

Assiduity Twelve

by J. Mykell Collinz

Rasheed changes his mind about working for me. He can't bring himself to break with Uzma. The bond between them is too strong. I admire his loyalty, to her and to her parents.

Don turns out to be my most reliable ally. Plus, he brings a ragtag security force with him. They still patrol the neighborhood but they are effectively taking their orders from me through him.

"Now I know what a military coup feels like," Don says.

"Some of your people will need to be wearing uniforms?" I say: "I want armed security guards at the construction site around the clock."

"What's in it for them?" he replies.

"If they work the hours and do it right they have a job with a regular income. We can make it a separate company, a private security service. We can even branch out to other parts of the city if you want to get more involved in that kind of work."

"You don't let no grass grow under your feed, do you?"

"I can't afford to, Don, not after signing a loan agreement committing myself to servicing a hefty debt with a regular payment. Other income will cover it in the short term but I'll need to see revenue coming from the new housing and retail units as soon as possible to assure I don't go broke."

"Who's going to live and shop in this new development once construction is completed?"

"Downtown is beginning to boom again, retail business is coming back, corporations are relocating offices there, the city's jewels are being scooped up by smart investors with deep pockets and there's already an influx of professionals, office workers, sales people, bartenders, waiters and servers, you name it, looking for a place to live close to where they work down there."

"Why this neighborhood? Other vacant areas exist closer to downtown."

"I've been asking myself the same question, Don. I remember this area from my childhood. All the houses were well maintained, some with neat little lawns in front, some with big porches, steps reaching to the sidewalk. A leafy canopy of tall trees shaded the streets and yards back then. Now it looks like a bombed out war zone. You wouldn't think it's the same place. Still, when I heard from my real estate broker about this area being on the market at cut rate prices, I couldn't resist grabbing a piece of it. She steered me to the block with the three big houses, telling me what a great deal I would be getting for my money. Turns out she was right in more ways than one. Now, with this development, she thinks I will create a domino effect, not only in the direction of downtown but all around the newly constructed area."

"Real estate broker, huh? Is that who's talking you into this?"

"Nobody's talking me into anything, Don. She's a smart young lady with a good education. She knows the local market and its history. This city will never be the industrial giant it was. There's talk of dissolving it, breaking it up into smaller burghs run by the county or state government. But the downtown area, along with the riverfront, will remain an economic hub and, without the burden of responsibility for the neighborhoods filled with unemployed citizens and no tax base, the new city will thrive."

"What are they going to do for the neighborhoods?"

"What can they do? Keep law and order. Get the children safely to school and back home again."

"Assuming they have a home."

"That's where Uzma and Rasheed come in. I want to continue supporting them and their activities with the cooperative living and urban farming but I've gone as far as I can until I start seeing income from this development project. They have use of the space where their gardens are for now and they can stay in the three big houses. That's about all I can do for them at the moment."

"What about construction jobs?"

"Most of the work is being subcontracted but I want a crew on site to coordinate and keep things tidy. If you can run that operation

along with security it would help out immensely. We'll need skilled trades people along with manual laborers."

"What's the status on your plan to build a movie lot and indoor studio."

"Well, it's on the back burner, of course, but once we have our construction crew together we can shift resources around and begin to prepare that site, too. When cash starts to flow, we'll be ready. Meanwhile we should continue gathering footage for the documentary film, involving Uzma and Rasheed as much as possible. It will become a valuable documentation of historic events if we succeed."

"And if we fail?"

"It will be good for laughs, a modern day tragic comedy."

