

## FATAL ERROR

\*\*\*

John P. O'Connor was one of Kansas City's top criminal defense lawyers. He regularly handled high-profile cases, winning more than his share. His secret was down-to-earth storytelling, which jurors always found more appealing than complex legal theorizing.

One wall of his office at his firm was covered with framed press clippings detailing how he helped a jury acquit one big-name client or another, including a high-spirited Kansas City councilwoman who once was charged with assaulting a local police officer. But when the reporters who wrote those articles appeared in his office for an interview, O'Connor was modest, noting that the clips were there only to reassure clients that they really did have a fighting chance.

Even an O'Connor courtroom loss could be impressive, though. A few years before, he had represented one of five defendants charged with an arson that killed six Kansas City firefighters. Though his client was convicted and sentenced to life, O'Connor's defense left more than a lingering suspicion, even among some federal judges, that prosecutors had indicted the wrong suspects.

O'Connor's background as a former assistant Jackson County prosecuting attorney also had earned him steady work defending police officers who found themselves in trouble.

As a former detective and lieutenant on the Cass County, Missouri Sheriff's Department, Jerry Cassaday had bumped into O'Connor a few times on cases, mostly those where Cassaday was trying to convict O'Connor's client on murder charges. As cop and criminal defense lawyer, Cassaday and O'Connor were natural adversaries.