

Retribution

by Jim Schicatano

It was his birthday and he could not think of a better present. Bob Banks had contrived a scheme that would finally provide retribution for his years of thankless, hard work. He sat behind the closed, wooden doors of his office and stared at his leather briefcase which he had set on top of his oak desk. The bomb inside was small but powerful. It could destroy the top three floors of the five-story bank where he was employed. He only desired to destroy the top floor, but it was better to be safe and thorough than be sorry. As he pondered over his scheme and the enormous destructive potential of the bomb he carried, he discovered himself smiling bitterly.

The resentment he experienced had been growing for years. Publicly, Bob accepted his position as First Vice-president of the bank, and never failed to mention his devotion to it. But deep within him a great void existed that needed to be filled. Like so many others, Bob wanted more. For the sake of his sanity, he wanted more. For the sake of his wife and two daughters, he had to have more. He wanted something different – something else. But what he needed eluded him.

He felt that his family deserved better. It was true that he had not been overly attentive to his family's needs the last several years but he desired to make up for the lost time. In many ways, his family was the only positive aspect of his otherwise unrewarding life. Perhaps, Bob needed to lean on them now more than ever before. Perhaps, even this new commitment to strengthening the family ties was no more than a selfish act of his. That would not surprise him. Still, he truly loved his family and they were his only avenue of emotional support.

Bob had no one else. He knew that his colleagues were untrustworthy. They patronized him and kissed up to him, all in the hopes of advancing. He was no more to them than a rung on a ladder. The mere thought of them sickened Bob. He knew that he was friendless. He realized that he was alone. He again glanced at his briefcase and knew what he had to do.

He suddenly gazed out the window and down at the street, five floors below. In the increasing heat of the afternoon sun, the residents of his hometown moved leisurely up and down the sidewalk, looking for a place to eat lunch or a store to shop. He had lived here his entire life. He knew most of the people that lived here – the fathers, the mothers, and their children. He used to be proud of his hometown. But the residents on the street below no longer concerned Bob. He had

grown too callous over the years for them to matter.

He had loved this town so much when he was a boy, but those recollections of his childhood that once sustained him, no longer sufficed. So much had changed since those days as a youth. The Sons of Italy, where his wife and he had spent many nights dancing, was now a condemned, old building. The old malt shop had been converted into a video arcade. Further down the street, a health spa stood on the very site of the old movie house, where he had spent nearly every Saturday afternoon enjoying the matinees with his buddies. Even Roddinger's department store, once the largest store in town, had yielded to a popular five-and-dime. It was as if Bob's life had stagnated while the rest of the world moved onward. The good old days were gone forever. If all the world is truly a stage, then Bob Banks had merely been a player with a small part in a very short play. The curtains had come down long since, only Bob was never able to leave that empty stage. He felt quite alone. He needed something else. He wanted something more.

But to his dismay, he was uncertain why he needed more. Most people would give anything to attain the position that Bob possessed. To some, it would be a brilliant climax to an already successful and noteworthy career. Bank Vice-President had such a triumphant ring to it.

But Bob Banks did not triumph. He had been slowly decaying throughout the latter part of his career. Perhaps his birthday had stirred such feelings of failure. Was it a middle-age crisis that he was experiencing? It didn't matter. There was nothing to stop him from doing what was inevitable. Nothing could dissuade him from accomplishing his most daring mission. Finally, he was calling the shots.

Yes, Bob was in control of the situation now. After all these years he was finally making a decision that even Howard McAllister, the President of the bank, could not overrule. Everywhere Bob went, the name, Howard McAllister, was mentioned. Howard was considered by many to be a genius and received all of the credit for the success of the bank. Bob Banks was virtually forgotten. But he would be forgotten no longer.

Howard was retiring in a month and his nephew, Stephen McAllister, the Second Vice-president, was going to be named the next President. The McAllister family had been running the bank for generations and Bob knew they were not about to relinquish the presidency to an outsider. It was true, Bob's credentials were being assessed for the position, but he had officially withdrawn his name from consideration several weeks earlier. For months he had been telling his fellow employees how

content he was to be First Vice-president. Bob had a formal letter sent to the Board declining any such promotion. He had a nice long chat with Howard concerning the matter and even recommended Stephen for the position. These actions, of course, were all part of his plan. When the President and the Second Vice-president are killed in an explosion, Bob might be a suspect. His motive would appear to be revenge and possible advancement. But by withdrawing his name and supporting Stephen, the prospects of a motive for such a heinous crime had been removed.

This day had finally arrived. He had patiently waited nearly a month for this opportunity and his patience had been rewarded. After a verbal agreement had been reached, the Meyer's Construction Company was furious when they did not officially receive the bid to renovate the exterior of the bank. No less than five representatives of the company were in Howard's office this morning, demanding an explanation. Howard and Bob had handled the situation reasonably well and were able to explain the situation to the company representatives. Heated words had been exchanged, however, and Stephen repeatedly lost his composure. Stephen's actions were not unanticipated by Bob, especially since the young man had been responsible for the misunderstanding. Accepting the outcome – although visibly not satisfied with it – the representatives departed from Howard's office at approximately 10 a.m.

The time of their departure was perfect. Bob's bomb possessed a four hour time-limit. He would set it to explode at ten minutes after twelve. The experts will then conclude that the bomb had to be set some time after 8 a.m. That would make the representatives of the Meyer's Company prime suspects. Bob was well aware that an angry demolition crew usually makes pretty good suspects.

He gazed into his briefcase and stared at the bomb that had been sitting in there for weeks. Today, ironically enough on his birthday, its powerful, destructive capabilities would be unleashed. As his mind drifted, he could almost hear the glorious sound of its explosion. He could almost visualize the fire, the burning, and the destruction. He touched the sleek wires and felt the firm sticks of dynamite. He looked at the timer and examined the detonator. It was so perfect. It was so beautiful. He almost hated to see it be destroyed.

But he glanced around his office and realized that everything in here would also be annihilated. A picture of his wife and two daughters was lying on his desk. He would regret losing that, but he couldn't risk moving it. His large, oak desk and his comfortable, modern chair would also be destroyed. It would be a pity to lose them, but it was a price he had to pay. The rest of the office appeared very drab and

businesslike. He never really added much personality to his office and often wondered why. One of the few personal possessions in the room was a crooked painting hanging on the far wall. It was one of those ridiculous, modern paintings consisting of a green base, that was supposedly a field, yellow dots, which he presumed were flowers, and a round, orange ball hovering in the middle of a blue background. He surmised that it was an artist's perception of a sunrise. He also presumed that the artist was stoned when he had painted it. But the overly, large sun reminded Bob of his promise to take his family to Florida this summer. It was a promise that he intended to keep. Perhaps they would move to Florida permanently. It might be a nice change of climate. It would be good to move, he thought. It would be good to get away. He glanced around his office again. The same bare walls, the same crooked painting, the same view from his window, the same oak desk, the same carpet, and the same wooden doors surrounded him. Seven years he sat between these walls. He had to get away.

For several minutes he sat staring. He stared not at the wall, but beyond the wall – beyond the bank. His mind wandered. His thoughts drifted far, far away. A crooked smile suddenly emerged. His lower lip began to quiver. His fingers lightly and rhythmically tapped his desk. He believed that he was a man controlling his own destiny. He was finally doing something without authorization. It was a decision – his decision – that he would attempt to perform. Although Bob Banks was a man who controlled his own fate and the fate of others, he was a man who was no longer in control.

In robotic fashion, he glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes to twelve. Stephen would be arriving at his uncle's office in ten minutes. Normally, the McAllister's would be lunching at that time, but earlier today Bob had overheard Howard telling his nephew to meet him at noon. It was probably another one of their all too frequent, secret meetings which excluded Bob. The duo often acted like espionage agents planning their next mission. Little did they know that this mission would be their final.

Enough time had been wasted, he thought; it was time to plant the bomb. He rose from his desk and headed towards the door. His plan was to insert the small bomb in the toilet tank in the bathroom next to Howard's office. From that spot no one would be able to see it or hear it, and it would be more than powerful enough to destroy the room next door where the McAllister's were located. Bob would take lunch at noon, as he always did, and would probably be eating at some restaurant when the explosion occurred. The only possibility of something going wrong was if someone was in the bathroom. But even then, he could merely wait until it was empty. Waiting would not be difficult, for if there was one quality that Bob Banks certainly

possessed, it was patience. He turned to get one final look at his office. Certainly there was nothing to keep him here and he turned and entered the hall with resolution.

The hallway was empty. He quickly, but casually, walked towards the men's room. After stopping momentarily at the door to listen, he heard nothing and entered. The bathroom was empty, also. He let out a sigh of relief and was thankful for his good fortune. Cautiously, he entered a stall and locked the door behind him. Nothing short of a tragedy could stop him now.

The slightest movement could be magnified into a loud noise, so Bob knew he had to work silently. He slowly lowered the toilet seat and gently placed his briefcase on it. He opened the briefcase, carefully removed the bomb, and set the explosive device on the toilet tank. He closed the briefcase and placed it upright on the floor.

He sighed again. His forehead and palms were becoming moist from sweat. His throat was becoming dry from anxiety and his fingers began to tremble. Under his shirt, a bead of sweat formed in his armpit and trickled down his side. He was more nervous than he had anticipated, but he would not allow himself to even consider withdrawing from his scheme.

He set the timer to ten minutes. That would give him enough time to leave the building and find a place to lunch. Only a simple press of the red button was needed to start the timer. He removed the cover of the toilet tank and set it on the seat. Two extra wires on the bomb allowed it to be fastened atop the lid of the tank and allowed it hang down into it. The fit was perfect.

Bob looked around him. The bathroom was still empty. He mentally reviewed all that he had done and was convinced that everything was ready. Glancing at his watch, he noticed that it was nearly noon. He hesitated for a moment, waiting for the second hand to reach twelve, then pressed the button. The timer began to tick. It was exactly noon. He quickly replaced the lid back on top of the tank, grabbed his briefcase, exited the stall, and stood motionless, listening for the ticking. The timer could not be heard.

He entered the hallway and quickly headed towards the elevator. The elevator was on the third floor. He began to pace, continuously pressing the elevator button. His fingers were fidgety and he could feel his heart beating faster. These old elevators were also going to be renovated. But in the meantime, he could hear the elevator moving slowly up the shaft. It had just reached the fourth floor and its sluggishness was trying Bob's patience. "Come on," he mumbled. Suddenly, a voice from behind startled him.

"Mr. Banks, I thought you went to lunch." It was his secretary.

"Just heading there now." He tried to act casual but a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead. Fearing he would draw attention to it, he decided not to wipe it.

"Mr. Fitzgerald called. I told him you'd call him back after lunch."

"OK, thanks. Remind me when I get back."

"OK." She turned and returned to the office. Bob could only hope that she would soon be leaving for lunch.

The doors finally slid open exposing an empty elevator. He immediately entered and pressed the first floor button. Glancing at his watch he noted that two minutes had already elapsed. In eight minutes it would be over. Its end would signal the beginning of a new phase of Bob Bank's life. Perhaps someday, when he's finally content, he'd recall these past seven years and they would appear to him in a more favorable perspective. As he leaned triumphantly against the back of the elevator he allowed himself a sigh of relief. He had done it.

Seconds after the elevator began to descend, however, the lights above him suddenly began to flicker. He leaned forward to press the first floor button but not before he experienced a sudden jolt. Bob automatically grabbed onto the handrail as the elevator came to an abrupt halt. The main lights were out and he stood enveloped in darkness. Everything was still; everything was silent. He held his breath in desperate anticipation. Several moments later the emergency lights softly illuminated the motionless elevator but the first floor button remained ominously dark. It would take a tragedy to stop him, he had said. The tragedy had indeed befallen him; the elevator was stuck.

Bob stood motionless, examining the emergency lights. He stared at the dark buttons, his body beginning to tremble in shock. Desperately, he began to randomly press the buttons. Nothing worked. He turned to the doors and attempted to pry them apart. It was futile.

Sweat trickled down his forehead as he staggered back from the doors. Horror filled his eyes. He pounded the side of the elevator. This couldn't be happening, he thought. This is impossible! What are the odds? His situation was critical, but he realized that he had to regain his composure. He had to think. Calmly. Coolly. Logically. He glanced at his watch. Another two minutes had elapsed – six minutes remained until detonation. He was trapped in an elevator just below the fifth floor. From this spot he would surely be killed. What had happened? Did the electricity go out? Had the elevator malfunctioned?

Either incident would certainly explain the situation. But the cause of his predicament didn't really matter, his only concern was to escape.

In less than six minutes the third, fourth, and fifth floors would be gone, and he was determined not to be part of it. He grabbed the emergency phone. It was dead. Frantically, he searched the ceiling for a trap door. There was none.

The hopelessness of his situation was becoming realized. There was no way out. "This can't be!" he mumbled in disbelief. The impossible had happened. He was now in a cold sweat and his legs were weakening. There was nothing more he could do. It was all in the hands of fate. He simply couldn't believe it; he had chosen his own means of death. Feeling defeated, he backed into the corner of the elevator. His fortune had been too good, now he was paying his dues. The lump in his throat began to swell. His tired eyes were firmly fixed on the doors as he methodically removed his tie. Sweat covered his neck and chest. For an instant, a chill swept down his back, but the heat from his nervous body quickly subdued his chill and left him with a warm, sleepy sensation. His mind began to drift.

These old elevators had been deteriorating for years and the Meyer's Construction Company had been contracted to install new one's as part of their remodeling plan. Ironically, it was Bob that delayed the installation of the new elevators. He did it as a means of using his power over Stephen McAllister. He did it for no other reason but vengeance. "Vengeance," he said to himself. "My own stupid bitterness." And he now realized that his bitterness would cost him his life.

Still in the corner of the elevator, Bob Banks slowly sunk to the floor. Tears filled his weary eyes. The situation was hopeless. It was useless to fight. He felt old. He felt quite alone. A knot formed once again in his stomach. It seemed like it had been there forever. The loneliness – the emptiness – had been growing for years. Emotions that he had suppressed for so long were intensifying in these final desperate moments. In the eerie silence of the motionless elevator, illuminated only by the tranquil glow of the emergency lights, Bob Banks knew that his life was meaningless. He was an insignificant person in an insignificant town. It had taken an entire lifetime to realize this – he had accomplished nothing.

In earlier years, whenever he finished a bank project, he would envision himself sitting back one day and marveling over all his accomplishments. He truly believed that hard work and the status he had achieved would give him the inner peace that he thirsted for. He

was wrong. His wealth and position left only an emptiness in him. Those long hours he had spent in the bank were for nothing. They got him nowhere.

There were four minutes to go. It would take a miracle to survive this one; and he no longer believed in miracles.

The tears stopped and he sat in a virtual trance. He had never considered dying before and he wondered how it would affect his wife and daughters. The possibility of the authorities connecting him with the explosion was remote. His wife and daughters would always remember him as the victim of a terrorist madman. In fact, he was the madman.

Why did he do it? What drove him to this point? He was a peaceful, successful man committing an insane act of violence. Why? Was this about middle-age? Was it about being President of a Bank? How did it come to this? He asked these questions over and over again in his mind but in reality, he already knew the answer.

It was about controlling your own life. It was about doing anything everyone wishes, following the common paths to happiness, doing what was expected of you, becoming successful, and still not finding inner peace. Where was that inner peace? Where was that self-satisfaction? How did one acquire it? He didn't know. But he knew that he wanted to define his own definition of success. He wanted out of the rat-race and off the fast-track that was supposed to lead you to happiness. Bob Banks had done everything everyone had expected of him and everything he had expected of himself. But the path that he had followed had only left him feeling hollow.

He had known all this for a long time but it was, perhaps, the first time he allowed himself to believe it. For the last seven years his mind had seemed so preoccupied while his body functioned like a robot. He would work his way out of it, he thought at first. But the depression and the emptiness only grew. He no longer held any dreams or goals. What was left to dream when you've become as successful as Bob? He had money, two expensive, foreign cars, a large, suburban house, a great family, and numerous other material possessions. But like he said, he wanted to define his own vision of success. He wanted to change the way he viewed life – the way we all viewed life.

There were only two minutes to go. Death was certain. But in a peculiar way, Bob Banks feared death less now. He remained seated in the corner of the elevator, still sweating, trembling, and mumbling to himself while he stared at the doors. Perhaps this was the way he had wanted it all along. Perhaps he had really wanted to die. He knew the elevators had not been working properly. Had he been hoping, subconsciously, that this fate would befall him? Perhaps. And perhaps,

in some ways, this would be better.

Suddenly, the buttons flashed, the lights above came back on, and the elevator was jarred loose. He quickly sprang from his position and pressed the first floor button. He had done it! The elevator descended and Bob felt as if he had a new life. He would live after all. But a thought came to his mind. What about everyone else in the bank? Why had he so instinctively pressed the first floor button? What if he had returned to the fifth floor? There might have been time to stop the explosion. The chances were slim but he could have saved everyone.

Would there be enough time? He glanced at his watch. There was just over a minute to go. It would be close. He couldn't risk it. Besides, he wasn't even sure if he was able to stop the timer. And what if he was caught? If that happened he would be spending the remainder of his life in jail. No, he had to save himself first, that was his main concern. It would be better this way.

There was one minute to go...

The elevator passed the second floor and was still descending. Freedom was almost his. He wasn't concerned with Howard or Stephen. Every man gets what he deserves. The other employees would have to save themselves. It wasn't Bob's fault that they decided to remain in their offices during their lunch hour. They had their own free will. If they wanted to get off the fast-track they would have to do it without his help.

He would live to see his wife and daughters, and that was all that mattered. Suddenly, Bob had another terrific idea. The whole family could celebrate and move out west to Oregon or Washington. Then he would have no more deadlines or meetings. He had the finances and it was time to take his family away from all of this. He owed it to them and he owed it to himself. Bob Banks was finally going to get what he deserved.

The elevator came to a full stop and the doors opened revealing the main lobby of the bank. The fresh air rejuvenated him and he realized just how heavily he had perspired. His shirt was soaking wet. Regaining his composure and straightening his posture, he quickly entered the lobby. That was close, he thought, as he glanced at his watch.

There were thirty-five seconds to go...

Some of the employees gathered around him.

"Are you alright Mr. Banks?"

"My God, you're soaking wet."

"Yeah, I'm OK," he replied. "Just got a little worried there, you know."

"Good thing Freddy was here. He got the elevator working in no time Mr. Banks."

"Yeah, thank God." He had to get out of there quickly. "Make sure no one uses that elevator until it's fixed. We'll see if we can't get the construction crew to install new ones right away. Now I'm off to lunch."

Twenty seconds...

He handled that quite well he thought, giving no indication that he knew of the impending explosion. He walked quickly and resolutely to the main entrance and Henry the security guard opened the glass door for him.

"Close one, Mr. Banks."

"Yeah, as if I don't have enough things to worry about," he nervously chuckled.

Ten seconds...

"Where's the Misses?" Henry asked him.

"The Misses?"

"Your wife and two daughters. They came to surprise you and take you out to lunch for your birthday."

"What?"

Five seconds...

"They must be upstairs waiting in your office. By the way, Mr. Banks, have a happy birthday..."