

Debra H. Goldstein

WHO SHOT J.R.?

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Occasionally, I think I should have admitted I knew who shot J.R. If I had, I'd have my job with the Landsford Private Detective Agency, a tidy sum of money, and I wouldn't be sitting here summarizing my recollections. At least, I still have my PI license. The problem, though, is that here in Texas, where parts of *Dallas* were filmed, there isn't any more call from the good ol' boy network for a middle-aged female investigator than there is for an unknown character actor. Oh well, if I'd told, I wouldn't have the time to write my thoughts while I wait for an audition callback or a would-be client to walk through the door of my low-rent office.

To put it into perspective, the world went wild on the night of March 21, 1980, when CBS aired *Dallas*'s "A House Divided" episode. The final scene of the season's last show had J.R. Ewing, the series villain, go into the corridor outside his office to investigate a strange noise. Moments later, he was shot twice. No one, including J.R., who fell to the ground, possibly dead, saw the assailant.

Part of the background behind the shooting of J.R. was that the actor playing him, Larry

Hagman, was negotiating for a raise. Hagman originally was planned to be part of the ensemble cast, but by 1980, his character's vicious way of double-crossing everyone, including his wife, while smiling, made him the show's breakout star. The two gunshots were a way of covering things from behind the scenes in case the contract negotiations went south.

No one expected the world-wide frenzy over who shot J.R. It was what people talked about around the water cooler, especially when The Writers Guild of America strike added eight more weeks to the wait. Parody songs were written—one even reached number sixty-seven. The shooting became part of the 1980 presidential campaign with Republicans distributing campaign buttons that read, "A Democrat shot J.R.," while the Democratic candidate, Jimmy Carter, regularly joked he'd have no trouble financing his campaign if he knew who shot J.R.

The betting lines in Vegas and London were crazy. Odds heavily favored J.R.'s wife, Sue Ellen (Linda Gray), brother Bobby (Patrick Duffy), sister-in-law Kristin Shepard (Mary Crosby), and brother-in-law Cliff Barnes (Ken Kercheval). There were also bets that the shooter was one of the businessmen J.R. swindled, Tom Landry (coach of the Dallas Cowboys), various politicians, entertainers, and even J.R., himself.

Me, I couldn't have cared less. I didn't watch *Dallas*. Consequently, I hadn't seen the episode and wasn't caught up in the madness. That is, until my boss, Phil Landsford, called me into his office. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

You see, I bounced around quite a bit. I went to college, but the traditional jobs my father preferred for me—nurse or teacher—didn't interest me. I wanted to be an actress. Unfortunately, wannabes, like me, turned out to be a dime a dozen. I got good at sewing costumes and helping with make-up, but other than a few one-liners in regional summer stock, it wasn't meant to be.

The next years were spent in odd jobs like substitute teaching (Dad would have been so

happy), school bus driving, bookkeeping, sales, and getting high. I was a true flower child even when the hippie movement died away. One day, I woke up and realized being forty was behind me.

Having met Phil Landsford, the owner of his own private investigation firm, at a party, I decided, on a whim, that he might be the answer to my future. I called and asked him for an appointment.

He gave me one.

Although I didn't own a business suit, I coupled my least flowing dark skirt with a muted flowered peasant top. I didn't have the money to buy a closed pair of shoes, so I hoped Landsford wouldn't hold my Birkenstocks against me.

When I walked into his private office, having been in his waiting room for almost thirty minutes, I silently prayed the sweat I felt running off me wasn't pooling in rings under my arms. I casually wiped my hand against my skirt before offering it to him. He had me sit down and asked, "What is it you wanted to see me about?"

It was at that moment I realized he thought I was there as a potential client. I swallowed hard before blurting out, "I want to be a detective and work for you."

Phil laughed.

His guffaw went on far longer than I thought necessary. Something made me tell him so.

He stopped and focused his gaze on me. There was no way I could get into his head, but I was sure that after my spunky retort, he was sizing me up.

"We don't have a woman working here."

I felt emboldened. "It's high time you should."

"You realize you can't be a private eye overnight. There are licensing requirements."

“Of course.”

“There’s a lot of drudge work involved with being a private investigator. Forms to fill out, sitting around, hours that aren’t always your own.”

I nodded. “I’ve done bookkeeping and clerical work. I’m used to what you call drudge work.”

Phil hired me. While I interned under him for two years and he sponsored me for my license, I found that he hadn’t been kidding. Writing and typing well-written reports and filling out forms was a big part of my job, but Phil also made sure I had the opportunity to ride with him on stake-outs (boring times in the car for hours drinking coffee while waiting to snap a picture of a husband or wife coming out of a motel room with someone who wasn’t their own husband or wife) and be part of some quasi-sting operations.

That almost brings me back to who shot J.R. It was a couple of months after “A House Divided” aired. We were having a little celebration in the office. Thanks to my efforts, we’d earned the largest fee of the year. We didn’t have champagne, but the beer was flowing.

Everyone was in a good mood, except Biff Reynolds, whose case I’d successfully taken over. At least fifteen years younger than me, Biff’s name should have been Buff. He was the handsomest man I’d ever seen. Periodically, I asked Phil to let me work a case with Biff, but Phil always refused. I think it was my strands of premature gray that made Phil tell me, “I don’t have any gigs for a mother and son right now.”

Hurt my feelings, but I didn’t dwell on it. Phil was giving me assignments that took me out of the office. The one we were celebrating was the nasty child custody case Biff started but couldn’t tie up.

The facts were simple. Mom and Dad split in New Mexico. Mom moved out of state with

the daughter during the night. A family member tipped Dad off that his ex was living in a trailer park in Texas with her boyfriend and that the child wasn't in school. Dad hired us to locate them. We weren't to grab the kid or do anything rash. He said all he needed was proof that the kid was living in the trailer. Once he had the proof, he could go back to a New Mexico court and get an order for physical custody of his daughter. Despite staking the trailer out at different times of the day and night, Biff had only observed the mom and boyfriend coming and going.

Because we were running out of time, Phil reassigned the case to me. I decided that instead of observing from the distance, I needed to make direct contact with everyone in the trailer. Knocking on the door and flashing my license wasn't going to do it.

I opted to be myself with a bit of embellishment. I went home, pulled my hair back into a ponytail with a few wisps straggling out, and made myself up to look older than I was. Glasses, jeans, a white shirt, an identification tag with someone else's name, sneakers, a clipboard, and a mini-camera pen, and I was ready to visit the trailer park.

Two hours later, the heat was getting to me, but I'd become a common sight in the trailer park as I knocked on most of the residents' doors saying I was taking an opinion poll. By chance, I even waved and was seen by the boyfriend when he drove up to his trailer. After giving him time to get settled, I decided it was time to visit the target trailer.

No one answered my knock.

Knowing at least one person was home, I rapped my knuckles against the door and the trailer's metal siding for a full minute. I was about to give up when I heard the trailer lock being undone. A little girl, the one I was looking for, answered the door. Holding up my clipboard and pen, I snapped a picture while saying, "Hello. I'm Cassandra Smith and I'm conducting a neighborhood survey about coffee habits. Is your mommy or daddy home?"

“Mommy’s at the store.” She pointed over her shoulder toward a mess that included a couch with a human lump on it. “Uncle Rob is sleeping.”

His snores told me he was out cold. I thought about grabbing the child, but that wasn’t my assignment. My charge was to confirm this was where the child lived. “Well maybe you can answer my questions, so we don’t wake up Uncle Rob. How many people live here?”

“Mommy, Uncle Rob, and me.”

Mission accomplished. I consulted my clipboard so she would think I was on the up and up. “Does everyone in the house drink coffee?”

She giggled. “Mommy and Uncle Rob drink coffee. I’m too young.”

I thanked her and hightailed it out before Uncle Rob woke up or Mommy got home.

My picture and the detailed report I wrote made Dad very happy. I don’t know all the legal machinations he went through in New Mexico, but he not only regained physical custody, but he paid our whopping fee without objection. Hence, the celebration and an understandably miffed Biff.

I didn’t realize there might be an additional reason for Biff’s anger until Phil motioned for me to grab another beer and join him in his office. Usually, I don’t like the taste of beer. It sits on my tongue with a lingering sour taste. Today, it was cool and smooth going down. Maybe because it was my second or third, it seemed perfect. Phil took his seat behind his desk, and I plopped into his visitor chair.

“Cassandra, I’ve got another job for you.”

“Oh. What is it?”

“I want you to find out who shot J.R.”

I barely missed spitting my beer out. “From what I hear on the news, that seems to be the

goal of a lot of people.”

“True. But they don’t stand to earn a cool hundred grand for identifying the shooter before the show comes back on the air.”

“And we do?”

“Yes. Our client has guaranteed the fee if we come through for him.”

“The news says even the Queen of England has asked the cast without any luck. I gather she isn’t our client.”

“Not by a long shot.”

“Who is?”

“That’s confidential.” Phil picked up a file from his desk. “Our client approached me the night after the television show aired. When he told me *Dallas* was scheduled to film several episodes leading up to the big reveal, I assigned the case to Biff.”

“He was going to go on the set like a reporter or something and observe?”

“Better than that. You know Biff also does some professional acting. *Dallas* needed a few extras for some hospital scenes, so he had his agent pull some strings. Things went fine until one of the other extras recognized him.”

“The other guy blew his cover?”

“You got it. Biff was escorted off the set and out of the studio by security.”

“After Biff was exposed, they closed the set. Because of the Writer’s strike, it was kept from reopening until the strike ended. Tomorrow is the first day filming will start again.”

“So, you want me to try out for a part?”

“No. We have a different way to get you in. If I recall, somewhere in your past, you waited tables?”

“For a really limited time. Balancing trays of food wasn’t my forte.”

“That’s not going to be a problem. You may have to carry a few things around, but mainly, you’ll slop food on a food line.”

“Excuse me.”

“You’re going in undercover as part of craft services.”

“Craft services?”

“Right. Each show contracts with a caterer to have a craft table with food available throughout the shoot. Because filming might be at night or in the morning, breakfast, lunch, and special orders are available as needed. Craft services handles the food.”

“They just leave food out on a table all day and night?”

“No. Besides the servicing table, there are coolers, refrigerators, freezers, microwaves, and whatever else powered by generators so that everything stays fresh. You will have to sign an NDA.”

“Wait a minute, if I sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement, how can I reveal anything to you?”

“In this case, the NDA is a minor technicality. You won’t sign with your real name. You’ll have a fake license, credit cards, studio pass, and craft services ID. I have confidence that you’ll be as successful with this assignment as the one we’re celebrating tonight.”

“What makes you think that if they made Biff, they won’t figure out I’m a ringer, too?”

Phil laughed. “I mean this in the nicest way. Look in the mirror. No one is going to suspect a middle-aged, gray-haired, somewhat frazzled food-server is a PI.”

Even though he had a point, I was still dubious until I stood behind the craft table in my black pants, white button-front shirt, and dark-mesh hairnet knowing my face alternated between

having a frazzled or fangirl look. At that moment, it was fangirl. Larry Hagman, J.R., was whistling and pointing at me. I simply stood there, a ladle dangling from my hand.

He whistled again. I jumped.

“Whoa!” The man next to Larry reached out and touched my arm. I looked into his green eyes and swooned. Biff was replaced in my heart. “It’s okay,” Patrick Duffy said. “You’re new, aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“To save his voice, Haggy doesn’t speak on Sundays. He only whistles. He’s not whistling at you, but at the menu.” He pointed to the menu on a stand to my right. “He wants the smoothie at the bottom.”

Hagman tooted a shorter sound that I took as “yes.” Before I could respond, the craft team leader, Kate, appeared at my elbow with a large cup in her hand. “It’s okay Wanda June. I have Mr. Hagman’s smoothie right here.”

Taking the cup from her, Haggy, as I desperately wished I could call him, too, smiled and whistled again. As he walked away, I fixed my gaze on Duffy’s green eyes. Seeing him in person, I felt the magnetism that drew fans to the Bobby Ewing character. There were so many things I wished I could offer him as I asked, “What would you like?”

“The chef salad please.”

After I slowly took one from the salad cooler and gave it to him, our hands touched for a moment. I tried to contain the electricity I felt as he took his salad, smiled at me, and turned toward the picnic table where Haggy was eating instead of whistling. As Duffy joined him, I silently hoped their brotherly relationship hadn’t been disrupted by a bullet or two.

A snort behind me brought my attention back to the craft table. It was Kate. “You haven’t

worked many craft tables, have you, Wanda June?”

I gave Kate the cover line Phil and I had agreed to. “No, some banquet catering for the company, but nothing like this.” I wiped the back of my hand across the beads of sweat on my forehead. “Usually, I’ve been in air-conditioned ballrooms. This is a new experience.”

“It’s an experience all right, but you’ll get used to it.”

I stared at the picnic table where Larry and Patrick were seated. “I’m not sure that’s going to happen anytime soon. I’ve seen a few entertainers when I’ve been catering, but I’ve never seen so many handsome and beautiful stars up close like this before. Which one do you think shot J.R.?”

She glanced around as if checking if anyone had heard my question. “That’s a topic you don’t talk about if you want to keep your job. They sort of forget about us being here because we blend into the background like our white tablecloth. Unlike some, *Dallas* is a good gig. It’s a really nice cast, good pay, and the demands are few and far between because most of the folks are into salads or smoothies. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll watch your p’s and q’s, never ask that question again, and swallow that fangirl look. Here comes Mary Crosby. Her special salad is marked with her name in the cooler.”

“Bing’s daughter?”

“What did I say about that fangirl bit?”

“Sorry. I’ll control myself in the future.”

“See that you do.” She smiled at Mary but left me to serve her.

Remembering that Mary was playing Kristin Shepard and that the odds favored her as one of the shooters, I glanced to see how far away my supervisor was as I welcomed her to the table with a big smile. “What can I get for you today?”

“There should be a special salad waiting for me. On days that we’re shooting, I avoid onions.”

“I heard they’re taping the reveal scene today. Are you in it?”

“None of us know. Now that the strike is over, they’re going to start new things later this week. Today, we’re filming some of the shoot scenes from different angles.”

I leaned forward. “You mean you shot J.R.?”

She laughed. “Who knows? A lot of us are filming today. Last time, everyone, even Larry, took a turn shooting himself.”

My brows knitted together perplexed at what she had said. “J.R., I mean, Larry, shot himself?”

“They did a take of that. J.R. can be so manipulative that there was a possibility he did it for sympathy or some wicked reason. On the day we all shot J.R., most of us hung around the set. After Larry shot himself and the director yelled, ‘Cut,’ Larry stood up with blood spurting out in a million directions from his chest.”

“He really shot himself?”

“No, he was wearing a vest with lots of holes from which blood squirted. It was so Larry.”

“Everyone must have gotten a kick out of it.” I handed the salad to her.

“They did.”

The actors might not know the identity of the killer, but I was sure the director and the writers working on the reveal script did. I needed to change my investigative tactics. Unfortunately, for the next two hours, I was kept busy by a steady stream of hungry people.

As the rush eased up, a young man with dark curly hair and an obviously reddened nose

approached the craft table. Before he reached it, he turned away from Kate and me, consumed by a sudden fit of sneezing. Finished, he held up his hand. “Don’t get too close. You don’t want this cold. Do you have any chicken soup?”

“Sorry,” Kate said. “We don’t. Can we offer you something else?”

“No. My throat’s too sore to swallow anything.”

“How about some orange juice? We have some small containers.” Without waiting for his answer, I opened the refrigerator and pulled out two small cartons. I placed them on the edge of the craft table. He picked them up and muttered his thanks.

“Vitamin C is good for a cold,” Kate said to his retreating back.

“I hope he doesn’t give his cold to any of the rest of the cast, crew, or us.”

“He’s trying not to. Except for him, all the writers are off today, so he’s holed up by himself in that little brown shed beyond the barn. That’s what they’re using as the writer’s room.”

Excited, I forgot Kate’s admonition and blurted out my first thought. “Is he writing the reveal script?”

Kate gave me a stern look but answered my question. “That’s already done. In the aftermath of the strike, he’s writing one of the scripts for later in the season.”

“With that cold, shouldn’t he be at home?”

“Should, but he’s scared to be off. This is one of his first assignments. He’s afraid if he goes home, someone else will get his gig.”

“Oh,” I said. “You know, there’s a diner a few miles from here that makes a great chicken soup. From what I understand, our role is to fulfill the food needs of everyone on the set. Things are quiet now. Do you want me to run down there and pick up a quart for him?”

Kate looked around and, to my surprise, agreed. "You're a natural for craft services. If someone wants a milkshake or whatever, we get it. We have about an hour until things rev up for snack time. Think you can go and come back with the soup by then?"

"Consider it done."

I raced to my car and before long returned to Southfork, the soup still hot. I was walking from the parking area to the craft table, when I noticed the writer, his back to me, leaning against the paddock's wood fencing staring at a prancing dark beauty. Instead of calling out to him, I decided to take advantage of the writer's room being empty. Maybe, I'd find the answer there.

Keeping close to the barn so he wouldn't see me, I sidled to the shed. I turned the doorknob, praying it was unlocked. I got lucky. Inside, I closed the door behind me and looked around. The room was a mess. Papers and used tissues covered the floor. I ignored them. What I needed was not the newest script, but a scrap of something tied to the reveal show.

The furniture was limited to a couch, desk, and one cheap metal filing cabinet. A quick glance at the desk told me it only held pens, paper, and info related to the script the writer was working on. I turned to the cabinet. It was locked.

I placed the white soup container on top of it and pulled one of the hairnet pins from my head. Inserting it into the lock, I pushed as hard as I could. The flimsy lock gave. I opened the top drawer and routed through the five files it contained. Nothing, so I moved to the second drawer. It quickly became apparent that someone was filing by season. The first drawer had only contained, in sequential order, the five scripts tied to season one. All of season two was in the second drawer.

As I suspected, the third contained the season that had just ended. I grabbed the "A House Divided" script. I flipped to its end. Except for a notation for two shots, J.R. to fall to the ground,

and the scene to go black, there was no indication of who shot J.R.

Closing the third drawer, I opened the fourth. It had several files, but only one contained a bound finished script. It was marked as being the first for season four—“No More Mr. Nice Guy, Part 1.” I took it from the drawer and skimmed it quickly. Other than reminding viewers of the shooting that ended season three and spending pages getting J.R. to the hospital, it was a throw-away script.

Still holding it, I yanked the fifth drawer open. Empty. I guessed whoever was neatly preserving a script per episode was planning ahead for another season renewal. I turned my attention back to the various files in drawer four. None contained another full script, but a few had scraps of paper shoved into them. I read each slip, but nothing jumped out at me until I reached the fourth file. Two words in capital letters caught my attention. I’d found my holy grail. It made sense. As sweet a girl as Mary Crosby seemed, her character was dispensable.

Encompassed by a feeling of joy, I stared at the paper until I heard a sneeze. I stuffed the slip into my pocket, threw the final first script back into the drawer, and slammed it shut. While the writer came through the door, wiping his nose on his sleeve, I grabbed the chicken soup from the top of the cabinet. I pressed the lock in with my elbow.

“What are you doing here?”

Holding the soup up, I held it out to him. “You asked for chicken soup. Craft services likes to fulfill requests. They sent me to one of our local diners to get you some of the best penicillin available for your cold. I came to deliver it, but you weren’t here, so I was just leaving it for you. Enjoy.”

I placed the soup on the desk and slipped past the speechless writer, glad to get back outside. Returning to the craft services table, I handed Kate the receipt for the soup and reported

that its delivery was accomplished.

“Perfect.” She stuffed the receipt into her pocket. “And your timing couldn’t be better. Here comes the army.”

Unsure of what she meant, I looked up and saw we were about to be attacked by the entire crew and cast, who apparently were breaking at the same time. Kate had said things would get busier at snack time, and she wasn’t wrong. For the next hour, as we worked side-by-side smiling and filling orders, the slip of paper burned a hole in my pocket. I couldn’t wait to leave the set, but I still had three hours left in my shift.

They say time flies, but it didn’t. Even helping Kate get things ready for what she assured me would be a busy dinner time for the next shift of craft service workers didn’t make the clock move. I was counting down the last minutes when the writer and another man, who I remembered serving the typical salad and smoothie earlier in the day, came running up to the craft table.

Smoothie spoke first. “Thank goodness, you’re still here.”

“Excuse me?”

“There’s a problem on the set. One of our EMTs was overcome by the heat.”

I was confused. Surely, I noted, there were other EMTs to help their stricken comrade.

“Not a real one. One of the actors. An older woman. We were going to have to rewrite the scene when he remembered you.”

Chicken soup nodded. “I thought you’d be perfect to step into the role.”

Smoothie took over the conversation. He framed my face with his hands. “Have you ever thought about acting?”

“When I was much younger. It didn’t work out.”

“Well, he was right. Your face and hair make you a natural to take on mature roles. If you’ll do this one for us today, I’ll guarantee you basic pay, one line, and three days of work. That’s enough to get you a SAG card if you don’t already have one.”

“I don’t.” I glanced over at Kate. Her smile and almost imperceptible nod were all the encouragement I needed. “What are we waiting for?”

Thirty minutes later, stuffed into the recently vacated, albeit somewhat smelly, EMT costume, a touch of powder on my nose, and my hairnet replaced with a cap, I repeatedly rehearsed my line: “He’s over here.” I was ready to go.

We filmed the scene of the EMTs rushing toward where J.R. lay, with me in the lead, in one take. Afterwards, the writer and Smoothie congratulated me on what a natural actor I was. “You know,” Smoothie said, “once you have your card, there are a lot of places I could use a woman of your age and talent. Of course, you’ll have to keep anything you’ve learned on this set in the family. Do you understand?”

I nodded, knowing what would happen when I saw Phil. I was right. He fired me right then and there.

My EMT scene didn’t make it to the screen in the United States, but it’s in the cut they show in Europe. Smoothie also gave me a line in a crowd scene that aired later in the season. Occasionally, I get a role on my own, but now that the writer specializes in commercials, he often adds a part for me. I think he feels bad he gave me one of the worst colds I ever had.