

Buzzsaw Briggs' Last Day

by Scott Cimarusti

“Broadcasting from the top of the Bainbridge Building, you’re listening to 97.9, WZML. Well, campers, this is Buzzsaw, signing off...Stick around though—Steamin’ Steve Elliott is in next. I’ll be back here tomorrow morning at six. Until then, here’s Jimi Hendrix and “Hey Joe” on WZML.”

Jim “Buzzsaw” Briggs faded down his microphone and punched up CD player #1 on the mixing board. He took off his headphones and began gathering up the piles of newspapers scattered around the on-air booth. Briggs subscribed to almost every major paper in the country—but not for the news. Buzzsaw was a puzzle junkie. Crosswords, word-finds—you name it, Briggs did it. His favorites were the Jumbles; where you had to unscramble a list of garbled words then assemble selected letters from each to form a quote or a quip at the bottom.

Briggs drained the last of the lukewarm coffee from his WZML mug and peered out the huge window that dominated the wall on the other side of the mixing board. Even though Briggs had worked at here for just shy of ten years now, he still couldn’t help but marvel at the panoramic view. It didn’t seem that long ago when he was still spinning records inside the cramped and claustrophobic closets that usually passed for radio station studios. Now, he could peer down like a god at the bustling midmorning traffic on Main Street five stories below; the only thing obstructing his view of the flawless May sky was the clocktower of the grim stone-and-mortar county courthouse across the street.

Briggs shook his head and chuckled to himself, realizing that he almost felt sorry for the muddled masses down there—scrambling around like “lemmings in their shiny metal boxes” (in the immortal words of former Police frontman, Sting). All on their way to be shackled to their desks among a labyrinth of cubicles. No thanks. He was quite pleased with the knowledge that he was among the select few that woke up each day looking forward to going to work.

He didn’t pull down a lot of cash as morning show host and program director at this mid-sized market classic-rock station, but at least he had found his sanctuary; a place where he could retreat from the problems and pitfalls of the “real world”. Up here, corporate greed, poverty, crime, war and the other ills of society seemed a comfortable distance away.

To maintain his self-created sphere of ignorant bliss, he thumbed right past every other section of the newspaper each day and headed straight for the puzzles. The news was too depressing. Plus, puzzles kept his mind sharp.

His stack of newspapers tucked neatly under one beefy and tattooed forearm, Briggs reached for the door—then stopped. He quickly grabbed a CD case and checked his reflection in it. He slicked back his slightly graying hair and tightened his ponytail a bit. Then he smoothed his beard and checked his teeth for unsightly food particles. Now he was presentable in case he had the good fortune to bump into WZML's lovely receptionist, Julie Matthews.

Briggs pushed open the door and almost plowed into the midday guy, Steve Elliott.

"Hey, Buzzsaw! Great show today, dude!"

Kiss-ass, Briggs thought to himself. "Thanks, Steve. Hey, listen—don't forget to get me your time sheet before noon—otherwise you won't get paid this week." The greasy-haired metal-head was always forgetting to submit his timesheet until the last minute.

"No sweat, dude—Thanks!" And with a flurry of leather and hair, Elliott edged past Briggs into the on-air booth.

Dude? Briggs raised an eyebrow and continued out into the hall toward his office. Damn, no sign of Julie. She was probably at her desk out in the lobby. He'd just have to invent an excuse to visit her later, and get an eyeful of her long, slender, tanned legs.

While the on-air studio boasted a magnificent view and plenty of room to stretch out, Briggs' office was little more than a glorified closet down the hall. The tiny room was dominated by a battered oak desk cluttered with towers of CDs balancing with a precision that even the most accomplished architect would envy. In the far corner, his well-traveled and beloved radio sat atop a scuffed metal file cabinet pasted with bumper stickers from radio stations all over the country. He squeezed his bulk into the beat-up leather chair behind the desk and tossed the newspapers onto the floor beside him (there was no room on his desk). No pink phone-message slips in sight. Good. He leaned back in his chair and was debating whether he should give that damned New York Times crossword another try when his phone/intercom beeped at him.

"Yes?"

Julie's perky and sweet voice greeted him. "Someone here to see you, Buzzsaw."

"Who is it?" Then he smacked his forehead. "Oh wait, don't tell me." He had forgotten that today was Monday.

She lowered her voice slightly. "You got it. 'You-know-who'. Right on schedule."

Briggs sighed. "All right. I'll be right there."

He buried his face in his hands. How could he have forgotten about Frank Geneva: the man who came in every Monday for the past six months, asking for a job on the air? The first few times they met, Briggs had been impressed with the man's tenacity; so he would let him down easy with a diplomatic speech about not having any current openings, though he would keep a resume on file for when a slot did open up. That usually placated even the most persistent applicants. But not Mr. Frank Geneva. The man still came in week after week—every Monday promptly at 10am, just as Briggs was getting off the air—and sat in the same contoured plastic chair by the window in WZML's modest reception area. And if Monday happened to be a holiday, and the office was closed, Frank would be there on Tuesday.

As the novelty of Geneva's dedication transformed into annoyance, Briggs tried blowing the guy off—instructing Julie to tell him he was in a meeting. He thought his plan might work until he stepped out of the studio the following morning to find the tenacious job-seeker waiting in the lobby once again. Buzzsaw's mama didn't raise no fool; and it didn't take Briggs long to figure out that no matter how many times he would try to dodge this man, he could count on him showing up the next day. There was no doubt Frank Geneva was clearly a man with a mission—though he reminded Briggs more of a stubborn puppy that won't stop chewing on the living room recliner.

Briggs rose out of his chair and headed toward the lobby, a smile creeping onto his face. At least now he had an excuse to ogle Julie.

Julie was wearing a short and clingy floral print cotton dress, low-cut enough to highlight her perky and tanned cleavage. Her thick mane of curly brown hair flowed down to her shoulders today—just the way Buzzsaw liked it. As he approached her desk, she looked up from her work and favored him with a sly wink that made his stomach somersault. God, just one night with her....

She nodded her head toward the familiar figure seated in his customary chair by the window. Briggs manufactured a smile and headed over. Based on Geneva's resume, Briggs estimated him to be somewhere in his late 30's; but his careworn face and premature graying made him appear older. He seemed to be focused on something outside the window. He started when Buzzsaw spoke.

“Good morning, Mr. Geneva.”

Geneva managed a thin smile, his deep-set eyes regarding Briggs warily. “Please, call me Frank.”

Briggs chuckled. “I know—I keep forgetting.”

An awkward silence fell between them. Each knew what the other was going to say; their lines rehearsed each week for six months now. But they went ahead anyway.

“So...do you have any openings yet, Mr. Briggs?”

“Call me Buzzsaw.”

“Do you?”

“Fraid not, Frank. But I still have your resume on file. And I’ll be sure to give you a call when I do.” Then, for some reason, he felt inclined to break tradition and add a new line to his speech. “Have you tried any of the other stations in town?”

Frank shook his head. “No...this is where I really want to work, Mr. Briggs. I love the station—I listen all the time.”

Briggs allowed himself to savor the compliment. “Thanks, Frank, I appreciate that.” He offered his hand and a wry smile. “Thanks for coming in. See you next week.”

Frank feigned another smile and shook hands before turning on his heel and aiming for the elevator.

When he was gone, Briggs was headed back to his office but was stopped by Julie.

“Why don’t you just hire the poor guy already?” Her clear gray eyes narrowed at him.

Briggs’ shoulders drooped. “What do you mean? I’m not blowing smoke—I really don’t have any openings right now. Besides, the guy doesn’t have any real radio experience—aside from an intro to broadcasting course he took at the community college. I can’t just throw him into a full-time shift—even if I had one available. Besides—I already have plenty of part-timers for the weekends.”

Her face developed a teasing little pout that turned him on even though it shouldn’t have. “I think it’s sad that he comes in here every week and you can’t find *something* for him to do.”

Briggs sighed. She was making him feel even more guilty than usual. He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know...maybe I’ll see if he wants to do fill-in shifts—when one of the weekenders calls in sick.” He spread his arms in a gesture of surrender. “Would that make you happy?”

Her pout melted into a saucy smile. “Thank you.” Her brow furrowed slightly. “Now maybe he’ll quit coming in every week.”

Briggs reluctantly resumed his trip to his office, wishing he could think of a way to prolong the conversation and sneak more glimpses down the front of Julie’s dress. Unfortunately, duty called. He needed to get the timesheets to payroll or he’d have a very

disgruntled staff. And he didn't feel like doing a 24-hour shift when they all called in sick out of protest for not getting their paychecks.

Plus, the New York Times crossword was still on his floor, daring him.

Buzzsaw waited until after lunch to call Frank Geneva about working on a fill-in basis. The phone rang only once before someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Frank?"

"Yes."

"Hi, Frank, it's Buzzsaw Briggs at WZML... Listen: it turns out that I could use someone to work here part-time—on-call. Meaning, that if one of the weekend part-timers calls in sick or something, I'd need you to come in and work their shift. Chances are it would be short-notice and it might even include the middle-of-the-night shifts. No guarantees. Are you interested?"

Silence on the other end. At first, Briggs thought that Frank was merely considering the offer or checking his schedule. Then, as the minutes ticked away, he started to think that he had been cut-off. "Frank? You there?"

"Yes. Sorry." A pause. "I'll do it. Thank you for the opportunity."

"Great! Why don't you swing by the station sometime this week so you can fill out the necessary paperwork and I'll show you around the on-air booth. Sound good?"

"That will be fine." Another pause. "Thank you again, Mr. Briggs."

Briggs smiled and rolled his eyes. "Now that you work for me, you're gonna have to call me 'Buzzsaw'."

"I can be there tomorrow morning at ten. Good-bye."

Briggs hung up the phone, a strange uneasy feeling worming its way into his gut. For some reason, talking to Frank on the phone made him feel like he just found out he was being audited by the IRS.

But before he could give it any more thought, his phone rang. It turned out to be an old radio pal from years back. As always, they dove right into reminiscing about the old days, and soon Briggs forget all about his conversation with Frank until weeks later when he had his interview with the police.

The following morning, Frank was waiting in the lobby promptly at 10am—as promised. When Briggs came out to meet him, Julie flashed him mock smoldering look, as if to say, *I thought we resolved this.*

"Hi, Frank, how are you?"

Geneva rose from his seat by the window. “Fine, thank you.”

Briggs gestured toward Julie. “Frank Geneva, this is Julie Matthews, our receptionist.”

Julie rose from her chair, revealing a very skimpy tight skirt—even for her. It barely covered the swell of her buttocks. She smiled and extended a hand. Briggs’ hadn’t had the pleasure of beholding her outfit yet, and his knees nearly buckled when she stood up. Frank politely shook her hand and continued to stare at her blankly, seemingly oblivious to the tantalizing sight before him. Either the man was gay, or Briggs was going to have to check him for a pulse.

“...fill out my paperwork?”

“Buzzsaw!”

Julie’s voice startled Briggs. “What?” He couldn’t take his eyes off her legs.

She smiled knowingly. “Mr. Geneva asked you where he needs to go to fill out his paperwork.”

Briggs shook his head clear. “Oh yeah, right.” He gestured for Frank to follow him. “This way.”

He led Geneva down the hall to Human Resources, sneaking one last peek at Julie over his shoulder.

When they got to HR, the manager was in a meeting, but they found a folder of forms that had been prepared in advance. Frank stared at them for a few seconds before speaking.

“Mr. Briggs...” he hesitated when he saw Buzzsaw’s eyes narrow. “Sorry—Buzzsaw...” Briggs’ smile returned. “Would it be all right if I took these home, filled them out there, and brought them back? I have another appointment this morning, and I’d rather not waste time here with paperwork that I can do just as easily at home. I’d much rather devote my time here to acquainting myself with the studio equipment.”

Briggs shrugged his shoulder. “I don’t see why not...just bring them back when you get a chance.” He turned and headed for the studio. “Follow me, then.”

As they approached the booth, the “On-Air” light flicked on, which meant that Steve Elliott’s microphone was live, and that they should hang back and wait until he was finished talking. Briggs used this opportunity to explain to Frank how they did their on-air breaks.

“Our station call letters are the first and last things you say. We want to make sure that the listener always knows what station he’s listening to—especially during a ratings period. Also: talk to one listener—not a group. Make him think you’re having a one-on-one conversation with him. Our typical listeners are male, 25-54. We play commercials

at twenty-nine minutes after the hour, forty minutes after, and again at :49. Each break, go into the commercials by reading some promotional copy and mention a few of the upcoming songs. Oh—and we do weather at the :29 and :49 breaks. Got it?”

Frank seemed to be nodding in all the right places. Whether he understood or not, Briggs wasn’t sure. Time would tell.

The “On-Air” light winked out so they headed into the studio. Elliott was kicked back in the chair, playing air-guitar to the Van Halen song currently playing. He sat up abruptly, looking slightly embarrassed as they walked in.

“Hey, Buzzsaw, what’s up, dude?”

“Steve, this is Frank Geneva. He’s going to be doing part-time fill-ins for us.”

Elliott stood up and shook Frank’s hand. “Good to meet you. Hey—you got a cool radio name, dude.”

Frank smiled. “Thanks. We’ll see.”

Elliott turned to Briggs. “Dude, I know you’re busy, but you got a sec? Something looks bogus during the one o’clock hour on today’s playlist. Check it out.”

Briggs politely excused himself and leaned over to see what Elliott was talking about. While they discussed the discrepancy, Briggs could see Geneva out of the corner of his eye. He had wandered over to the panoramic window, and was staring out into the street, as if in a daze. After a minute or two, Briggs figured out the schedule problem and resumed Frank’s orientation.

He showed him how to use the equipment, explained the filing system for all the CDs, and taught him how to read the program schedules. Frank was a patient and attentive listener.

After about twenty minutes, they said good-bye to Elliott and left the studio.

Briggs stepped out to the lobby. “Well, I think that’s about it...any questions?”

Frank shook his head. “No. Thank you for your time.”

“No problem. Hopefully we can get you on the air soon.”

For the first time, Briggs saw a genuine smile light up Geneva’s face. “I hope so too.” He turned to leave. “Thank you, Mr. Briggs.”

Briggs wrung his hands in mock frustration, trying for a laugh. “Damn—it—call me Buzzsaw!”

But Geneva merely continued silently toward the elevators.

After he was gone, Briggs started getting that vague uneasy feeling again. There was something about Frank’s demeanor that reminded him of the nature programs he sometimes watched on cable; the ones where the intrepid adventurer stumbles across a rattlesnake coiled under a nearby bush, poised to strike. But even more troubling than the

feeling itself was the fact that he didn't know where it was coming from. Frank seemed harmless—a little distant, maybe—but otherwise, just a normal guy trying to break into the radio biz.

Briggs shook it off, telling himself that he was being ridiculous. He diverted his attention instead to more worthwhile pursuits—like finding out what Julie was wearing today.

As it happened, Frank Geneva's radio debut came a lot sooner than Jim "Buzzsaw" Briggs would have guessed.

About a month later, Briggs went into work as usual, the first one in at 5:45 on a Friday morning. Slate gray clouds choked the sky, and there was an unseasonably cool breeze as he walked in the rear entrance of the Bainbridge Building. He took the elevator up to five, and unlocked the door to WZML's suite. With his stack of newspapers in one hand, WZML mug in the other, he headed straight for the studio. Never one for show prep—preferring instead to fly by the seat of his pants—he never came in to work any earlier than he absolutely had to; relying instead on his customary make-it-up-as-you-go style.

As he walked into the booth, Andy, the overnight guy, was getting ready for the last break of his shift before Buzzsaw would take over. Briggs quietly set down his newspapers and meandered over to the large window overlooking Main Street. There was an unusual amount of activity down there this morning. A crowd of about twenty was milling about outside the courthouse. A few TV vans were parked along the curb, their microwave antennae stabbing upward toward the heavens. People dressed in suits and skirts carried microphones and pads of paper. Guys in t-shirts and jeans shouldered cameras or hustled cables. Several people had staked out spots near the main entrance and set up cameras on tripods. A half-dozen uniformed police officers patrolled the street, checking IDs and setting up barricades.

Briggs waited until Andy switched off his microphone. "What's going on down there?"

Andy chuckled and gestured to Briggs' pile of newspapers. "Don't you ever read these?"

Briggs' eyes never wavering, he took a swig of his coffee. "No."

Andy thumbed through the stack of newspapers, took out the local paper, and handed it to Briggs. "Take a look."

On the front page was a hard-to-miss mug-shot next to another grainy black-and-white photo of a crime scene. The headline read, “Devlin Free Today”. As Briggs skimmed the article, he vaguely remembered this story—it had been big news for a while; even someone who avoided the news as if it were a disease couldn’t have missed hearing about it. About five years ago, a woman and little girl had been ruthlessly butchered in their home. Police had no trouble collecting iron-clad evidence—including several eyewitnesses—that indicted the culprit; a career criminal by the name of Jason Devlin. Unfortunately, right toward the very end of the investigation, the police dropped the ball. Devlin’s smooth-talking lawyer somehow uncovered a technicality and managed to orchestrate a plea-bargain that reduced his client’s sentence to a paltry five years in the county lock-up. There had been a public outcry of outrage and accusations of corruption within the local judicial system, but the media soon tired of the story and moved on to more ratings-worthy pursuits—like what the celebrity of the week was wearing to the Academy Awards. So the story slipped into obscurity until today when the alleged murderer would be back on the streets. According to the article, Devlin’s release was scheduled for 10:30 this morning. His lawyer even had the audacity to conduct a press conference for his client at that time.

Briggs shook his head and tossed the paper back on the pile. This was why he steered clear of the news. He looked up to discover Andy was already halfway out the door. “See you Monday!” he called from the hallway.

Buzzsaw sipped his coffee and watched the activity around the courthouse for a few more minutes before sitting down behind the board to start his show.

It didn’t take long for him to slip into his groove; in fact, it was one of his best shows ever. The music was great and he got some hilarious callers—he even took a chance and did a matchmaking bit on the air. Some guy called in, lamenting that he hadn’t had a date in three months. So Buzzsaw sent out a plea for any eligible young women to call the station and volunteer to go out with this guy. After a few risqué callers, Briggs and the dateless guy finally agreed on one particular woman who sounded like she was ready to jump in the sack with him on the word “go”.. They were all set to arrange a motel rendezvous, when they got one more caller. It turned out to be the dateless guy’s wife, who then proceeded to verbally tear them both a new one. It was priceless—Buzzsaw couldn’t have scripted it any better. At one point Julie even came in and gushed over the show, treating Briggs to a quick peek down her blouse.

Right after the 9:49 break, the studio’s office line chirped. It was Julie.

“Hey, Buzzsaw, Steve Elliott just called—said he can’t make it in today.”

Briggs exhaled a loud sigh of frustration. “Great.” He looked at the clock. “Looks like I’ll have to cover his shift. Did he say why?”

“No...but he sounded weird though. Who knows....”

“Probably had a little too much of the wacky-tobacky last night.”

“And I probably don’t need to remind you...but don’t forget your big meeting at one o’clock today.”

Briggs pounded his fist on the mixing board. “Dammit! That’s Right! How am I going to make that meeting if I’m still on the air?”

“Sorry, Buzzsaw...” Julie hung up.

Briggs slammed the receiver down. It figured. He was having such a great show...now he had to deal with this crap. His big meeting was with the station owner. He needed time to prep...go home and change...he couldn’t still be on the air. But where was he going to find someone on such short notice? All his weekend part-timers had full-time jobs during the week—they couldn’t just drop everything to come in and work a four-hour airshift which didn’t pay squat.

Julie popped in the studio to bring Briggs his mail. “So what are you going to do?”

Briggs shook his head. “I dunno. Looks like I’ll have to stay on until two, when Angie comes in for her show.”

“But you’ll miss your meeting.”

Briggs threw up his hands. “What else can I do?” His brow furrowed as he grabbed the phone. “I’ll call Angie—maybe she can come in early.”

Julie was halfway out the door when she stuck her head back in. “Hey, what about that one guy you hired? Remember—the one who used to come in every week begging for a job?”

Briggs smacked himself in the head. He had forgotten all about Frank Geneva.

“Julie—you’re awesome. Thanks!” He offered her a sly smile. “You know, if you play your cards right, you could have me.”

She rolled her eyes and exited the studio. Briggs grabbed the phone list and dialed Frank’s number.

“Hello?”

“Frank? It’s Buzzsaw at WZML. I need your help. The midday guy just called—he can’t come in today. Can you cover his shift?”

Silence on the other end. Briggs crossed his fingers, wincing.

Finally: “Sure, I can come in. Give me about twenty minutes. Is that OK?”

Briggs breathed a sigh of relief. “That’ll be fine. Thanks, Frank—I owe you one.”

They hung up and Briggs checked the clock. Frank would get in at about a quarter after ten. Twenty-five extra minutes on the air was no big deal for Briggs—it was certainly preferable to having to slog through another four-hour shift and missing his meeting with the station owner.

But his relief was only temporary. He remembered that Frank had almost no experience on the air, and it had been at least a month since his tour of the station. Well, beggars couldn’t be choosers. It was either put Frank on the air, or possibly miss a very important meeting—and one did not blow off meetings with station owners, if one had aspirations of retaining one’s job. Hell, if Frank was that green, he’d tell him to just play music non-stop, without any breaks, until Angie came in at two.

Briggs popped in the next CD and went back to his newspaper crosswords.

After several minutes, curiosity got the better of him, and he peered out the window at the scene outside the courthouse. The media had surrounded the front of the building in a surprisingly organized semicircle. The intentionally visible law enforcement presence had one lane of the street blocked off to accommodate the crowd. They too formed a perimeter outside of the media throng. If he had a camera, Briggs would have had the perfect view of the upcoming press conference: right across the street and five floors up.

The studio door opened, and Briggs started. It was Frank Geneva.

Briggs checked his watch: 10:15. Man, this guy was punctual. “Hey, Frank... thanks again for saving my ass, man.”

Frank offered him a strained smile, which Briggs chalked up to first-time jitters. “Glad I could help.” He was carrying a small briefcase and dragging a large cumbersome-looking duffel bag behind him. Briggs looked at the bag curiously. Reading his expression, Frank explained. “Oh, this...I brought some work with me in case I have some time during the songs.”

Briggs chuckled. “What do you do, bricklaying?”

Frank returned a strained laugh. “Actually, it’s a load of very heavy books. I’m a freelance writer and I need to do some research for a book I’m writing.” He patted his briefcase. “My deadline is coming up really soon.”

Briggs nodded and turned his attention to the day’s music playlist. “We got about two minutes left in this Doors tune. You got The Who coming up after that, and then—one of my favorites—Hendrix and “All Along the Watchtower”. I’ll have to listen to that one in my office. That should take you to your first break at twenty-nine minutes after.

Keep it short and simple. Squeeze in a weather forecast if you feel comfortable. I printed up a copy for you to read from.” He put a hand on Frank’s shoulder—it was like touching a bundle of live electrical wires. “Look, I know this is your first show. Don’t sweat it—you’ll do fine. I appreciate you coming in to help. That counts for a lot.”

Frank smiled, but didn’t seem to relax any. “Thank you.”

Briggs grabbed his stack of newspapers for the last time and headed for the door. “Any questions, give me a holler. I’ll be in my office.”

Frank nodded and sat down, turning his attention to examine the playlist.

Once Briggs was out in the hall, he stopped. He decided to sneak a peek back in the studio to see if Frank was OK. As the Doors tune faded, he watched Frank punch up CD player #2, then reach for the next CD. Briggs nodded approvingly and eased the door shut.

Once he was sure the door was closed, Frank cranked up the music and began removing items from his duffel bag.

Briggs headed back to his office. He looked at his watch—10:21. It wouldn’t take him long to organize his reports for his meeting, so he decided to kick back for a few minutes with a cup of coffee and today’s Jumble puzzle.

But first, he needed some musical accompaniment, so he scooted his chair over to the file cabinet and switched on his radio.

In the on-air studio, Frank Geneva continued to unload the contents of his duffel bag—none of which turned out to be books. The first item was a cordless drill. He took it and three long screws over to the studio door and proceeded to drill the screws through the door and into its frame. The drill’s whine was drowned in the blaring guitar riffs of Pete Townshend and the shrill shrieks of Roger Daltrey.

The screws in place, Frank returned to his bag and removed a small, heavy-looking metal hammer.

He had the drill and hammer in hand when he realized that the song was ending. Time to load up the next one.

In his office, Briggs was wrangling with the day’s Jumble. He hadn’t come across one this tough in awhile. He kept his eyes on the clock, though...it was easy to let time slip away when he was focused on one of his puzzles. He heard the Who song winding down, so he paused to listen to see what Frank would do. The Hendrix song came up right on cue; Frank even played a short pre-recorded station jingle over the intro. It

sounded good. Briggs leaned back in his chair and let the soulful music of the late left-handed guitar legend wash over him.

Back in the booth, Frank finished cueing up the next song, and swapped out the screwdriver tip in the drill for a large bit. He brought the drill and hammer over to the huge window and began to methodically drill a series of holes into the thick plexiglass, forming a rough circle about a foot in diameter.

Out in the hallway, Julie Matthews was passing by the on-air studio when she suddenly stopped. She thought she heard a strange sound coming from inside the booth. But with the music so loud, she couldn't be sure. It didn't really matter—she had more pressing concerns at the moment anyway. She was on her way to the copier with an armload of documents. Plus, she wanted to detour past the new promotions director's office and introduce herself. He happened to catch her eye the other day.

Frank looked at his watch—10:28. There wasn't much time left. God help him, this had better work. The final hole in the glass drilled, he reached for the hammer.

Briggs, still lost in the spell of the late Mr. Hendrix, was stuck on the last word of the Jumble. Coincidentally, the scrambled letters formed the word GENEVA, the name of his part-timer who saved his ass by coming in to work for him today. Maybe the coincidence was a good omen for his meeting with the owner later.

Try as he might, Briggs couldn't rearrange the letters to spell anything coherent. Maybe he needed to put it aside for a while and go back to it later.

He heard the Hendrix song ending and remembered that Frank would be doing his first live break next. He sat up and folded his hands on his desk in anticipation. Now he would see if he made a huge mistake hiring this guy.

It took three hefty swings of the hammer—his efforts at the gym had paid off—but Frank finally managed to punch a jagged hole about the size of a basketball in the window; the smaller holes he drilled had weakened the thick glass just enough.

He turned the music down a bit to avoid attracting attention from across the street. Then he chanced a glance out the window. As he had hoped, the hive of activity outside the courthouse was oblivious to his efforts across the street and five stories up.

He reached for the briefcase, opened it, and began assembling the contents inside. As he locked the final piece in place, he hesitated. The Jimi Hendrix song was ending.

He was supposed to do a break next. He hoped he wouldn't be disappointing Mr. Briggs too much, but he needed to make a slight modification to the playlist.

He waited until "All Along the Watchtower" was done. Then he punched up CD player #1 on the board.

It was 10:29.

The Hendrix song ended. But instead of Frank Geneva's voice, Briggs heard the opening riffs of "Trampled Under Foot" by Led Zeppelin. He didn't recall seeing that on the playlist. Maybe Frank got cold feet at the last minute and decided to throw on a song instead of doing his break—which was fine. At least the guy knew his limitations and was willing to work around them. Still...maybe he was having technical problems and was forced to cut to the Zeppelin tune.

Briggs stood up and headed down the hall.

In front of the county courthouse, directly across Main Street from the Bainbridge Building, Jason Devlin, accompanied by his lawyer, exited through the main doors and was assaulted by a barrage of microphones and exploding flashbulbs.

Devlin's lawyer held up a hand in an attempt to bring some semblance of order to the media mob. When they had quieted to his satisfaction, he removed a folded sheet of paper from his coat pocket and began to read.

Frank Geneva raised the newly-assembled sniper rifle to his shoulder and tweaked the scope slightly. The slick, cool metal and polished wood felt oily to his touch. He blocked out the screaming guitar of Jimmy Page and the screeching wails of Robert Plant behind him and exhaled slowly. A temporary calm washed over him; the closest thing to peace he felt in more than five years.

He thrust the barrel through the jagged hole in the glass, and he waited.

A figure appeared in the crosshairs.

Frank squeezed the trigger.

Right outside the studio door, Briggs heard something that sounded like a someone opening a bottle of champagne. But the music from inside was loud enough that he wasn't sure what that sound was. He gently pushed the door and almost walked right into it as it refused to open. Strange...the door didn't have a lock...it must be stuck. He pushed again. Nothing. Then he leaned his shoulder into it. It still didn't budge.

Jim "Buzzsaw" Briggs began to get that uneasy feeling again.

Down in the street, outside the courthouse, Jason Devlin heard a strange high-pitched whine followed by a tinkle of glass. He glanced behind him and saw a dime-sized hole in the glass of the front door of the courthouse. Still not registering what had just happened, he turned back to face the crowd. That's when he felt warm liquid trickling down the right side of his head. He touched his fingertips there and they came away red. By the time he realized what was happening, he saw and felt nothing...a cloud of blackness obscuring everything.

Frank had miscalculated the effect of the wind on his first shot. But his countless hours at the shooting range had not been wasted. He was able to make the adjustment quickly and deliver a second fatal bullet.

The realization that he just ended another human being's life was inconsequential to him at this point. He had finally completed his mission.

His nightmare was just about over.

Devlin's lawyer had been distantly aware of the sound of the first bullet too. He turned to his notorious client just in time to see another dime-sized hole suddenly appear in the center of the man's forehead. Blood trickled from the hole and Devlin crumpled to the ground. The lawyer followed his client down, shielding himself with the corpse.

When they saw Devlin and his lawyer fall, the police reacted almost immediately, whirling around to face the Bainbridge Building. Some drew their service pistols, aiming at the peculiar hole in the window they now noticed on the fifth floor. Others ran across Main Street and stormed the building.

Briggs heard the second gunshot. Growing up with a father who loved to hunt, there was no mistaking that sound this time. His gut filled with ice water. Disregarding his own safety, Buzzsaw Briggs backed up about ten feet away from the door, then ran at it full speed, throwing his right shoulder, and all of his 228 pounds into it. The wood around the screws splintered, and Briggs stumbled into the booth. The next morning, he would wake up to discover a bruise covering most of his upper shoulder, tinged a sickly spectrum of purple and yellow.

Briggs felt a rush of warm air on his face—an odd sensation for being in the climate-controlled studio. Then he noticed the large round hole in the window. And standing to one side of that hole was Frank, clutching a sinister looking rifle with a long,

narrow barrel. Over the music, Briggs could hear commotion coming from the street below. He gaped at Frank, terror coiling around him like a python.

Frank calmly turned to face Briggs, a serene smile on his face. He walked around to the front of the mixing board and turned down the studio speakers. Then he spoke.

“I’m glad you’re here, Mr. Briggs—forgive me if I don’t use your nickname. I don’t have much time left, but I wanted to thank you. You have generously—though unknowingly—helped bring peace to my tormented soul. And for that, I am eternally grateful. I do hope that the series of events I have orchestrated here today will not cause you any trouble—that was never my intention.”

Briggs remained speechless as he continued to stare at Geneva blankly.

Frank set the rifle down on the floor and removed the last item from his duffel bag. It turned out to be a snub-nosed revolver, the fluorescent lights winking off its silver finish. Frank calmly drew back the hammer and smiled at Briggs. “Time for this nightmare to finally end.” His smile never faltering, he put the barrel in his mouth and squeezed the trigger.

Briggs averted his eyes at the last second, sparing himself the gruesome sight. He heard the loud report, followed by a dull thump as Frank Geneva’s lifeless body slumped to the floor.

Not more than two seconds later, several policemen stormed into the studio, guns drawn.

His eyes still squeezed tightly shut, Buzzsaw Briggs couldn’t think of anything else to do but slowly raise his hands.

It was several hours later when Jim Briggs found himself alone back in his office. He had spent most of the day, and into the night, talking to the police. Detectives had interviewed the entire staff—including the station owner, who, needless to say, had been quite surprised to be greeted by uniformed officers when he arrived for his meeting with his program director.

The building was dark and still now, a marked contrast from the hive of activity it usually was—and had been all day with police officers and reporters swarming the halls. Even Briggs’ breathing seemed to echo too loudly in the artificial silence.

He was exhausted, but there were still a few things he needed to wrap up before he headed home. He slumped into his chair and rubbed his eyes vigorously, burying his face in his hands while his brain sorted through the events of the very long and surreal day.

Throughout the course of his numerous conversations with the police, Briggs found out that Frank Geneva's real name was Frank Evans. It was Evans' wife Sarah, and daughter Rebecca that had been savagely murdered a little over five years ago by the late Jason Devlin, during a random home invasion while Frank was away on business. After the sham of a trial, Frank had quit his job and retreated into relative obscurity, selling off his family's belongings and renting a cramped, rundown place on the edge of town where he subsisted on his cashed-out retirement account and his late wife's insurance policy settlement.

At one point during the afternoon, police had searched Frank's apartment. According to the detective that Briggs spoke to, they found a scrapbook of newspaper clippings chronicling the murder and the trial. They also found a storehouse of ammunition, a shooting range pass (with Frank's alias), and a computer (the one item from his past life he had kept). The most intriguing item, though, was a notebook filled with copious notes about the physical properties of plexiglass and detailed measurements of the buildings along Main Street adjacent to, and across from, the county courthouse.

They also found the folder of uncompleted forms Frank picked up from the human resources department at the radio station. When Briggs heard about this, he almost heard an audible click in his head as it occurred to him why Frank had hesitated to fill them out the day he came in for orientation. If Frank had turned them in using his alias, he would have been discovered, and suspicions might have been raised. And if he had used his real name, he still risked unwanted attention.

At one point during his interview with the detectives, Briggs got a phone call from "Steamin'" Steve Elliott. He was calling from his apartment to warn everyone at the station about Frank, fearing the worst and hoping it wasn't too late. According to Elliott, Frank had paid him a visit earlier that morning with a fabricated story about car trouble. When Elliott had let him in to use the phone, Frank attacked him from behind with some well-practiced martial arts techniques. Frank subdued and immobilized Elliott and strapped him to his La-Z-Boy with duct-tape. He then had Elliott call the radio station and tell the receptionist that he couldn't come in to work. Frank even timed Elliott's call so that it would leave Briggs in a bind to find a last-minute replacement, and he would have no other choice but to call in Frank. Once Briggs finally thought to call Frank, he dialed what turned out to be Frank's cell-phone (he didn't have a home line), which rang in Frank's hand as he sat right next to Elliott.

Elliott had just finally managed to free himself from his bonds. And despite being forcibly confined to his chair for the better part of the day, he didn't have any unkind words about the late Frank Geneva. Apparently, Frank had left ten thousand dollars in

cash on Elliott's coffee table as compensation for a missed day of work and the inconvenience of being strapped to a chair for several hours.

The police interviews wound up going on well into the evening. The lead detective was the last to leave about twenty minutes ago—along with the rest of the station staff. The last person Briggs saw leave was poor Julie. Even the shortest skirt in her closet couldn't distract him from the harried look in her eyes. All she could do was wander around with a blank stare of disbelief.

Briggs stretched and reached for his briefcase, setting it on his desk. He began to rifle through some of the piles of paperwork, when his eyes wandered to the last thing he had been doing before he had headed to studio to check on Frank.

It was the newspaper opened to the puzzle page and the stubborn final clue of the Jumble. The last scrambled word still taunted him. GENEVA.

He felt a chill at the significance of that final word. Now it seemed more ominous than coincidental.

Then like a roar of thunder on a cloudless spring day, it dawned on him; the solution to the puzzle.

He scrambled for a pencil and with a slightly quivering hand, formed the new word.

AVENGE.

He let the pencil slip from his grasp, his eyes riveted to the page before him.

Briggs' mind reeled. He couldn't help thinking that the solution to the puzzle had been a hidden clue foreshadowing the day's events...though he had failed to see it.

He continued to sit in silence for several minutes, staring at the Jumble, not daring to complete the puzzle by spelling out the quote at the bottom, for fear of some new ill omen.

Finally, after several minutes, he forced himself to crumple up the newspaper and toss it into the recycle bin next to his desk. It was the first time he had ever left a puzzle unfinished.

Briggs shoved aside the rest of the clutter on his desk and reached for a blank sheet of paper. He didn't feel like typing this on the computer—he needed to write this by hand.

Even as he scrawled out his resignation letter, he still wasn't sure why he was quitting. Was it the obvious; the fact that he felt a stomach-churning stab of guilt at being an unwilling accomplice in the murder of another human being...even though the victim had been a killer himself?

Or was it because—Frank’s motives and the larger concept of morality and ethics aside—he had caused Frank so much additional anguish by not hiring him sooner; thereby depriving him of the one crucial component he needed to carry out his plan to bring peace to his troubled soul? After all that suffering that Frank endured at losing his dear family in such a violent and senseless manner, who was he to stand in the way of the man’s idea of justice?

Whatever the reason, one thing was clear: Briggs would never be able to work in WZML’s studio again. He would never be able to enjoy the view from that huge panoramic window again without being reminded of the anguish of a man who had endured five long years to carry out his grim revenge.

Even up here in his fifth-floor sanctuary, surrounded by timeless music, he was no more sheltered from the shroud of pain and suffering that threatens to shadow the world than anyone else.

Jim Briggs signed his name to the letter, and left it on his desk along with his keys. Then he stuffed his personal belongings into a cardboard box, flicked off the light and headed for the door, his footfalls echoing off the nondescript linoleum and acoustical tiles.

Maybe that sanctuary he sought was still out there somewhere.

He desperately hoped it was.