THE LAND GRAB

A Bucket List Mystery
Short Story

By

Elizabeth Perona
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ELIZABETH PERONA
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The glazed-over look in Charlotte’s eyes put Francine on alert. Whenever she saw it, she knew her friend was about to say something that hadn’t been fully processed by her brain. Sometimes Charlotte said whatever the other person wanted to hear; other times she said whatever popped into her mind. So Francine was braced to head off trouble when Charlotte told the policeman, “Someone killed my uncle, and I know who did it.”

Francine sighed. It had been a rough afternoon for Charlotte, but this was an unexpected development. The two women had suspected the worst when they used Charlotte’s key to let themselves into her Uncle Harold’s house just after lunchtime. Charlotte hadn’t heard from
the 82-year-old widower in two days, despite having left numerous messages. They’d found him in bed, unmoving. Being a retired nurse, Francine had immediately checked for a pulse but found none. She’d called 911, and then comforted Charlotte while they waited for the Speedway Police to arrive. She’d sat by her friend’s side during questioning.

But this latest twist had exasperated Francine. “You don’t know that he was murdered, Charlotte. I think it was just natural causes. There wasn’t anything about him that made it look otherwise. And he’d been taking heart medications. They were sitting on his nightstand.”

Charlotte shifted away from Francine on the couch. “I bet the paramedics found something. Or the deputy coroner. They’ve been in there awhile.”

Francine got up and looked out the living room window. The paramedics had arrived within a few minutes of her call. Their ambulance was parked in the driveway, the deputy coroner’s car now alongside. Two police cars had also responded. They were parked in front of the house. One had contained a rookie officer, Brett O’Neal, and his field training officer, Lt. Joe Helphenstine. They’d come in. The other policeman had remained outside. Francine could see him questioning Harold’s neighbor, Lloyd Monroe.

O’Neal, who’d interviewed them, came over and stood next to Charlotte. “What makes you think he might have been murdered, Mrs. Reinhardt? Did he have enemies?”

“I’m just saying that he was very healthy, even though
he was taking medicines. He power-walked two miles three times a week. He could dance for hours at a time.”

Francine had seen Harold ‘power-walk.’ It might have seemed fast to Charlotte, who’d had to slow down a year ago when her hip replacement surgery hadn’t gone so well. But to Francine, watching Harold power-walk was like watching someone run through Jell-O—the motions looked fast, but he didn’t cover much ground. And while he might have been a dancer, she guessed he didn’t jitterbug anymore.

O’Neal looked at his notes. “Earlier, you said you and Mrs. McNamara last saw him two weeks ago during the 500. Did he give you the impression he was worried about his life?”

“He was too busy parking cars on his lawn,” Francine offered. “We hardly talked to him at all.”

Charlotte sniffed. “He didn’t have much time to visit with us that day. Being directly across from the track makes his parking pretty attractive. Did I tell you he makes almost $700 on Race Day? Because of my hip surgery, he was very nice this year about letting me park for free.”

O’Neal tucked his notebook under his arm and joined Francine by the window. He peered past the rutted front lawn and Georgetown Road to the first-turn bleachers. “You can’t get much closer than this. You been a race fan long?”

“Didn’t give a hoot about it until I met that Brazilian driver Helio Castroneves at the Marsh grocery on Crawfordsville Road three years ago.” Charlotte leaned heavily against the armrest and stood up. She made her
way across the room until she was standing next to O’Neal. She had to look up to make eye contact since he was a good nine inches taller. “He was such a nice young man. And good looking, too. You’re not so bad yourself, you know?”

Francine wasn’t so sure about Charlotte’s assessment. The policeman’s hair was shaved to his scalp, and he had an ultra-lean, muscular build that gave him a hard edge. But when he smiled, which he did at Charlotte’s remark, his hazel eyes sparkled. It made him less intimidating somehow.

O’Neal thanked her and appeared embarrassed by the compliment. “I prefer the Brickyard myself. Tony Stewart’s my favorite. He’s a fighter.”

“I’m not surprised you like fighters,” Charlotte said. “You kind of look like one with those long, strong arms. I bet you’ve got six-pack abs, too. I bet you know how to take a punch.” She playfully jabbed at his stomach.

O’Neal was grinning as Lt. Helphenstine came out from the bedroom. Francine placed him in his late 40’s. Although he was quite a few pounds overweight and had a receding hairline, he had very few lines in his face.

O’Neal dropped his smile. The lieutenant motioned Charlotte and Francine to the brown leather couch. “Ladies, please have a seat.”

Francine tried to help Charlotte, but she gently pulled her arm away. “I’m okay, Francine.” She looked at the officers. “All my friends seem to think I’m an invalid. I hobble a bit, but I’ve still got spunk.”

She has that in spades, Francine thought, settling into the couch beside her.
“The deputy coroner is trying to get hold of your uncle’s doctor,” Helphenstine told Charlotte. “If she’s successful, and the doctor signs the death certificate, she says she can release the body to you this afternoon.”

“But what about the autopsy?” Charlotte exclaimed. “Aren’t you going to find out how he died?”

Helphenstine stared at her with a puzzled look. He glanced at O’Neal.

“Mrs. Reinhardt believes her uncle may have been murdered,” O’Neal said.

Francine thought she saw a look of bemusement pass between the two officers.

Helphenstine turned a sympathetic smile to Charlotte. He squatted down so he could be at her eye level. “I’m very sorry about your uncle’s death. I’ll ask the deputy coroner to explain her findings to you as soon as she’s finished. Let me go see if she’s done.” He disappeared into the bedroom.

The paramedics came out and nodded at O’Neal as he let them out the front door. Then he squatted in front of Charlotte as Helphenstine had done. “I’m just curious, Mrs. Reinhardt. How do you think he was murdered? And who do you think did it?”

Charlotte had a gleam in her eye. She leaned in close. “As for how it was done, poison. He threw up before he died. You noticed that, didn’t you? In the bathroom? There’s a poison that gives a victim a heart attack, but it makes them sick first. I read lots of mysteries.”

“Oleander, isn’t it? I read a lot of mysteries, too. But what would be the motive? And who would do it?”

Before she could answer, Helphenstine reappeared
with the deputy coroner. The slightly-built woman, who Francine guessed to be in her twenties, wore bright red lipstick that made her pasty complexion seem even paler.

“Mrs. Reinhardt, I’m Susan Clement,” she said, shaking Charlotte’s hand. “I’m so sorry about your uncle. I’ve examined him, and everything would seem to indicate he died of natural causes. I’ve called his physician. Based on his age and the type of medications he’s been taking, his physician has agreed to sign the death certificate.”

“No! He couldn’t have just died! Don’t you have to do an autopsy?”

“I understand this isn’t easy. But despite what you see on television, when the deceased is elderly and has a pre-existing medical condition, and there are no signs of foul play, an autopsy is not required.”

Francine knew that was especially true in a big city like Indianapolis, where they had to be budget-conscious. Autopsies are expensive.

“But what if he were poisoned?” Charlotte’s voice peaked when she said it. Francine was afraid her friend might become hysterical.

Clement’s voice remained calm. “Is there a reason to believe someone wanted him dead?”

“Yes.” Charlotte set her jaw. “My uncle refused time and again to sell this land. It’s prime property, sitting across the street from the Speedway. Lots of people wanted to buy it. I bet the owners of the track would pay a pretty penny to get it.”
Francine saw the surprised look on the coroner’s face. She herself was surprised. While it was reasonable to believe that prominent family might want the property, since they also owned a lot of the surrounding land, the idea that they would kill for it wasn’t. If anyone could offer the right price, it would be them.

Clement took a deep breath. “Now Mrs. Reinhardt. It’s my understanding that housing values have declined in this area over the last few years. Ever since the Motor Speedway started hosting three races a year, it’s a major hassle for the people who live here. Very few want to put up with the congestion.”

Charlotte looked puzzled. “Well, Harold said that Lloyd Monroe who lives next door has been trying to buy him out for years. Why would he want the land otherwise?”

“I grew up in Speedway, and I know Lloyd Monroe,” Clement said. “He owns a bunch of other properties. Maybe he sees it as a long-term investment. It’s possible that someday the Motor Speedway may decide that they want this land. Probably not soon, since they own a large chunk of property across 16th Street that hasn’t been fully developed. I think they’d use that land before they’d buy any over here.”

“So, it’s not valuable?”

The coroner shrugged. “Not now, it isn’t.”

Charlotte looked to Officer O’Neal for help.

“I live in Speedway, too,” he said. “Land values have been declining.” He ran a finger across his prominent jawline. “Although, now that I think of it, the Redevelopment Commission does have a plan to straighten up
the intersection where 16th Street, Main, Crawfordsville, and Georgetown Road come together. If they did that, they would have to shift Georgetown Road to the west, and that would change whatever property remained on this side from residential to commercial. That would make it more valuable.”

Francine knew the intersection well. It was a pain to negotiate. Everyone knew it needed work, especially since the businesses that operated on the Crawfordsville Road side had become seedy. The worst was the strip club at the corner.

O’Neal’s suggestion made Charlotte perk up. “Then if they decided to go through with it, the land value could appreciate at any time.”

Francine noticed that Helphenstine had moved closer to the group at the mention of the Redevelopment Commission. Now he shook his head.

“My brother Jerry’s a commissioner. It’s pretty far down on the Commission’s wish list. They’re divided on whether to do it or not. Half want it. Half don’t. They’re letting my brother sway the issue since he represents the folks who live around here. And they don’t want it.”

“Why not?”

“To relocate Georgetown, they’ll have to tear down all the houses on this side. Then a whole new set of houses west of the track will bear the brunt of the traffic and depreciate in value.”

Charlotte shook her finger at Lt. Helphenstine. “I’m still suspicious of Lloyd. The minute Francine and I arrived, he rushed over to see why we were here. I told
him Harold wasn’t answering the phone. That’s when he said he hadn’t seen Harold in a couple of days. Wouldn’t you think he’d have called or something?”

O’Neal sighed. “What people should do, and what they actually do, are two different things. I haven’t been a policeman all that long, and I’ve seen it a hundred times. And just because he wants to buy the land doesn’t mean he would kill your uncle for it.”

Charlotte’s face went glum. Francine felt a little sorry for her, but her accusation did seem off base.

Clement put her hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “If you have that much concern, I can do a tox screen on your uncle. It’ll allow us to rule out some poisons, but it will take several weeks to get the results back.”

“I’d like that.”

Clement stood up. “Let me get it underway, and then I’ll be gone. Have you selected a funeral home?”

Charlotte nodded. “Conkle’s, on 16th Street.”

“I’ll give them a call,” Helphenstine said. “And I’ll let headquarters know what’s going on.” He left the house.

Charlotte started to get up from the couch. O’Neal took her by the arm and helped her up. Charlotte winked at him. “Thank you, handsome.” She clung to the officer’s bicep to steady herself.

Francine almost rolled her eyes. She knew once Charlotte was on her feet she was fine.

After groping the officer’s muscles, Charlotte let go and moved toward the hall. “Can I get something out of Harold’s office to show you?”

O’Neal raised his eyebrows. “Let me come with you. What is it?”
“I’ll show you.”

Francine caught up with O’Neal as they followed along behind Charlotte. She whispered, “We’ve been worried about Charlotte for some time. Between her hip replacement and the chemo she’s taking for breast cancer, she’s gotten testy. We’re not sure what she’ll do or say anymore.”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“Our bridge club. Five of us.”

“Why does she want her uncle to have been murdered?”

Francine felt her cheeks redden. “Well, when we all turned sixty, we made lists of the sixty things we wanted to do before we died. One of Charlotte’s was to solve a mystery.”

As Francine and O’Neal trailed into Harold’s office, Charlotte turned around to see them talking. Francine closed her mouth immediately.

O’Neal spoke up. “What are you looking for, Mrs. Reinhardt?”

Charlotte didn’t answer but turned back to a bulletin board near Harold’s desk. Only a few notes were tacked to it. Charlotte scratched her head, and the blond wig shifted to one side. Francine made a mental note to fix it later.

“I know it was up there.” Charlotte pointed to the bulletin board. “He showed it to me just the other day.”

Lt. Helphenstine entered the office. Everyone glanced at him.

O’Neal turned back to Charlotte. “What’s missing?”

“A photo. For the past few weeks, Harold’s been
staying up late at night, photographing the comings and goings at that strip club on Crawfordsville Road. He had a platform built in the tree out back so he could easily see the back exit. This one photo had someone standing in the doorway, pawing a stripper.”

Lt. Helphenstine cocked his head. “Were there other photographs?”

“He had a bunch of them in his desk drawer, except for the one that used to be on the bulletin board.”

“I’d like to take a look at them,” Helphenstine said.

Charlotte switched on the desk lamp. She opened the drawer and pulled out thick stacks of photos, handing them to the lieutenant.

Helphenstine sat at the desk and began to separate them into piles. Francine estimated there were at least two-hundred photographs. Toward the end, he pulled a couple of photos close to his face and studied them.

“Was there anyone in the picture your uncle could identify?” he asked Charlotte.

“He didn’t say, but he was excited about it. Those two photographs you have were taken at the same time, I think, but you can’t see the guy’s face.”

“Did he have any distinguishing features?”

“Honestly, I don’t remember what he looked like. I wasn’t paying attention.” She reached for the photos but Helphenstine didn’t let go of them. She squinted at the images. “If it’s the same guy in those photos, you can see he has a bald spot on the back of his head. The security light’s reflecting off it.”

“I think you’re right. I’ll just take these two along
with me, give them a little more thought,” he said, pocketing them.

O’Neal frowned and started to say something, but just then the woman from the coroner’s office called out for Lt. Helphenstine. Everyone followed him out of the office. Susan Clement was in the living room.

“I’m finished,” she said. “I’ll send you the results of the tox screen as soon as I have them.”

There was a knock at the door. Charlotte opened it, and the men from Conkle’s Funeral Home came in to retrieve Uncle Harold’s body. Clement left after them. Before the officers left, Lt. Helphenstine gave Francine and Charlotte each a business card and told them to call if they had questions.

Charlotte went into the bathroom and got a tissue to wipe her eyes. “He saw something in those photos. He just doesn’t want us to know what it was.”

Francine rested a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t put a lot of stock in that, Charlotte. The coroner is probably right about natural causes. They see a lot of cases like this.”

Charlotte broke into tears. Francine put her arm around her friend and guided her into the kitchen. Charlotte sat in a padded chair at a small table.

“How about if I make you a hot toddy, Charlotte? It’ll calm your nerves.”

“But it’s June!”

“Oh, you’re right. Maybe I’ll just spike some lemonade.”
About an hour later, Charlotte looked a whole lot better. Rest and a couple of my hard lemonades work wonders, Francine thought. The two women drove over to make the funeral arrangements, and Charlotte had another good cry, but Francine thought her friend seemed resolved about the death. She hoped that Charlotte would get off the kick that Uncle Harold had been murdered.

“It’s suppertime,” Francine said after they were finished. “Why don’t we stop at MCL Cafeteria and get something to eat before we head back to Brownsburg?” Francine and Charlotte loved to stop at MCL, and the Speedway shopping center had the closest location to their homes, about fifteen minutes away.

Charlotte’s eyes glazed over. “Let’s go to the library, instead. I want to look up information on the Redevelopment Commission.”

“Francine...”

“Uncle Harold wouldn’t just die of natural causes without being sick first. I want to check out some things.”

Francine groaned. “Okay, but first, we have to get food.”

After a stop at MCL, the two drove to the library on 25th Street. There they read the previous year’s minutes from the Redevelopment Commission.

“Look at this map,” Charlotte said. “If they were to align Georgetown Road with Main Street, Uncle Harold’s property would still be fully intact and redesignated as commercial property.”

Francine traced a finger along the route. “It would go
right through the middle of the strip club, so that building would have to come down.”

“That would make a lot of people happy.”

“It looks like a bunch of residential properties would have to go, too, but some of these lots are already vacant.”

“I wonder how many of the properties Lloyd owns? I bet we can find that online somehow. Let’s ask the librarian.”

With a little help, Charlotte searched a property tax database and found the answer. “Lloyd Monroe owns them all,” she told Francine triumphantly. “All except Uncle Harold’s.”

Francine had been examining newspaper clippings. She held one up. “Here’s a shot of the Redevelopment Commission. Look at this guy here, the one turning around. He’s got a bald spot on the back of his head. Do you think it could be the same guy Uncle Harold caught at the strip club?”

Charlotte bit her lower lip. “It’s hard to tell, but it could be. Does it say who he is?”

“No, it just identifies the group as the Redevelopment Commission.”

Charlotte took the clipping from Francine and went to the copy machine. When she returned, Francine looked at her watch. “It’s almost eight! The library’s going to close soon. Let’s put this file back and go home.”

“Francine, I appreciate you being with me today, but I want you to drop me back at Harold’s house. I’ve decided to stay there tonight.”
“And sleep in your clothes?”
“I’ll just sleep in the buff. I do that sometimes.”
“Charlotte! You cannot sleep naked in the bed where someone just died.”
“Of course not. I’ll put on one of Harold’s robes and sleep on the couch.”
Francine frowned at her.
Charlotte put her hands on her hips. “You read all the time about the homes of recently deceased people being robbed because no one’s staying there. That could happen here. And don’t worry. I’ll put on every light in the house.”
Charlotte wouldn’t be dissuaded, so Francine was forced to return to Brownsburg without her. This is so unlike her, Francine thought as she drove away. She picked up Lt. Helphenstine’s business card and dialed the number on her cell phone. Officer O’Neal answered.
“My friend has decided to stay at the house alone tonight,” Francine said after identifying herself. “I’m worried, and I wondered if you could maybe look in on her.”
“My shift ended earlier, and I’m just clearing up a few things,” he said, “but I’ll leave word for someone else. Thanks for calling and letting us know.”
“Will you please let Lt. Helphenstine know as well?”
“I’ll make sure he gets the message.”
Francine felt a little better, but she couldn’t help recalling the far-away look in Charlotte’s eyes. I hope she doesn’t get herself in trouble, Francine thought.

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Charlotte watched her friend drive away yakking on the cell phone. “Francine, you’ll get yourself in trouble doing that,” she said. As she turned and headed back into her uncle’s house, Lloyd Monroe came over. Charlotte despised seeing him twice in one day. He had a narrow, flat face and black hair with long, thick sideburns, and she thought he would have looked exactly like a ferret if his hair were a different color.

“We’re not selling the property, Lloyd.”

“You’re not? Don’t you need to check with his other relatives?”

“No, he left me the property in his will.” Charlotte felt the words roll off her tongue. They sounded true, even to her.

“Oh.”

“Is there anything else?”

“Umm. I’ll be happy to look after the place until you get back tomorrow.”

“Thank you, but I’ve decided to stay the night.”

“Really? I thought you’d be headed back home.”

“It’s just that there’s so much to do. I’ve got to go through his computer files. He put a bunch of photos on his computer, and the police want me to see if I can find a specific one.”

Lloyd’s mouth dropped open, but he quickly closed it. “I didn’t think Harold had a computer. He couldn’t even program a VCR.”

“Oh, he liked to let on that he couldn’t do that stuff,
but he could. He kept a laptop hidden away. Like I said, I’ve got to look through it.”

“I won’t keep you. Listen, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to call.”

Charlotte watched Lloyd Monroe scurry back to his house. *Now why do I do things like that?* she said after she closed the door.

Charlotte waited all evening for Lloyd to make his move, but nothing happened. Four hours of anticipation, only to be let down. She’d even put Francine’s number on speed dial, just in case. Now she lay on the couch, willing herself to sleep. She sat up and looked at the clock: 2:05. Her body was tired, but her brain kept reviewing the day. If the photos had nothing to do with her uncle’s death, why had the policeman taken them? She was still sure Lloyd Monroe was involved, too. He’d looked suspicious when she implied a copy of the missing photo remained on Harold’s non-existent computer.

Charlotte struggled off the couch. She retied Harold’s robe and put on his slippers, but they were so big she had to rubber-band them to her feet.

She went into Harold’s office. Everything was just as she’d left it. She sat in his chair and went through the photos again but didn’t see anything suspicious. If there were something, she told herself, it would be in either the missing photo or the two taken by Lt. Helphenstine. She’d ask to get those back in the morning.

Charlotte looked out the window, trying to see Lloyd’s house. A tree and tall shrubbery blocked her view. Charlotte partially turned away when something
caught her attention. Though it was night, the city lights never let it get too dark, and she could see the tree in the backyard from which Harold had taken his photos. He had built a platform about eight feet off the ground. High enough, Charlotte thought, to see into Lloyd’s house.

She went into the kitchen. Harold kept a flashlight and binoculars by the door, and she snagged those as she left. She hobbled into the grass. Dew had already settled on the lawn, and she could feel the wetness on her toes. The slippers must be getting soaked, she thought. For a moment, she considered putting on her shoes, but it was either comfort or momentum, and she decided on momentum. Then she giggled. *I bet Miss Marple would have done the same thing.*

Charlotte aimed the flashlight into the tree. Because she was only five-feet tall and not in the best of health, the platform looked very far away. But she had it in her mind that she was going to get up there.

*I’ll take it one step at a time*, she assured herself. The homemade ladder looked sturdy enough. She slipped the flashlight into a pocket, put the binoculars around her neck, and placed a foot on the first step. She pulled herself up with effort. She managed the second step, and then the third. But at the fourth rung, her feet began to hurt. Should have put on the shoes, she thought. But Charlotte was nothing if not determined, and five minutes later, she pulled herself, exhausted, stomach-first onto the platform.

Once her heart stopped pounding, she sat up and looked around. The platform was about five feet by five
feet, made of thick plywood. There was no railing of any sort, and it made Charlotte wary. She gingerly scooted to the back where she could lean against the tree trunk and face Lloyd’s house. Unfortunately, she could only see the backyard. She thought maybe there was a light on in one of the rooms, but it was just a guess.

Charlotte shined her flashlight into the backyard. Lloyd had a patio off the back porch where Charlotte could make out pots of tall plants with white flowers.

That looks very much like oleander, she thought. I need to tell Francine about this tomorrow.

With not much else to look at in Lloyd’s backyard, she checked out the view in other directions. She didn’t need the flashlight to see the strip club on Crawfordsville Road, which was well lit and had a security light, but she did need the binoculars. Still, nothing was happening there. She rested her head against the tree.

It wasn’t comfortable, but Charlotte felt drained. Soon, she dozed off, only to be startled awake by the sound of someone climbing the ladder. Her first thought was to move, but she was stiff from climbing.

Lloyd Monroe pulled himself onto the platform. He was wearing a black t-shirt and jeans and seemed to blend in with the night. “What are you doing up here, Charlotte?” he asked.

“I wanted to see what Uncle Harold could see. What are you doing here?”

Lloyd looked around. His glances were quick and furtive. “The same. Have you seen what you wanted?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve seen your back yard with its pots of
oleander. And the back side of the strip club, which Harold photographed."

"I’m going to need your help, Charlotte. You see, I need to have that photo. I want you to tell me where Harold’s computer is."

She shook her head. "You killed him, Lloyd. Somehow you gave him oleander. The police might not think so, but I do. Why’d you do it?"

"You think this is some Agatha Christie mystery where the killer spills his guts at the end?"

Charlotte was trying hard to keep her cool, but inside she was trembling. "Yes. And I’m playing the role of Miss Marple, so let’s have it."

"Trust me, I’m going to let you have it. But first I want the computer."

"You won’t get away with this, Lloyd. It’s public record that you own every home on the block except this one. If you kill me to get the property, someone else will figure it out. You’ll be a prime suspect. What I don’t understand is why you want a property that isn’t worth anything."

"It’ll be worth plenty if they align Main Street and Georgetown Road."

"But it’s not going to happen."

"Only because the person standing in the way is Commissioner Jerry Helphenstine. And Harold’s telephoto lens caught him at the strip club. So this is my chance to get the property and make it valuable at the same time. I had to stop Harold before he exposed Helphenstine. Now I’ll buy the property, then blackmail Helphenstine into pushing for realignment. Or, expose
him and let public opinion do it for me. Either way, I make a bundle.”

Lloyd didn’t have much room on the platform. To move anywhere, he would have to cross over Charlotte’s legs, and that’s what she was watching for. Her goal was to kick a foot out from under him and send him falling off the platform.

He took a step toward her. “Where’s the computer, Charlotte?”

She heard a rustling in the yard.

Lloyd’s head jerked up. “Who’s there?”

Silence.

“I know someone’s out there.”

Lt. Helphenstine stepped out of the bushes in the back of the property. He had a gun in his hand.

*Thank goodness,* thought Charlotte.

“Please go right ahead and kill her, Lloyd,” Helphenstine said. “I’m tired of cleaning up my brother’s messes. If he weren’t sharing his bribes with me, I’d turn him in myself. But you can take care of this problem. You kill her, and I’ll take away the evidence along with the computer. You can buy this property, but you won’t be able to accuse my brother of anything. In time, maybe they’ll vote to realign Main Street, and then you’ll get your money. But you’ll have to wait.”

Lloyd snorted. “I won’t be your stooge. If I can’t turn a profit right away, it’s not worth it. She won’t sell me the property anyway.”

“Don’t turn around, Joe,” said a tight, controlled voice. Charlotte recognized Officer O’Neal at the corner of the house. “Just drop the gun,” he said.
Lt. Helphenstine didn’t turn around, but he didn’t drop the gun, either.

“What are you doing here, Brett?”

“I got suspicious when you took the photos without a search warrant and then kept finding excuses not to let me see them. There’ve been rumors that your brother was ‘in’ with the strip club, and that he was paying you to keep his record clean. So when Mrs. McNamara asked me to pass the message onto you about Mrs. Reinhardt being here alone, I made sure you saw it. If you were involved, you’d take the opportunity to do something. And you did. Now, drop the gun.”

“I’m your training officer, Brett. Don’t do this. Accusing me without proof won’t look good on your record.” The gun remained in Helphenstine’s hand.

“Don’t be stupid, Joe. There’s no way out. I’ve had my radio channel on. The car is taping everything, and I’ve already sent for backup.”

Helphenstine dropped the gun by his feet.

“Now get in a kneeling position with your hands behind your back,” O’Neal said.

“No.” The lieutenant remained standing.

“We’ll just wait for backup to get here.”

Charlotte felt a long, tense silence take hold.

Helphenstine nudged the gun a little ways off to the left with his foot. “How’s that? You can take the gun away from me now.”

“We’ll wait.”

Charlotte could hardly breathe. She looked at Lloyd. His face was getting redder by the minute. He looked bad. “Lloyd?”
Lloyd held his chest and gasped.

“Officer O’Neal, I think he’s having a heart attack,” she said.

Lloyd Monroe fell off the platform.

Charlotte was never quite sure of the sequence of events after that. She knew she screamed. She heard shuffling feet in the grass. Fists hitting, and men grunting. Something heavy hitting the tree. Sirens in the distance. The sound of handcuffs snapping shut. Someone climbing the ladder.

O’Neal stuck his head above the platform. “Are you all right, Mrs. Reinhardt?”

“Yes, but what about Lloyd?”

“Mrs. McNamara is giving him CPR.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Charlotte,” Francine called. Her voice sounded labored.

“What are you doing here, Francine?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I drove out here and found Officer O’Neal in the driveway. He let me stay but made me get back in my car until it was over.”

The sirens got louder, and two medics arrived to take over.

O’Neal helped Charlotte down from the platform and into the kitchen where she could sit comfortably. An on-duty officer took statements from everyone. Francine prepared hard lemonades for her and Charlotte. O’Neal declined.

“So I was wrong and I was right at the same time,” Charlotte said, taking a sip.

“Lloyd Monroe killed my uncle, but not for the reason I thought.”
“That’s right. He wanted the land, but more than that, he killed your uncle to get control over Jerry Helphenstine. He hoped to get the land afterwards, but it was just a hope.”

“Then I really didn’t solve the mystery.”

O’Neal’s eyebrows lifted, and he smiled at her. “Almost. Now, I want you to promise me you won’t try anything like this again. If Mrs. McNamara hadn’t called to let me know what was going on, it might have ended badly.”

Charlotte didn’t say anything.

The officer’s voice was tight. “Promise?”

Charlotte felt her eyes go out of focus. She wondered if it was Francine’s concoction. “I promise,” she said.

But from the way Officer O’Neal and Francine looked at each other, she got the impression neither of them believed her.

THE END
About the Author

Elizabeth Perona is the father/daughter writing team of Tony Perona and Liz Dombrosky.

Liz Dombrosky is a stay-at-home mom and pre-school teacher. She graduated from Ball State University in the Honors College with a degree in teaching. Her career as a novelist began with Murder on the Bucket List and now includes Murder under the Covered Bridge and Murder at the Male Revue. She and her dad are at work on the fourth novel in the Bucket List mystery series. Liz has also co-authored two Bucket List short stories, “The Santa Cause” (in Homicide for the Holidays) and “The Missing Ingredient for Murderous Intent” (in Murder Most Edible).

In addition to being co-author of the Bucket List mystery series, Tony writes the Nick Bertetto mystery series, authored the standalone thriller The Final Mayan Prophecy with Paul Skorich, and was co-editor and contributor to the anthologies Racing Can Be Murder and Hoosier Hoops & Hijinks. Tony is a member of Mystery Writers of America and has served the organization as a member of the Board of Directors and as
Treasurer. He is also a member of Sisters-in-Crime. Tony recently retired from his day job as the Deputy Town Manager for the Town of Plainfield, Indiana.

www.elizabethperona.com
Also by Elizabeth Perona

**Bucket List Series:**
Murder On The Bucket List
Murder Under The Covered Bridge
Murder At The Male Revue