

## SQUIRRELLY

## 1

## Gunsmoke

Even through the haze of his mellow pot high, Barnaby could not ignore the unmistakable ratcheting noise of a squirrel gnawing on wood in the hallway. It was just one too many such episodes. With a long sigh of exasperation, Barnaby unfolded his legs from the lotus position and got to his feet. “Damn vermin,” he grumbled, fastening the waistband on his cutoff jeans.

The two women sitting back-to-back in mirror image lotus positions on adjacent tatami mats continued their syncopated om, seemingly oblivious to the noise and Barnaby. The chronic squirrel damage never seemed to bother them. They left dealing with all of that to him.

Vexed, Barnaby’s high diminished. On bare feet, he padded to the closet and noiselessly withdrew the double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun. Releasing the safety and thumbing back both hammers, he stalked out to the hallway. He knew the birdshot load would pepper the old plaster walls and the woodwork, including the new wood he used to replace the gnawed newel post, but every fiber of his being wanted that squirrel dead. “Enough,” he said to himself. Rehabbing the nineteenth century hotel was work enough without having to repeat work done once. He had to rid the place of those vermin before they got into the money making part of the building.

With the evening dusk, the long broad hallway was nearly dark, too dark to discern clearly the small pest sharpening its teeth on the newly installed post at the far end. Barnaby knew he had to rein in his anger until he could draw a clear bead on

the thing. He eased along the wall, edging closer to the top of the wide stairway.

There it was. Barnaby raised the shotgun, lodged the butt against his shoulder, sighted down the barrel, took a slow, deep breath, and gently squeezed the trigger. The blast overwhelmed his yelp of pain from the claws of a squirrel clinging to his bare leg. Reflexively, he swung the gun barrel at the squirrel, swatting it loose, and triggering the second barrel. Birdshot struck his left leg and foot, knocking him off balance and backward against the wall. Stunned, he collapsed. Over the gunfire ringing in his ears, he could still hear the women endlessly repeating om, drowning out his call for help.

A fat squirrel scampered over the welts on his outstretched leg, stopped, looked him in the eye, then scurried away.

Resisting the incoming tide of darkness that threatened his grasp on consciousness, Barnaby swore he would kill every last squirrel if it took him the rest of eternity.

## 2

### Classified

Easy was oblivious to the early morning office clatter as he trudged to *Catskill Daily Sentinel* reporter Lucinda Lane's desk. Pulling two wrinkled sheets of paper from his pocket, he looked again at them in dismay then jammed them back in his jacket. He slumped into a plastic chair next to her desk, but she didn't acknowledge him. Intensely focused on her work, she kept flailing away at her keyboard. Minutes passed. Finally, Easy cleared his throat. "Hi, Lucinda," he said, his voice devoid of cheeriness.

Without looking away from her computer screen, Lucinda said, "Hey, Easy. What's the problem?" the soft edge of her down-home Georgia inflection still present even after years among Yankees.