone. It had been years since I used a landline, but I recollected that the beeps meant someone had left a message.

Cold from the kitchen floor had me shifting from one foot to the other. The clock above the stove said it was nine-fifteen, six hours since I had collapsed into the guest bed. Before hitting the sack, I'd ransacked Mike's apartment in a fruitless search for clues about what the thieves wanted. Still wired, I had decided it was better to be productive than toss and turn and get nothing done. I scrubbed the counters and vacuumed, then washed, dried and folded his laundry.

Having done my morning chores last night I could justify crawling back into bed. That's how depression wins. I needed to keep exercising and eating reasonably well if I wanted to climb from the hole I'd plummeted into following Abigail's death. With little food in the house, eating well needed to wait until I grocery shopped. The temperature was already in the high sixties. I should exercise.

Ten minutes later, I had dressed for a run. I closed the door, made sure it locked, and keyed the deadbolt into place for good measure. Satisfied that someone needed to pick both locks or break the door to get in, I tied the key into my laces and walked toward the parking lot. A woman from a nearby unit stuck her head out the door.

"Oh mister," she said. "Did those two men find you?"

"Pardon? Two men?"

"I am so sorry for your loss. I've seen you and your family lots of times, but I've never introduced myself—I'm Brenda Wojik. Such a nice, quiet man. You have my condolences."

Her words triggered my tears. I brushed them away and remembered what she had said. "You asked about two men?"

"Yesterday I went to the funeral, but I didn't go to the cemetery. I

needed to change clothes before I returned to work.” She held her hands to the side of her face. “Oh, I hope you’re not offended about the cemetery.”

I assured her I was not; I appreciated her taking time to attend the funeral. I wanted to spin my hands to encourage her to move her story along. One cannot rush ladies of a certain age, and I did not want to be a boor.

“I didn’t see them when I got home. It didn’t take me five minutes to change. Heading back out, who should I see but the two of them marching up the walk, big as life. I thought, what the heck are you doing? I stepped out, casual like, to cross their path and said, ‘Afternoon, gentlemen. What brings you here today?’ They said they were looking for Captain O’Malley.”

“So why did you ask if they had found me?”

“Oh.” Surprise covered her face. “I did say that, didn’t I? Well, they said they’d come back to talk to whoever was handling Captain Mike’s affairs. That’s you, isn’t it? They hinted that Captain Mike had something of theirs.”

Had they broken in? “I assume they didn’t leave their names. Or a number? Can you describe them? Maybe I’ll recognize them.”

“Cops. My first reaction was they were off-duty cops. They were big and had that cop swagger. And big black shoes like cops wear. And Captain Mike being retired, I . . . I guess I assumed they were cops.” She touched my arm. “Is your sister okay? I didn’t see her at the church.”

Her words exploded a neutron bomb of confusion in my brain. My legs wobbled, as though the concrete sidewalk floated on a spruce bog. Fiona had broken contact with me soon after I graduated from college. She visited Uncle Mike? And he never mentioned it? What the hell was in that envelope he left for her? And if he’d been seeing her, why didn’t he have her address? Apparently, confusion plastered my face because she let go of my arm and stepped back.

“Well,” she said. “I don’t know . . . I assumed she was . . . she looks so much like you. She’s much younger, but these things happen. Oh, dear me. I’ve let my mouth run without thinking.”

“Mrs. Wojik—Brenda. I do have a sister. She lives out West and is older than I. When was this?”

She stared at her feet and shook her head, muttering, “Brenda, Brenda, Brenda. You did not want to turn into your mother.” She gave her



shoulders an exaggerated shrug and looked up at me. “She’s here lots and is the only woman who stops by besides your mother. In fact, she was here Monday—the day before the funeral? I glimpsed her coming up the walk, carrying a briefcase. Talking into her phone. Your sister lives out West? I am so embarrassed I upset you. Especially in your time of sorrow . . .”

I didn’t plan to tell someone I had just met that I hadn’t seen my sister in umpty-ump years. Through my son’s intervention, I had learned much about Fiona. Paddy had even shown me pictures. A year ago she had not been thin and muscular. Diets sometimes work, but looking younger than me? Doubtful. Then again, even with Brenda’s thorough descriptions, was she a reliable witness? Some people fill in details to hear themselves talk. “I’m not sure who you saw,” I said. “People often mistake me for other people. I have one of those faces.” Which was an outright lie, but I needed space to reflect on this new information.

I excused myself noting the short window I had to get in my jog. Her further apologies followed in my wake. Not much caring where I went, provided I put mileage in, I concocted a run around the neighborhoods surrounding Uncle Mike’s place.

During my jog, I concluded it was not my sister. Paddy kept loose track of her online. If she’d lost enough weight to be “thin and muscular,” he would have said something. Besides, Fiona had never been close to Uncle Mike.

Yet Uncle Mike had left that envelope for me to send to her, and he knew how to keep secrets. Oh hell, I’ll call Paddy, ask about their trip home to Chicago, and find out if Fiona’s circumstances had changed.

If she had been there Monday, and she had visited often, had she been the one to steal the keys and rifle through Uncle Mike’s file cabinet? Or, it might be the two cop-like guys. Or it might be someone else. Whoever it was, what were they looking for? Was it related to Uncle Mike’s murder? I hadn’t called the police about the stolen keys and the rifled file drawer. I couldn’t prove anything, and what could they do? Should I reconsider?

While showering, I had two brainstorm: Uncle Mike wasn’t as anal as Mom implied in her comments to the lawyer; he was, however, a list-maker and receipt-keeper. If he kept a storage unit that the unknown key fit, somewhere in the mess of papers I had shoved into the file cabinet last night should be its receipt. Second, every voicemail system had its quirks, and I might stumble around forever guessing access codes. While looking

through the file cabinet for something obviously missing, I'd spotted a bunch of user manuals. With luck I'd find the one for retrieving voicemails.

I found the telephone manual and discovered nine voicemails. The first eight were telemarketers or people I needed to call to cancel appointments. The ninth said, "Mr. O'Malley, this is Scott Brown from Fourth National Bank of Waltham. A Boston police officer showed up with your safe deposit key wanting to get into the box. Said you were dead? I guess you won't get this message if you are. Er . . . My supervisor said I should call you. I told them they'd need a court order or proof they were the executor before I gave them access. Cops should know that. Okay then . . . bye."

Why would a Boston cop have Uncle Mike's safe deposit box key? Because it was on Uncle Mike's stolen spare key ring. Which meant two Boston cops or people who impersonated them had broken in, not the woman Brenda Wojik saw. How did they know where to go? For safety reasons an address is not generally on the key. Had they found something in his file cabinet?

The top drawer of the file cabinet yielded a folder labeled in bold letters, "SAFE DEPOSIT BOX." The folder contained the agreement dated a dozen years ago listing the number for a large-size safe deposit box at the main branch of Fourth National Bank of Waltham. Uncle Mike was the sole signatory. The twelve years of annual renewal notices, each marked paid, gave me a smile.

I made a quick survey of the files, hoping to spot one labeled STORAGE UNIT or LOCK THAT WEIRD KEY FITS. Nada. Miscellaneous receipts overfilled one drawer, and I'd have to go through those. In a quick perusal of Uncle Mike's check register I didn't see payments relating to the key.

That dead end was especially frustrating since I had learned nothing to shed light on Uncle Mike's mysterious note telling me that people I hadn't met were counting on me to do the right thing. Who were these people and what right thing was I supposed to accomplish?

Uncle Mike wasn't one to waste money, meaning there had to be a reason for him to spring for a large safe deposit box. I expected to find something of value. So, apparently, had the Boston cop impersonator who tried to get access to the box.

How hard would it be for the people who stole the key to create a fake court order and open the box? Or was Uncle Mike under investigation at the time of his death and a real court order might soon appear?

Whatever that box contained was part of Uncle Mike's estate and belonged to Mom. Standing and thinking was wasting time. I needed to find out what was in it. Now.