

# The Case of the Three Union Stewards

Ernest Isaiah West

Susan J. Martin, *Middle Tennessee State University*

*Keywords:* Libraries, Mysteries, Chicago, Fiction

---

It was a short train ride from the McCormick Center to Hyde Park, but Leslie nevertheless enjoyed the gentle sway of the electric as it wound its way through a handful of stops. She was visiting Chicago for her annual library conference, and on the second day had carved out some free time to visit old friends and colleagues at the University in Hyde Park. She would have time for perhaps one chapter of the book in front of her, *Logan's Run*, and then it would be off to hurrying down 57<sup>th</sup> Street to get to the University library. She could already see she would arrive at the station at the same time she was supposed to meet her friends, and so she would have to run a gauntlet of temptations from bookstores, a Greek restaurant, and the lure of donuts in the local bike shop. She was excited to be outside of Texas, free from her husband (whom she adored), and ready for whatever mischief old friends and a few drinks could make.

Leslie considered herself fashionable but compensated for that with cultivating a stereotype of loving books, cats, and rules. Her friendships were lifelong. When she reached the library there was no excessive hugging on the second floor in technical services, yet Rita and Samantha greeted her triumphantly, and together in determined procession made their way to the Harissa, a Middle Eastern restaurant large enough to accommodate a good time for three. So happy the company, so fast the talk that they did not realize they overordered until plates of chicken and lamb shawarma, Tagin, Mo Jadara, and kifta filled the table. Laughing and lifting their glasses to first world problems, they tucked in to solving them.

Leslie brought the girls up to date on her husband Lesley, and their three boys Denton, Dallas, and Austin. Lesley was an almost retired cemetery superintendent. He had been somewhat of a rascal in his youth but had grown bookish over the years with several hobbies. Presently all his adventures tended to be in either funeral services or stamps. The boys were thriving with their respective colleges and girlfriends. Leslie now desperately wanted to hear all the shop talk Rita and Sam could dish out.

“Well, Crystal didn’t show up for work today, no call, no show” Rita started, “I can’t remember her ever missing a day of work” She gulped the rest of her drink and ordered another. “I dunno about this. And she is a union steward too!”

Sam explained. “Crystal only took over as union steward seven months ago because the former steward, Jessica, went missing. She was last seen at the Sand Dunes in Indiana, and then poof!

Gone! And to make the matter more macabre still, Dolores disappeared a year and a half ago, and she was union steward before Jessica!”

“Some union”, piped Leslie.

“Right”, said Sam, “You’ll probably remember that the Teamsters pulled out from the University after they failed to unionize the campus’ different robotic systems. The union that filled the gap- The Fur Trapper’s Guild of the Upper Peninsula -is not anywhere near as professional as the Teamster’s. They literally go back as far as the Hudson Bay Trading Company, but for all their pedigree they are still a bunch of crooks. Contract negotiations were a mess. Nobody could tell what was going on. The University held secret meetings, and in the end even management joined the union. Everything about this seems to be shady, and the stewards have taken a lot of flak. Dolores was an older and tougher cookie, and gave out as much as she took, but Jessica was a sweetheart and was miserable filling in, and so is Crystal.”

“I dunno, “Rita repeated, “sure hope Crystal shows up at work tomorrow!”

The reunion went on for a couple more hours, and then Leslie found herself alone in her hotel room with time to finish her novel. She had room service deliver tea, and after a short call to her husband, settled in. She really did not care for science fiction and fell asleep as Logan 3 strove for sanctuary in a crazy world.

Day three of the conference dawned, and Leslie was set to give her presentation *The Mendoza line: How to Manage (and improve!) Underachievers*. When she arrived, the Center was a-buzz with the news that Crystal was seen diving off Promontory Point the evening before last. She was a strong and accomplished swimmer, but no body had been found. Her apartment on Kimbark was unlocked, and her handbag and cell phone were on the kitchen table. She did not show up for work, neither did she call in. Naturally, the consensus quickly became that there was a serial killer abroad dedicated to murdering librarians. What he did with the bodies was anybody’s guess. Several time that day Leslie received texts from Samantha detailing every fact and fantasy she had heard on the matter. Rita sent no texts and merely responded to one by saying simply she did not understand what was going on.

Two more days passed, Lake Michigan had been searched by divers, and there were no leads on Crystal’s disappearance. The conference ended, and Leslie called her husband to tell him she was going to spend a few more days in Chicago to be with her friends during this time.

“That’s fine honey, that’ll give me time to read my new treasure!” he practically sang in reply.

“What’s that?”

“I took your advice and got off eBay and found website for a lovely bookstore in Pierceton, Indiana that had a copy of Stephen G Rich’s *Philately of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902!*”

“Oh”

“They expressed mailed it to me, and even enclosed a beautifully handwritten thank you note. Here, I’ll send you a picture of it”

“That’s fine dear, I’ll call you tonight!”

“love you.”

“love you, too.’

She seriously loved her husband, but she had to laugh at how different they were as a couple. They met and talked initially when they found out they shared the same first name. But she could hardly date him because his last name was Quackenbush- Lesley Paul Quackenbush, born of hippie parents with four brothers and two sisters. Leslie was an only child, and when she did agree to marry him, she kept her maiden name. Leslie Lynn Cabot could trace her lineage fourteen generations back down most of her lines. Her college roommate swears to this day that Leslie can *recite* her lineage.

But twenty years of marriage had shown that what they did have in common was quite strong. They were both insatiable readers, even competitive. They constantly made bets on silly things, and the loser would have to read a book of the winner’s choice. That was how Leslie came to be reading a William Nolan novel. Her only consolation was that she normally won such bets, and that is how Mr. Quackenbush came to read all the Brontë’s, much of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and the screenplay *To Sir with Love*. Leslie herself could not stand the Brontë’s, but all is fair in love and war.

The weekend was here for Samantha and Rita, and they chose ice cream over booze for this meeting. There was a darling hand-crafted Ice cream parlor over by the tobacco shop near 53rd Street, and so they joined up there. Rita had already ordered and was halfway through an enormous banana split by the time Leslie showed up. Her two friends were as different from each other as she was with her husband. Rita talked little and never judged anything or anyone, so she had time to eat much, and she worked in circulation. Samantha lived to talk and judged everything, and therefore had only the smallest scoop of ice cream that was already beginning to melt. She was a serials cataloger.

“The police came and took everything connected to Crystal’s desk. Her computer, her files, even her trash. I wonder why they didn’t just take the desk as well.”

“Oh Sam, they have to do that kind of thing. And I hope YOU haven’t given up on finding Crystal alive. There is no evidence that she is dead. And hope costs so little” Leslie said, perhaps a little more condescending than she meant. But the friend in Sam didn’t even notice.

“You know me, I’m an expert at worrying. But who would want to hurt Crystal? And it has got to be the same people who took Jessica and Dolores. It’s all connected.”

“There is something that doesn’t make any sense to me. Everyone hates the new union, but everyone loved the union stewards, well at least Jessica and Crystal were loved. The snatchings are presumably over the way the union treats its members, so why remove persons who make a bad experience better?” Leslie stopped short as Rita reached across the table and took Sam’s untouched ice cream.”

“What? You weren’t going to eat it anyway.”

They moved the party from the shoppe to Rita's apartment in Woodlawn, a lovely brick 1920's building calling itself *La Floresta*. Rita was well stocked with comfortable furniture and snacks and wine, and the stress level just seemed to drop. The conversation took a turn when Leslie asked about a handwritten set of rules labeled *Conduct in the Library* and dated March 12, 1970 that was hanging in a simple frame on the wall. It caught Leslie's eye because it was written in flawless library script, a long-forgotten art of library yesteryear.

"Dolores gave that to me. She made it when she first came out of Library school. She kept using that script even though no one else did. It was kinda her thing."

The night ended and the girls agreed to meet at the University Chapel for Sunday services the next morning. Back at her hotel, Leslie once again ordered tea, and looked out her window where she could see Soldier Field. "Ah Chicago" she thought to herself, "so beautiful and so dangerous. You could spend a lifetime here and not know it all, and every time I leave you there is something I miss."

Her mind was so full she could not continue with her novel. She would never cheat, that is, not read what she lost in a bet, but she had no heart for it now. She would finish the tiring little bit of science fiction on the plane ride home. Picking up her phone she noticed an unread text from her husband and opened it to see the picture he had sent of his book with the note. She froze in disbelief. A quick call to her husband, and then a call to Samantha.

"Hold on, girl, we are NOT going to church tomorrow!" Leslie went to bed with the wonderful peace of mind that occurs the soul thinks its put all its problems behind.

The next morning Leslie encountered the single strangest person she had ever laid eyes on. A woman was sitting in the hotel lobby looking like something that had walked out of a novel. She was wearing a shapka with a large peacock feather sticking out, and about eleven pounds of jewelry; rings on every finger, and four or five necklaces. When she stood up, she towered over everyone in the room. She simply stared at Leslie as she crossed to the desk to check out. Leslie made arrangements to have her luggage stored in the lobby until she returned for it later on in the day, left the building with just a tote bag and turned towards the train station. She could hear the clip-clop of something that sounded rather like a horse, and when she turned, she could see the peacock feather following her in the crowd some thirty feet away.

Reason chided her not to lead this half metal, half fur oddity to the girls, so Leslie shot a text as she walked, rapidly thinking of her next move. At the crosswalk she stared at the red hand flashing. At that moment instinct kicked in.

Run!

She shot across the street just as the traffic started moving, and vaguely headed toward Lake Michigan. She had to veer north when the way became crowded, and after she stopped moaning about wearing the- wrong- shoes- for -this -kind- of- crap she realized she was at the Old St. Mary's Church. A small girl leaned against the outer wall and looked up at her with big eyes.

“You in trouble, Ma’am?”, she asked.

“You know, I think I am. I need a place to hide. Do *you* know a good hiding place?” The girl nodded and skipped to the left. Round the back they came upon a perfect row of trash cans running along a functional alley, and among them Leslie squatted. In less than a minute she saw a peacock feather moving along the sidewalk in front of the Church. When the feather disappeared, Leslie could hear the heavy shoes walking back and forth as the wearer thought of her next move. Wasting no time, Leslie shot the opposite direction, once again heading for the Lake. Soon the Field Museum was in sight, and behind that the Shedd Aquarium. As there was no line, Leslie paid the price of admission and went inside, if for nothing else then to get a chance to breathe, sit down, and think.

And once again, not getting five minutes rest, she glimpsed her hunter storm into the Aquarium. The seeming impossibility of it all frightened her deeply. What fresh hell was this? Leslie in summer garb was sweating profusely, but this creature in hat and fur looked positively cold- like blue steel, inhumanly cold. A killer? She could well believe it was a robot.

She stayed just ahead of her assailant, close enough to see her through the various fish tanks, but far enough to make a break for it as soon as she was near an exit. Waiting just long enough for an extra few minutes of breath, she shot out of the Aquarium and leaped onto the nearby metro, which had just pulled up. It was time to put some serious distance between herself and the *thing* that was chasing her. She rode to Millennium Station, ran up to the surface and crossed the street, then hopped on the 151 bus to Lincoln Park, and practically flew into the crowded zoo. And after thirty minutes she relaxed. No one could have followed her; she was now confident of it. She went up to one of the food kiosks, ordered a cold drink, and dialed Samantha on her cell phone.

“Sam, you won’t believe what’s happened to me!”

“Well, from your text I figured it was *something* odd. What’s up?”

“I was being chased by.....” and she hung up her phone, and then silenced it as well. Standing not two feet in front of her loomed the tall monster with her back to Leslie. She was mechanically scanning the crowd. Leslie could smell her heavy scent of musk. And now she was terrified. The woman’s physique was far more impressive than she had realized—a formidable match in any fight. Her Episcopalian upbringing kicked in, and before she knew it, she was praying. The giantess moved away, and Leslie slinked round the back of the beverage hut and ran into the Penguin House. It was only a matter of time before she would be caught, so she did something she rarely ever did. She broke the rules. She went *into* the penguin exhibit. The birds were very friendly, but she scampered out of the public’s sight behind a small decorative igloo. And there it got cold very quickly. She never knew if her tracker went into the exhibit or not, for she hunkered down there making herself small. In a librarian’s tote bag can be guaranteed many items, and a cardigan sweater is one of them. Leslie was cold but not frozen as she stepped out into the warmth.

Without incident she hopped back on the 151 bus to Michigan Avenue, and then lost herself in the crowd as she made her way to Grant Park. As she approached Ida B Wells Drive, she caught

sight of the Bowman and the Spearman, and the large Peacock feather in the crowd that was crossing between the Indians. And whether it was because she was tired or because she was desperate, Leslie stopped running, and became angry. This was going to end, now. Making her way to the statue of Abraham Lincoln, she put down her tote bag, leaned against the statue and waited.

She did not expect that she would have to wait long. She was out in the open, unmoving, and begging for a fight. Ten minutes passed, then twenty, and Leslie had to work on keeping her anger alive. Since she was under the statue of Lincoln, she thought of how thoroughly Yankee she was, how proud she was of the union. She even indulged in fantasy and imagined the annoying peacock feather hat of the giantess transformed to that infamous hat of calvary officer J.E.B. Stuart, one of the more audacious officers of the Confederate victory at Fredericksburg.

But her waiting continued. Was she being watched? Why the delay? Realizing that her anger was gone, but that she could walk as bravely as she could wait, she made her way out of the Park, turned her cellphone back on, and in a few minutes was at the Harold Washington Library. She used the bathroom, mixed with the patrons, relaxed on the ninth floor, and generally got hold of her nerves. Could she call the police? After all, besides being odd, what had her pursuer done? She had not spoken, had not threatened, and when a confrontation could have happened, it simply did not. Suddenly she was embarrassed for having hid in a penguin pen. She had let an odd and unfamiliar person give her xenophobic worries.

On Sundays, the Harold Washington closes early, and although she could not help herself looking around for a peacock feather, all she saw was a billboard with Homer Simpson eating a donut. With today's plans shot, she decided to go back to the hotel and see if there was a vacancy for another night. And donuts sounded good.

With the library conference over, there were plenty of rooms available at the hotel. Leslie grabbed her luggage from the lobby storage and headed to a third-floor room with a decent view. After a bath, meal from room service, and an irritating phone call to her husband (who could not stop laughing about her day), She called Sam to ask if it was possible for her to take the day off.

"I can do anything for an old friend," she had answered, "What do you have in mind?"

"A day trip to Indiana, of course! And get Rita to come."

Sam showed up the next morning for her day off sporting a Pittsburg Steeler tee shirt. Leslie threw her luggage into the trunk and off they drove to pick up Rita. At about the third traffic light the impossible happened. The car doors were not locked, and so the monster returned easily, opening the door, and climbing in the back seat behind the girls.

When the screaming stopped, a voice in a perfect midwestern accent demanded to be driven to Navy Pier. Samantha made the appropriate turn at the next intersection while Leslie fumbled for her cell phone. With the Ferris wheel in sight, on East Illinois Street, Samantha yanked the car to the side of the road and both girls jumped out and ran in opposite directions. It was by accident that ten minutes later they were both on Navy Pier looking for a policeman.



But all the policemen were busy. Remarkably busy. It seems there was a fight down at the Pier entrance. Following the flow of the curious crowd, they saw the giantess swinging her purse effectively as a weapon, and each time it hit an officer he would go sprawling. Later they would learn that a bored cop has merely stopped her for jaywalking (a remarkable thing in itself at the Pier), but she had punched him in the nose as a reply.

“That’s the President of the Trapper’s union,” stated Sam, “I’m positive. That’s Janis du Charn!”

And at that moment Janis caught sight of the girls and started struggling towards them despite what was now a band of policemen. “You know where they *are!* I will hunt you *all* down. Nobody escapes the contact!” Such was the strength of her hoarse voice that the girls feared she would break free.

Leaving the scene and retreating to the car, Sam and Leslie drove the rest of the way to Rita’s apartment. In forty minutes, they were driving Interstate 94 to Indiana route 30. Leslie told the girls all she had been through and discovered.

A couple of hours later they arrived at a quaint shop, *Sanctuary Books*, and they were open. A young man stood by the register, and Leslie wasted no time.

“Tell the girls I want to speak with them” she demanded.

“What girls?” stuttered the surprised clerk.

“Never mind”, and Leslie simply stormed through the shop to the back room. There, fixing labels and weighing books and writing notes were all three refugees from the University in Hyde Park. Dolores, Jessica, and Crystal looked well for being thought dead.

Leslie had planned to say something commanding like, “I believe you have some explaining to do?”, but there was no time, as Rita and Sam bear-hugged their lost comrades. All five were in tears.

The explanation came less than ten minutes later.

The Union contracts were indeed so badly conceived that they required even retired workers to give two percent of their pensions (plus social security) to the Fur Traders. The contracts were iron clad, and only death or running away could provide escape. The girls all willingly agreed to keep their secret, and friendships were renewed.

“But how did you find us in Indiana?”

“The thank you note you wrote to my husband for that silly stamp book of his was in perfect library script. I simply used the address off the card! Now, how exactly did you make your escape to here?”

Dolores admitted, “It was quite haphazard, really, and I’m surprised it’s worked this far. I was alone in the beginning, and I just sorta slunked off by myself. I packed a bag, rented a Divvy bike, rode it out to a train stop I never use, and made my way to Indiana. As you know, Indiana is one of the best kept secrets that each Chicagoan must find for herself. I’ve rented this space under a pseudonym for almost three years, now.”

“That’s where I come in, “added Jessica. “I serendipitously came to her bookstore a couple of years ago, and once we found each other it wasn’t long before I faked my own disappearance in the Sand Dunes.”

“And I swam to freedom after getting a letter from Jessica, “piped Crystal, “and now that you have found us, perhaps we ought to tighten down our security a bit. Seriously, I think we would have to leave the planet to be totally hidden, but Indiana will do!”

As the girls prepared to leave, Dolores approached Leslie with two books. “Your husband thought you’d like the rest of the Logan’s Run trilogy, and since I had them in stock, you’ll have them for your return trip home!” Outside Leslie smiled a winsome smile of gratitude, but inside she groaned.