

Murder on the Great Allegheny Passage



By Benjamin A. Horwitz

Chapter 1

It was a hot, sultry, summer, night in the valley of the three rivers. Even up on Mount Washington there was no relief from the unbearable weather Pittsburgh had been suffering through for over a week. David Cohen sat out on the screened-in veranda of a three-bedroom condominium he and Holly Morgan purchased the year before. He sipped his chilled martini and watched the lights flicking like hundreds of candles lining the superstructure of the bridge 400 feet below spanning the Monongahela River. It was a site Dave had come to know well since his childhood days growing up in the suburb of Squirrel Hill. In high school, after the Friday night football game, everyone and their dates would drive up to the overlook on Mount Washington and try to make-out. Dave thought about those early days while taking in the view, smiling occasionally to himself, then sipping his martini.

Twenty-five years before, David Cohen and Holly Morgan had been college sweethearts at Cornell. They broke up Dave's senior year. Don't bother asking. They still don't agree on the reason for their breakup. After college, they both went their separate ways. Both married twice. Both had two children with their first spouse. And both had been divorced from their second spouse for several years when a chance meeting of Holly and Dave's sister at an Iyengar Yoga seminar Holly Morgan attended in Chicago. The rest, as they say, is now history.

Dave's sister immediately called Dave upon her return from Chicago and Dave called Holly the next day. Holly Morgan was living and working in San Francisco for a large brokerage house and had developed a reputation and a large following as an analyst for the oil industry. She often appeared on CNBC. David Cohen was working for himself as a Civil Engineering consultant after a 25-year career with a large engineering firm located in Cleveland, Ohio.

Holly Morgan was 46, looked like 26, and could have appeared on the cover of Vogue Magazine. Five-feet-nine, 126 pounds, jet-black hair cut short in a brush cut and a perpetual tan inherited from her Italian parents. It would be impossible to pass Holly Morgan on the street without catching yourself staring at her as she walked by.

David Cohen just turned 49. He had a swimmers lean muscular build. He was just short of six foot one and weighed 180 pounds. His blue eyes and light brown hair were inherited from his

mother's Eastern European ancestry. His occasional bellicose, impatient, behavior could be justified. His parents were survivors of the Holocaust.

After several weeks of phone conversations, bringing each other up to date on their status, they decided to take a risk and get together and take a bike trip along the Erie Canal from Buffalo to Albany. Over the years, both Holly and Dave became bike fanatics. Holly flew into Pittsburgh and they drove to Buffalo to begin their bike trip. During the course of that trip, they stumbled upon a terrorist plot to blow up the canal locks in Lockport, New York. Yeah, it sounds preposterous on its face. Something out of the TV show 24. But it was real - very real to Dave and Holly.

Destroying the locks in Lockport had several objectives: flooding the town of Rochester, shutting down the electrical generating capacity of the Niagara River and deploying fifty, two-person teams up and down the east coast entering malls and theme parks, then randomly killing as many people as they could. The real purpose was to cause as much confusion as they could while simultaneously plotting a coup in Pakistan and eventually allowing al Qaeda to take over Pakistan and their nuclear arsenal. It sounded like a crazy plan even to the FBI, but Dave and Holly were certain they were on to a plot even if the FBI thought they were completely delusional. They pursued the terrorists, who were also on the bike path checking out the locks in Lockport and the bike route itself and the lay of the land for their eventual escape.

Dave and Holly stumbled upon the plot totally by accident. First Dave noticed one of the terrorists on the bike path had detonation cord hanging out of his bag on the back carrier of his bike. Dave worked on several coal projects in Wyoming where detonation cord was commonplace on the site. Then totally by accident Holly came upon one of her students in the Yoga class she taught in San Francisco at a restaurant in Weedsport, New York. Khalid Khan turned out to be the mastermind of the operation along with a young, beautiful, Indian, graduate of Oxford posing as his wife – Benazir Cossar.

By all accounts Dave and Holly should have been killed execution style right on the banks of the Erie Canal. But fate saved them from their execution. It had been a little over a year since their brush with death. They were slowly adjusting to their ordeal, but still had occasional flashbacks of the night they knelt before the Erie Canal, gagged and bound and accepting their fate. That an escaped fugitive wanted for shooting and killing a New York State Highway Patrol officer would save them from Khalid and Benazir is something that appears in dime-store crime

novels. But this was no ten-cent crime novel. This was very real. And the night sweats and insomnia they both had been experiencing the past year were real. They were just beginning to feel some semblance of normalcy in their lives. They talked about marriage just after they finished the final leg of the bike trip. Yes, they decided to continue on from Lockport and finish their Erie Canal bicycle adventure. Both Dave and Holly were obsessive-compulsive. But they delayed their marriage. They wanted to be sure that the events of that terrifying evening wouldn't interfere with their relationship. They knew the events of that evening would require them to stay together. At least until they could make some sense out of the experience. They couldn't share it with anyone else. They would test living together for a while. Then perhaps make it official and marry. Holly moved to Pittsburgh from San Francisco – she lost the flip of the coin. One year later, marriage was on both their minds that hot, muggy, summer evening.

The phone rang.

“Hey Dave could you please get that, I'm right in the middle of a power-point presentation I'm giving tomorrow.” Holly yelled from the third bedroom they turned into an office. No response from Dave who was right in the middle of a reverie on Mount Washington with a high school flame. The phone rang a second and third time.

“Hey David, get the phone will ya, I'm right in the middle of something.” Holly was not as patient with her second request.

“Okay, Okay I'll get it.”

Dave slid the partially open sliding glass doors, walked back into the living room and picked up the portable phone. “Hello”

“Is this David Cohen?” The familiar voice on the other end of the phone politely asked. Dave couldn't quite place the voice but recognized it immediately.

“Yes,” was Dave's simple one word reply- noticing the caller I.D. was from a Washington D.C. exchange and then looking closer he noticed it was from an FBI office. He knew immediately who it was. He was startled.

“Dave this is Robert Chaffee. Do you remember me?” It was a rhetorical reply from Agent Robert Burns Chaffee.

“My God, of course I remember you Agent Chaffee.”

Agent Robert Chaffee was the FBI agent who at first humored both Dave and Holly when they first called him on the bike path telling him they thought some strange events had taken place and thought he should check them out.

“I trust both you and your wife are adjusting to your life okay.” Agent Chaffee said.

“We’re doing just fine Agent Chaffee, but we hate to disappoint you – we’re not married yet. Is that why you called to see if we made good on that promise that night when you took us back to the Holiday Inn in Lockport?”

“Who’s that on the phone, Dave?” Holly hollered from their office.

“Hold on Agent Chaffee.” Dave held the phone by his side. “It’s agent Chaffee” Dave yelled back.

“Agent Chaffee? What the hell does he want?”

“Pick up the phone in there, Holly.” Holly picked up the phone.

“Agent Chaffee, Holly Morgan. To what do we owe this honor.” She was happy to hear his voice.

“Holly Morgan, good to hear your voice again. I’m glad I got you both on the phone. I wanted to talk to you both.”

“I suppose you need our help again in ferreting out some nefarious terrorist plot.” Dave said jokingly. Interrupting agent Chaffee before he could continue on.

“Well Dave that’s not too far from the truth.” There was absolute silence and a pregnant pause on all ends of the three telephones. Then Holly spoke up first.

“You’re joking of course.”

Another long awkward silence at both ends. Then Agent Chaffee spoke.

“No Holly I’m not joking. But I really can’t talk about it over these open phone lines.” Agent Chaffee’s voice was solemn and serious. “Is there any chance I can fly out to Pittsburgh? Or if you want we can fly you both to our headquarters in Quantico.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Holly was stunned. Dave was in shock.

“Yes very serious, Holly.”

Another long period of silence.

“You have got to be out of your f’ing mind, Agent Chaffee!” Dave exploded after the brief silence.

“Dave, please don’t talk that way. Calm down, Please.” Holly could see Dave was about to go into one of his belligerent fits. She took over the conversation. “Mr. Chaffee, you really can’t be serious about this. Do you realize what Dave and I have been through. You know what we’ve been through. It’s just a little over a year. We shouldn’t even be here. You know that. We’re not professionals at this sort of thing, Mr. Chaffee. We were lucky to uncover that plot. And we’re damn lucky to be alive.”

“Look I’m really sorry.” Agent Chaffee broke in. He could sense he visibly upset both Holly and Dave. He tried to calm the situation down and continued. “I told my superiors not to make this request, but they pretty much ordered me to call you. This went pretty far up the chain of command, so I couldn’t refuse to make this call. But I’ve made it and I’ll just tell them you said you couldn’t help us right now. And I promise that will be the end of it. I’m truly sorry to you both. But really, I had no choice. They’ll understand. I’m sure. I’m really sorry to have upset you. Damn it I knew this would happen. I never should have called. Let’s just pretend this never happened. Please accept my apologies and I hope you guys get married. Good by.” And Agent Robert Chaffee abruptly disconnected before Dave or Holly had a chance to answer.

Holly came rushing into the living room and put her arms around Dave and began to cry. Dave held her tightly.

“Do you believe that guy? Are those people down at the FBI just completely nuts or what. ‘Pretty far up the chain of command,’” Dave repeated what Agent Chaffee had just said seconds ago. Holly backed away and looked into Dave’s eyes.

“Dave I cannot believe that Agent Chaffee just called and actually said what he just said.”

“God Damn It. We were just getting over this and he has to call. Is he out of his f’ing mind?”

“Hey Dave, I thought we we’re gonna stop using the F-word. Remember the pledge we made.”

“Yeah I remember, but I didn’t say the “F” word I said f’ing and besides, if any occasion required the use of that word, this one surely does. But seriously, those people are crazy. What could they possibly want us to help them with that they couldn’t handle within there own department, ‘ pretty far up the chain of command’?” He repeated the phrase a second time. Dave’s engineering curiosity was starting to get the best of him. Holly could sense it.

“Dave there is no way you’re gonna call him back. No way in Hell. Don’t even think about it. I don’t care how far up the chain of command it went. I don’t care if it went all the way up to the f’ing President! No way! Right?”

“Absolutely Holly. Just forget he ever called. We’ll just forget he ever called. And let’s both try to keep the profanity under control. At least for a week, anyhow.” Dave and Holly found themselves using four letter words quite often after their terrifying experience that should have cost both of them their lives. That was their excuse, anyhow. Their frequent cussing was brought to their attention by their friends and family, so they decided to set up a penalty system where when anyone was caught using a profanity, they had to deposit ten bucks in one of two labeled jars they set up on their granite, kitchen bar. Using the “f” word was an extra ten bucks. Dave’s jar had about twice as many ten and twenty-dollar bills as Holly’s.

“Oh David, I’m afraid. I don’t like this one bit.” Holly put her arms around Dave again and held him tightly.

“Afraid? There’s nothing to be afraid of. Agent Chaffee can’t force us to do anything we don’t want. This is America Holly Morgan. A little over a year ago they called us heroes. Remember? They even gave us a private ceremony at Langley.”

“I’m not afraid of Agent Chaffee, David. I’m afraid of you. I’m afraid you’re going to call him tomorrow to find out what he wanted us to do.”

Chapter 2

It had cooled off considerably as Dave and Holly lay in their king-size bed holding hands. Dave had turned the air conditioning off in the middle of the night and opened their sliding – glass bedroom doors. The sun was just coming up. It wasn't yet 5:30. Neither got a good night's sleep. Both were restless and got up several times at night.

"You didn't sleep very well last night, did you Dave?" Holly rolled up next to Dave and turned towards him as he lay face up starring blankly at the ceiling.

"No, and neither did you. Christ, how many times did you get up last night?"

"About as many as you."

"Damn that agent Chaffee." Holly said as she tried to get out of bed, but Dave gently drew her back by her arm and held her tightly next to his body.

"I still don't believe he called last night. 'It went pretty far up the chain of command'" Dave repeated what Chaffee said on the phone. "What the hell did he mean by that?"

"Just drop it Dave, will ya. You make me nervous every time you repeat that. Who the hell cares what he meant by it. We're not gonna pursue it anyway. David, promise me you're not going to call Chaffee."

"I'm not gonna call him, Holly"

"Promise me."

"I'm not gonna call him." Dave repeated more emphatically.

"Damn it Dave, promise me."

"I promise. Okay. I promise. Let's just forget it."

Holly turned, got on top of Dave and straddled him.

"Let's get married David."

"What?"

"You heard me, let's get married."

"When? Now?"

"Let's get married this weekend. You call your kids and I'll call mine. They can fly into Pittsburgh this weekend. Call your sister this morning. She always said we could get married at her place. And let's just do it."

"You're serious. You want to get married this weekend."

“Yes, this weekend. I’ll call my daughters before I go into Pittsburgh this morning and you call your two sons.”

“Wait a minute here. Just hold up a second. I know what you’re doin.”

“What, what am I doing?”

“You think that if we get married, there’s no way we’d ever listen to what Chaffee has to say. Like somehow marriage would make things different.”

“You’re nuts! You are completely crazy, David Cohen.” Holly smiled to herself but Dave couldn’t see the grin on her face because she quickly buried her face next to his in the pillow.

“That’s what you’re up to Holly Morgan. I know you too well. Don’t bullshit me. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that if we were married we’d never chance any kind of a foolhardy venture with Chaffee or anyone else.” Dave forced Holly back to her straddling position. She had a Cheshire cat -like grin on her face from ear to ear.

“So what. What if that was my motive? We said we’d get married in a year after I moved in and it’s been over a year. And that “bullshit” just cause you ten bucks.”

“Alright. Fine with me. Let’s get married this weekend. I’ll call the boys this morning right after you call your two girls. Then I’ll call my sister. She’ll call the rabbi and we can get married Sunday. We’re gonna get married by a rabbi, right? That was the deal, right?”

“Fine. That was the deal. No problem.”

“You know what, let’s call Chaffee and invite him to the wedding.”

“David! You better not be serious cause that’s not the least bit funny.”

“I’m kidding.” No he wasn’t.

“And don’t forget to put that ten bucks in the jar before you go out this morning.”

Holly decided not to waste the moment or the position they were in. They made love. Then took a shower together. Then Dave made their favorite breakfast. Rocky Mountain toast – a piece of white bread with a hole cut out of the middle. An egg dropped in the hole, then the whole concoction fried on both sides in gobs of sweet butter until the egg set up nicely in the hole. After breakfast, they made the appropriate calls they said they were going to make and Holly left for downtown Pittsburgh. Dave knew he wouldn’t have to make that call to agent Robert Chaffee to satisfy his obsessive curiosity. He knew before the day was over, Holly Morgan would make that call – to satisfy her obsessive curiosity.

Chapter 3

The wedding date was set for that Sunday, June 28th. Dave's older sister was already getting her back yard in Squirrel Hill prepared for the ceremony. She called the Rabbi. Dave called his two sons. Holly called her two daughters. Holly's two daughters were in their mid- twenties and drop dead gorgeous like their mother. Dave's two boys, also in their mid-twenties were studs in their own right. There wasn't enough room in their Mount Washington condo for everyone, so Dave's sister offered to put up her nephews for the weekend. It was Monday evening and everything was put in motion for the wedding ceremony to take place at noon on Sunday.

Dave and Holly wanted to keep everything simple, but Dave's sister had other plans. A pre-wedding dinner on Saturday was planned at the Grand Concourse restaurant in Station Square, right on the Monongahela River, for all the out of town guests that were about to be invited. Dave and Holly were thinking that only a hand full of close friends and family would be attending, but after they had a conference call with Dave's sister that evening, the guest list burgeoned to 50.

Agent Robert Chaffee was secretly added to the guest list. Holly called Agent Chaffee before noon that Monday. Nothing was mentioned about the call Chaffee placed the previous evening that upset Dave and Holly. And Holly kept the call to agent Chaffee from Dave secret, but told Dave's sister to include one more person for dinner at the Grand Concourse restaurant.

Dave decided that his wedding gift to Holly would be a brand new carbon fiber bike. Holly's present bike was a one-year-old, Jamis, carbon fiber, bike she had bought before last year's bike trip along the Erie Canal. But Dave knew Holly had a hard time getting on that bike because of the memories. He contacted his bike mechanic, John Sweeney who owned an upscale bike store in Shadyside. That week he would bring Holly's Jamis down there and have Sweeney order a new Specialized Carbon Fiber bike with the exact same dimensions and set up as the Jamis. He trusted John Sweeney implicitly to order and set everything up as he did before on the Jamis that Holly loved – before the experience on the Erie Canal. John Sweeney never took in a trade for a bike, but his relationship with Dave Cohen was such that he bent the rules. Said he was sure he could sell the Jamis for \$1500. It cost \$2200. The new Specialized road bike was in the neighborhood of \$2500. With the adjustments, lighter rims, and additions Holly would want it

would send the price a little over \$3000. Dave told John to have the bike ready the Monday after the wedding.

Dave and Holly planned to take a weeklong honeymoon on their bikes. They had planned a bike trip from Pittsburgh to Washington D.C. for the end of the summer and just decided to move the trip up a few months. They had sent away for all the brochures from the ATA Trail in Pennsylvania. The ATA (Allegheny Trail Authority) had an old rail line converted into a crushed limestone bike trail across a section of Pennsylvania to the Maryland, Mason Dixon Line border, ending up in Cumberland, Maryland. They called the bike trail The Great Allegheny Passage. From there the trail would connect with the C&O Canal bike trail along the Potomac River right into Washington, D.C. It was about 350 miles from their condo perched up on Mount Washington to Georgetown where the C&O Canal trail terminated. The final destination of Washington D.C. would turn out to be the perfect setting for Dave and Holly and Agent Robert Burns Chaffee to get reacquainted.

Holly Morgan left work early Monday afternoon and went shopping for the right dress for the wedding. Eventually she found exactly what she was looking for – a canary yellow sleeveless, strapless, short, tight fitting outfit that allowed all of Holly Morgan’s fine features to stand out. Yellow was a perfect color for Holly’s natural swarthy complexion nicely tanned from biking that summer. She decided to buy matching shoes but stayed away from high heels or any heels. The dress needed no alterations. She brought it back to the condo that evening.

Dave decided to go out that Monday to Saks and purchase a plain vanilla, navy blue suit, white shirt, and solid light gray tie. He toyed with the idea of new shoes but decided against it when he didn’t find anything much different than the shoes he already had back at the condo to choose from. David Cohen was not much of a clotheshorse. His biking apparel came directly from the racks of Wal-Mart. Much to Holly Morgan’s chagrin. Holly Morgan was stylish in everything she did. Her biking apparel was off the racks of European sporting good shops.

Yellow was her favorite color, set off so well against a perennial tan. She had several skin-tight one-piece, Lycra, biking outfits. She turned quite a few heads – male and female – as she went biking through the streets and surrounding parks in Pittsburgh. Dave and Holly biked every weekend the weather permitting. She was easily the stronger biker. And in those skin-tight, one-piece, Lycra, European, biking outfits, looked like she was training for the Tour de France

When Dave got back to the condo he took both his and Holly's bike, put them on the bike-rack on his car, and headed for John Sweeney's bike store in Shadyside. He told John Sweeney to adjust his bike for the Great Allegheny Trail and to be sure Holly's new Specialized bike conformed exactly to the Jamis. He said he would pick up the bikes the following Monday. He also mentioned to John that he was getting married Sunday. ("Are you shitting me?" was John's quick reply.)

The activities of the next few days were hectic for Dave and Holly, mostly for Holly; who decided to get more involved with planning and coordinating the whole affair with Dave's sister. Dave was more than happy to let them both go at it. He was more concerned with the bike trip to Washington D.C., going over the brochure in great detail, like only an obsessive engineer can do, trying to determine the best places to stop on the bike trail. Measuring distances between likely stopping points with the precision of a cartographer. The Great Allegheny Passage was listed as one of the best bike and walking trails in the country.

Crossing over the Allegheny Mountains on an abandon railroad line was not considered a difficult climb. Slopes over the mountains on the abandon rail line were not supposed to exceed 2%. The scenery on the crushed limestone path crossing over the Allegheny's was reported to be drop dead gorgeous. Dave was excited about getting back on the bike and taking an extended bike trip with Holly. Dave was more excited about the bike trip than the wedding. Dave and Holly had been biking in the Pittsburgh and surrounding areas every weekend since early May. They were both in good biking condition – Pittsburgh's hilly terrain will get you in that fine biking form quickly – your bike too. Or kill you quickly – your bike too.

Friday of that week, Dave and Holly drove out to the Pittsburgh airport after an early dinner to pick up their four children. They had to stay at the airport for over two hours until all their kids came in from all over the United States. Holly's two daughters came in from opposite coasts. Dave's sons came in from Atlanta and Chicago. It was 9 in the evening before they all congregated in the airport terminal parking lot and headed for Dave's sister's house in Squirrel Hill where Dave left off his two sons. Holly, Dave and Holly's daughters drove back to the Mount Washington condo. It was midnight before everyone got settled in. It was still unbearably warm that entire week in Pittsburgh.

Family and friends began congregating at the Grand Concourse restaurant around 6 in the evening. Drinks and appetizers were being served between 6 and 7:30. Half the restaurant had

been set up for the wedding party. Dave and Holly got to the festivities a little after 6. Within minutes of entering the restaurant, Dave saw Agent Robert Burns Chaffee standing near the bar, looking a little lonely. Dave quickly grabbed Holly by the back of her arm and turned her around.

“Holly Morgan, I knew it. I could have bet my life savings on it.” Dave turned her around towards the bar and pointed at agent Chaffee. Holly smiled sheepishly.

“C’ mom,” She said. “He looks pretty lonely standing over there. Besides, if I didn’t call him back, you would have, eventually. But Dave, I never mentioned - we didn’t talk about the call he made last Sunday. I swear.”

They slowly walked towards the bar greeting family and friends eventually making their way to where agent Chaffee was standing. Chaffee was staring out at the Monongahela River. His back was to Dave and Holly as they approached. Dave spoke first.

“Agent Chaffee, we just can’t seem to keep you out of our lives. Welcome to Pittsburgh.”

Agent Chaffee was at first startled, then immediately recognized the voice and turned around. A broad smile greeted Dave and Holly.

“There is no one’s wedding that I would rather attend. Congratulations to you both.” Robert Burns Chaffee put his arms out spread-eagle like and embraced both Dave and Holly in one giant bear hug.

Saturday’s festivities ended around 10:30. Dave and Holly stood outside at the restaurant’s entrance saying their good-byes to the last stragglers. It was still unbearably hot and muggy on the banks of the river. Dave and Holly were ready to leave, but noticed one of Holly’s Daughters and one of Dave’s sons were engrossed in conversation. Holly called over to her daughter and said they were ready to head back to the condo. By midnight, Dave and Holly were engrossed in their own conversation. Lying in bed trying to determine when their obsessive behaviors would overtake their good common sense and find out why agent Robert Burns Chaffee called them last Sunday? Why he needed their help? And how far up the organization did the request actually go? They were hoping they could make it past the wedding, Sunday, and be on their bikes traversing the Great Allegheny Passage, climbing up and over the Appalachian Mountains, like Americas first explorers, but heading in the opposite direction towards the nation’s capitol. They figured if they could make it till Tuesday, and get on that bike trail. They were home free. Or so they thought.