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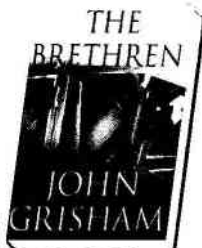
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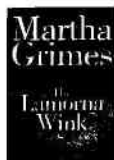
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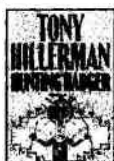
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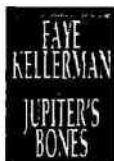
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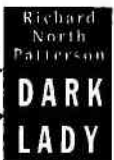
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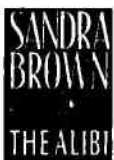
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

We were recently glad to see an issue of *Mystery Readers Journal* that was devoted to the short story, and we found it interesting indeed. Among other things, it included an article by AHMM author David K. Harford, whose most recent story for us was "The Martin McKain Affair" (November). As you know if you've been with us awhile, Harford's stories are usually long ones, and his essay is titled "Going Long: Writing Novella-Length Mysteries." In it he writes about the difficulty of turning out decent, much less attention-getting, stories of only a few thousand words as many new authors think they should do. By writing longer, he made his first sale to us after a number of rejections of short pieces, and he enjoyed the storytelling much more.

(Small caveat here for writers: now, don't *all* of you jump on the bandwagon, please! We don't have

the space to publish many novella-length stories in a year's time.)

If you're not familiar with *Mystery Readers Journal*, you might want to check it out—we've always found it fun to read. It's a quarterly publication, and each issue is devoted to a theme. This year's are Legal Mysteries, France, The Senior Sleuth, and Mysteries of the Southwest.

Articles on the designated theme are submitted by whoever wishes to write one (mystery writers often) and selected by editor Janet Rudolph. Books on the subject, new and old, are also discussed.

Back issues are offered, so you can get a copy of the short story issue (Fall 1999) by sending \$7 to P.O. Box 8116, Berkeley, California 94707. Subscriptions are \$24 (\$36 for overseas airmail).

If you have questions, you can e-mail Ms. Rudolph at whodunit@murderonthemenu.com.

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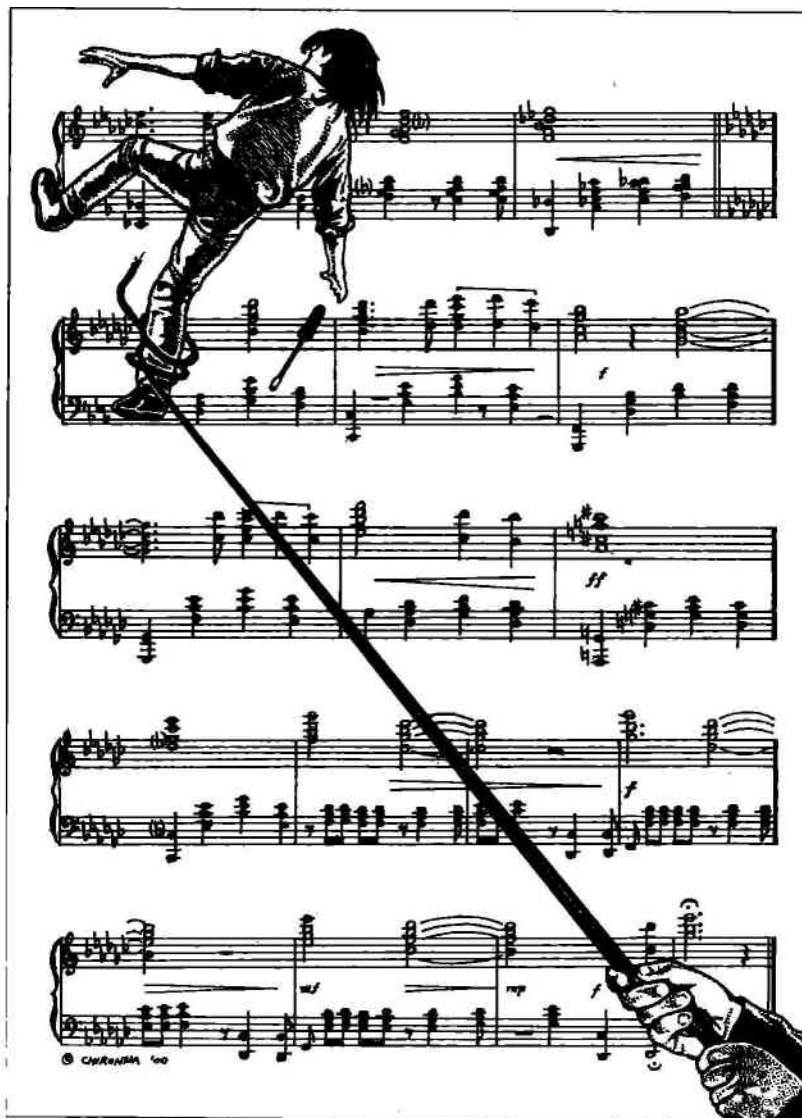
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FICTION

NO STRINGS

John H. Dirckx



The Riverside Park bandstand, both landmark and eyesore, stood in the dead center of the eighty acre park, its parabolic, sound-reflecting shell sticking up out of the ground like a gigantic ear of steel and concrete. On the stage of the bandshell, which was gritty with windblown dust and littered with dead leaves and debris, four persons were working intently, each at a different task. A fifth stood staring at the stage in rapt meditation from the graveled surface where wooden benches would soon be ranged for the first pops concert of the season.

These five had never been here together before, and they would never be here together again. All of them would remember this morning for the rest of their lives. But for one of them, that was only going to be a matter of minutes.

A fitful breeze stirred the budding trees and shrubs that grew wild along the riverbank, and tore at the skeins of early morning fog still hanging over the water. Melody Draechlein buttoned her sweater against the damp chill in the air. She paced off a distance on the stage, made a note on a clipboard, and then crossed it out.

"Look at this, will you, Jonn?" she asked. "I can't believe what a mess it's making of this seating chart just to add one trombone and one tuba."

Jonn Delpakian, who had been raising clouds of dust with a wide broom, came to her side and examined the chart.

"You can't put the trombones there," he said. "They'll bash the

guys in front of them every time they hit low E."

"Well, what should I do, then? Stagger the seats, or leave a set of risers empty?"

"Ask your dad. Ask Thorne. I just play clarinet. And sweep the floor."

Melody looked out into the audience area to where Anton Draechlein stood with the sun glinting metallicly in his hair and beard. Although he seemed to be looking directly at her, she knew better than to ask him anything while he was in one of his creative trances, hearing to the music of the spheres.

Thorne Chaffin glanced up from a looseleaf binder stuffed with orchestral scores. "If I were you," he said, "I wouldn't even look at that seating plan until the risers are in place."

Delpakian leaned on his broom handle. "Does that mean you're ready to help me bring them up?"

"I doubt if the two of us could manage it," said Chaffin, and went back to his music.

Ed Luthenborg, wearing an electrician's tool holster, clanked across the stage. "Some of these fixtures belong in a museum," he grouched as if to himself. "Insulation cracked off, contacts corroded, screws missing. Is there a ladder down below?" he asked Delpakian.

"All I saw down there were the risers and a lot of spiders and crickets. And this pathetic excuse for a broom, which somebody forgot to throw out. What do you need a ladder for?"

"I need to wire up those speakers around on the back of the shell."

"If you'll give me a hand bringing

up some of the risers," said Delpakian, "we can see if there's a ladder down there with them."

He and Luthenborg disappeared through the arched opening at the right end of the stage and headed for the storage area below.

Meanwhile Anton Draechlein, moving with the ponderous urgency of a steamroller, had approached the stage and was now climbing the stairs at the left end. Melody and Chaffin met him at the top.

"Thorne's got the programs finished for all eight concerts, Dad," said Melody. "Remember what you promised."

Draechlein put on bifocals with one hand and stretched out the other hand for the programs. "I said he could conduct any program I approved—if he could spare the time to rehearse the band."

"No problem there," said Chaffin. "All the numbers are old standards, and there's one of your compositions on every program. Two for the Fourth of July concert."

Draechlein ran a critical eye over the program of the first concert and made a sudden and rather alarming noise like a suppressed hiccup. "You can't do the Strauss," he said with gruff finality. "That's never been scored for winds and brass. We just checked last summer."

"I'm arranging it myself on the computer," said Chaffin. "I've got it half finished already. There'll be plenty of time to rehearse it. The first pops concert isn't until two weeks after Memorial Day."

Draechlein made more noises and stamped away to ruminate over the other programs in peevish solitude.

Delpakian and Luthenborg returned from the basement without having found a ladder. "This is a bigger mess than I thought," fumed the electrician. "I don't even know what I'm doing here, a left-handed piano tuner fixing light switches and stringing speaker wire."

"What's the problem?" Chaffin asked.

"We can't reach those speakers on the back of the bandshell to hook up the wires," said Luthenborg.

Chaffin stepped through the doorway at the side of the stage into what would have been the wings if this were an indoor auditorium. As it was, he found himself on an irregularly shaped platform, fifteen or twenty square feet in area, hidden from the audience area by the base of the soaring arch that formed the front rim of the shell. From here a stairway led down and back, conforming to the curve of the shell. A concrete ridge a few inches wide swept upward from the platform across the back of the shell, evidently corresponding to a curved beam in the supporting structure.

"Can't you reach it from that ledge?" asked Chaffin.

"Spider-Man might. I get height fright looking down to see if my shoes are tied."

"Have you got the end of that wire stripped? Give me a screwdriver."

"Thorne, you can't walk up that ledge," objected Melody. "It's too narrow, and it gets steeper the higher it goes."

"Haven't you known him long enough to know that you can't talk him out of anything?" asked Delpak-

ian. He started for the far end of the stage.

Melody followed him. "Jon, did Thorne say anything to you about the group?"

"Such as?" Delpakian's manner was far from cordial, and he was manipulating the broom with counterproductive vigor. "I told him a couple of weeks ago that if he wants out, it's okay with me."

"He doesn't want out." She looked across the river at the traffic speeding along Pemberton Avenue. "He wants you out."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. He wants to do strictly rock, and he wants you and Hilty to drop out of the group."

Delpakian flung down the broom again and tore off in toward where Chaffin and Luthenborg were working. When he reached the platform behind the stage, Luthenborg had gone to his car for a spool of wire, and Thorne Chaffin was alone.

"What's this garbage about my dropping out of Mind Set?" demanded Delpakian.

Chaffin, with one foot on the curving ledge, eyed him unperturbedly. "Jon, clarinet and saxophone music is for people with grandkids and paid-up mortgages. We're only getting two-bit gigs because the bar crowds want rock. You and Hilty fit in like a couple of pallbearers at a wedding."

"Have you talked about this to Hilty yet?"

"I've talked to all the guys, and believe me, you and Hilty are the odd men out."

"Listen, Thorne, I started Mind Set, remember? It's my group. I sign

the contracts, I write the checks. You can't just walk in and take it over and throw me out."

"History may say different."

Ed Luthenborg came up the steps carrying a spool of weather-proofed speaker wire as Delpakian charged away.

"Don't go aloft just yet," Luthenborg advised Chaffin. "First I want to unroll enough wire around the back of the shell to reach the other speaker." He handed the free end of the wire to Chaffin and went back down the steps. Thrusting a large screwdriver through the hole in the core of the spool, he took off through the weeds at the base of the bandshell, letting it uncoil as he went.

Delpakian was at center stage, declaiming to Melody, who was offering scant consolation. "Maybe he's right," she said. "Maybe the way to get more gigs is to concentrate on rock."

"Okay, but where does that leave me?"

Anton Draechlein, still brooding over the pops concert programs, passed at his habitual lumbering pace toward the end of the stage where Thorne Chaffin was waiting to do his aerial act. Two or three minutes later he returned, in the same distracted mood, and almost collided with Luthenborg, who was crossing the stage in the opposite direction. Luthenborg in turn disappeared for a minute or two through the doorway at the right and then came back looking perplexed, or maybe just annoyed.

All of these comings and goings Melody noticed more or less unconsciously, standing as she was

at the front edge of the stage facing into the shell, and repeatedly looking from it to the seating chart and back again.

Delpakian was still raging. "He can start his own group if he wants to," he said. "Nobody's stopping him. But he can't call it Mind Set. That name and the goodwill that goes with it belong to me. And so does the sound equipment. What about you? Would you still sing with Hilty and me?"

Melody fidgeted with her chart in silence. She saw Delpakian turn away wrathfully and head toward the end of the stage again. She was looking outward across the park when, a couple of minutes later, he ran around the front of the stage on the gravel, shouting frantically and waving his arms.

"**C**an't you close his eyes?" Melody Draechlein stood on one foot staring in horror at the body of Thorne Chaffin, which lay amid a trampled area of grass and weeds at the back of the bandshell. His neck was twisted at a grotesque angle, and his skin was mottled purple. The paramedics had unceremoniously slashed up the front of his sweatshirt to attach monitor leads to his chest, where they still remained. A tangle of electrical wire lay across his legs.

Nick Stamaty shot another flash photo. In his dark suit and gold-rimmed glasses he looked more like a clergyman than an investigator for the coroner's office.

"I'll put a blanket over him in a minute, ma'am," he said. "I'm not al-

lowed to change anything about the body before I take pictures."

A wave of shivering passed over her and made her teeth chatter. "I can't believe this is happening."

"If you'd like to have a seat in front, on the passenger side . . ." He nodded toward the white van that was parked on the nearest roadway, where the paramedics were just repacking their equipment. "I'd like to ask you a few more questions."

"Will he be . . ."

"In the back? No. An ambulance will be coming later to pick him up. You're not a relative, you said?"

"No. His family lives in North Carolina." She drifted away to the van but couldn't keep her eyes off the crumpled, lifeless effigy of Thorne Chaffin that lay at the base of the bandshell.

At length Stamaty joined her, pushing the driver's seat back as far as it would go and moving the steering wheel to its highest setting to make room for a clipboard with report forms. On one of these he entered her name and address.

"Can you tell me what happened? Just as you saw it. Take your time."

"I didn't see it happen. All I know is that he was trying to attach wires to that speaker on the back of the shell."

"I think you said he was working with somebody else on that?"

"Mr. Luthenborg. He's a piano tuner and technician at the Conservatory. He was trying to get the lighting and sound system ready for the summer pops season."

"And where is he now?"

"He and my father both had to leave. They hadn't planned to spend

more than an hour or so here this morning."

"And your father is . . ."

"Dr. Draechlein, the music director of the Philharmonic. He usually conducts the pops concerts here at the park during the summer, but this season he was going to let Thorne take them over."

"Did either your father or Luthenborg see Chaffin fall?"

"Nobody saw him fall. Jonn Delpakian went behind the stage to talk to him about something and just found him lying on the ground."

"Who's Delpakian?"

"One of the musicians in the Philharmonic and the Civic Band. He was just helping out, cleaning up and so on. The city doesn't allocate any money for support services—we all have to pitch in and do whatever has to be done."

"Was Delpakian helping to string wire?"

"No, he was sweeping the stage."

"Did he leave with the others?"

"He left when they did. He had his own car."

Stamaty made a note of Delpakian's name. "Anybody else here this morning besides you and these people you mentioned?"

"No."

"Was Chaffin breathing or moving when you first saw him on the ground?"

"No."

"And according to your observation, his death was accidental?"

It seemed to her that she hesitated for only an instant, but it was long enough to draw an inquiring glance from Stamaty. "Of course it must have been an accident. It was

just such a shock, and—such a stupid way for him to die. He didn't drink or do drugs. He didn't even smoke. He was in good shape, and he had a perfect sense of balance. How could he fall off the back of the bandshell and get killed?"

"The ledge he was on is only about five inches wide," said Stamaty, "and it's more than twenty-one feet from the ground at the point right below the speaker. It looks like he just got his feet tangled up in the wire. Do you have any reason to think it happened some other way?"

"No, I guess not."

"No bad feelings between Chaffin and any of the other people here—recent arguments . . ."

"Thorne could be overbearing at times. He often rubbed people the wrong way. But that was just his manner. He never did anything to make somebody want to kill him."

Stamaty nodded as if inviting her to go on, but his heavy eyebrows were raised and his look was anything but amiable. When they'd started talking, he'd seemed like an uncle—friendly, sympathetic, and helpful. Now the avuncular veneer was wearing thin and the public official was showing through.

"I'm not sure if you're trying to convince me or yourself," he said. "Who was the last person he rubbed the wrong way?"

She tried to deny everything but soon realized she was only getting in deeper. All in a rush she told him about Thorne's move to take over the group Jonn Delpakian had formed a couple of years ago. "But I know Jonn didn't kill him. He couldn't kill anybody."

"Not even in a sudden fit of rage?"

"No. Not Jonn. Besides, he was with me when Thorne fell."

"We can't be sure of that. I mean, we don't know to the second when he did fall. What about the others—your father and this piano tuner, Luthenborg? What kind of terms were they on with Chaffin?"

"Well, my father thought Thorne was the eighth wonder of the world—the most brilliant musical prodigy since Mozart. I don't believe Thorne had ever had much contact with Mr. Luthenborg—though they did drive out here together this morning."

As she was walking to her car in the lot on the other side of the park, a solitary and forlorn figure, Stamaty picked up the phone. He had punched in four digits of the number he called to order the removal of a body when he stopped, hung up, and called police headquarters instead.

It was about ten thirty when Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn parked in the roadway behind Stamaty's van. The coroner's investigator was sitting on the steps at the right end of the bandshell, about ten yards from where the body of Thorne Chaffin lay under a blue plastic sheet.

The air in the park was damp, and Auburn could smell the river even at this distance. The bandstand with its huge reflecting shell loomed under an overcast sky, a monstrosity of pitted concrete and not-quite-stainless steel. Auburn noted, without appreciating them, the art deco touches—curving rows of parallel ridges giving a fluted ef-

fect and a dado of alternating green and ivory tiles.

Auburn had worked side by side with Stamaty many times in the past. Within three minutes he had heard all the salient features of the case and looked at the body. Thorne Chaffin was tall and rangy, with shoulder-length jet black hair and coarse but virile features. His head and face looked like something roughed out by a sculptor from a block of stone with a few preliminary strokes of the chisel. It would never be finished now.

"Are these wires connected to anything?"

"No. The electrician was just unrolling them from a spool. It's lying on the ground, over on the other side."

Auburn covered the body again. "Your guys coming?" he asked.

"Not yet. I wanted Public Safety in on this before the body was removed. If you want in, that is."

"I don't know. Let me look around."

Auburn climbed up on the stage, walked across it, wandered around the back of the shell, and rattled the locked door of the basement. He uncovered the body again and looked at the hands and the shoes. He tried climbing the ledge from which Chaffin had fallen and immediately gave it up as too risky.

He found Stamaty strolling in a pensive mood along the riverbank. Five Canadian geese were paddling in a tranquil arc across the chilly, murky water towards a small island in the middle of the river. "What instrument did he play?"

"Mostly organ and guitar. But

that girl said he could pick up any instrument ever made and get music out of it. Said her dad compared him to Mozart. What do you think? Did he just fall?"

"The only way somebody could have knocked him off that ledge was to climb up after him—"

"Or yank on the wire he was holding."

"Or yank on the wire. Have you got good pictures?"

"I always get good pictures."

"Take him away. I'll go around and talk to these people, but I don't expect to get much. It was probably just a dumb accident, and if it wasn't, the only one who knows that isn't going to tell me about it."

He started away and turned back. "Contrary to rumor, no matter how much rope you give a guy, he won't hang himself. Not with the Miranda decision and entrapment and probable cause all going for him."

"Rope!" snorted Stamaty, who had been a cop for years in another city before joining the coroner's office. "You can't even hand a suspect a roll of post office twine."

"You're giving away your age, Nick. The post office hasn't used twine since the Eisenhower administration."

After seven years as a beat cop himself, and another seven as a detective sergeant, Cyrus Auburn was all but immune to fatigue and all but impervious to bad weather. But his digestive system could be as temperamental as a two dollar watch. From the park he went to lunch.

The Conservatory of Music occu-

ried a tall narrow red brick building with limestone pilasters in the neighborhood of the university, with which it was affiliated. There was no reception desk and no elevator. A directory board in the lobby was so thickly plastered with notices and messages that it was only with difficulty that Auburn recognized it for what it was and found the number of Dr. Draechlein's office.

Somewhere in the building someone was singing scales in a vibrant contralto. As he climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, these grew gradually fainter, eventually yielding to an intricate sequence of notes endlessly repeated on a violin.

Draechlein's office door stood open. Auburn walked into a suite of three adjoining rooms, in one of which a baby grand piano groaned under a mountain of sheet music, books, and folders. In another, Draechlein was sitting at a desk, similarly inundated, watching the traffic in the street below.

Auburn rapped on the doorpost and showed identification. Draechlein sprang to attention and cleared a chair for him to sit on. He was a stoutly built, intense man, with spiky hair and a full beard the color of smoke, given to abrupt and dramatic gestures. The bridge of his bulbous nose showed deep marks from a pair of glasses not presently in evidence. "It's about Thorne, of course." He spoke with a faint Teutonic accent.

At the park Auburn had started three-by-five-inch file cards on each of the people at the bandshell when Chaffin died. He pulled out the card with Anton Draechlein's name on

it. "This is just a routine inquiry, sir. For the record—"

"Let me tell you something, officer," interrupted Draechlein. "I have the reputation of being a Tartar—harsh, demanding, hypercritical, without feeling. Maybe some of that is true, but what happened this morning has shocked me, shaken me more than anything in my whole life. Thorne Chaffin had a rare musical talent, and the loss to the world of music is incalculable. But my personal loss is even greater."

"What was your relationship exactly?"

Draechlein's beard twitched as his face worked with emotion. "He came to the conservatory three years ago as a keyboard student. Not only did he have the makings of a virtuoso organist, but his intuitive grasp of musical theory was astonishing. Do you happen to know what solfeggio is?"

"Sorry, sir. I'm afraid I don't know Rimsky from Korsakoff." It was something Auburn's mother used to say. For some reason Draechlein seemed to find it inordinately amusing. Maybe he was getting hysterical in his grief.

"Solfeggio is the ABC's of musical theory—notes, intervals, scales, chords . . . Some people are born with it already built into their nervous systems. They don't have to learn it, just activate it, like remembering something. Thorne was one of those people."

Glorification of the lately departed was nothing new in Auburn's experience, but he felt sure Draechlein was expressing long-standing convictions. "I understand you and

Chaffin were out at the park this morning working on the programs for the summer pops concerts."

"For the Civic Band concerts, yes. Possibly you're aware that I'm music director of the local Philharmonic Orchestra. During the off season some of the members of the Philharmonic form a Civic Band, and we put on eight pops concerts at Riverside bandshell. I was grooming Thorne to take over the direction of the Civic Band this year."

"Pardon my stupidity, but what's the difference between an orchestra and a band?"

Draechlein made a violent clucking sound deep in his throat and threw his hands into the air as if he were about to conduct a symphony. Instead, he delivered a lecture.

"The main difference is that there aren't any instruments in a band that you can't take out in the rain. Stringed instruments—violin, viola, cello, and bass—are made of Norway spruce and glue. Lots of glue. After about three minutes in a heavy rain, you just throw them away. Somebody made an aluminum violin once, but it sounded like an elephant in labor. Where was I?"

"You were getting Chaffin ready to take over the pops concerts. I understand he also plays in a group."

"Exactly," said Draechlein, contorting his heavy features in a demonic grimace. "A group. Of monkeys. Manufacturing uninspired noise for gangs of adolescents who are too drunk to hear anything but a rhythm line laid down by a jackhammer!"

"You obviously didn't approve of that part of his work."

Draechlein flailed his arms and legs so that the metal swivel chair under him clanked like a boxcar going over a switch. "Let me tell you something, officer. Most people think that because musicians sit down and make nice noises, they're not working very hard. But playing a musical instrument isn't play, it's work. And a percussionist sheds ten times more sweat counting beats than hitting drums.

"There is no kind of job on this planet that consumes more energy, demands more intense concentration, or puts a greater strain on the constitution than being a professional musician. And even a genius has to practice. All the hours Thorne spent on the guitar and the synthesizer were so much time lost from the organ."

When he paused for breath, Auburn waved the file card between two fingers as if to flag him to a stop. "About this morning. Could you tell me what happened, as you saw it?"

"I didn't see Thorne fall. Nobody did. He was working with our sound technician, Luthenborg, trying to wire a speaker. There's a sloping ledge behind the bandshell—"

"I've seen it."

"They didn't have a ladder, and Thorne thought he could climb along that ledge—just showing off."

"Did you see him up on the ledge?"

"I saw him starting up with some wires in his hand and a screwdriver in his mouth."

"Was Luthenborg with him then?"

"No. I just went around behind the stage to talk to Thorne for a minute. When I went back on the stage, Luthenborg was coming across it

from the other end, grumbling about something as usual. Two or three minutes later, Jonn Delpakian went back to talk to Thorne and found him lying on the ground at the back of the bandshell, unconscious."

"Is Delpakian one of the musicians in the Civic Band?"

"He plays clarinet in both the Philharmonic and the Civic Band. And also—" this with a scowl of distaste—"in his own group, the same one Thorne played with."

"Was Delpakian helping with the wiring job?"

"Not that I know of. He was just there." He ran the fingers of one hand through his beard. "Delpakian follows my daughter around like a tame squirrel. Have you talked to her yet?"

"No. Is she here?"

"She should be. I'm not sure if she came back here after she left the park. She was quite upset."

"Was she particularly close to Chaffin?"

"She was fond of him, and she respected him for his musical talent. I don't think it amounted to anything more than that, but what does a father ever know?"

Auburn found Melody sitting alone in a small recital hall, looking at photographs and weeping copiously. She was wearing a long baggy gray sweater, lemon yellow jeans, and tennis shoes. She had her father's florid coloring and strongly marked facial features, but none of his flamboyance. At least not today.

She told him essentially the same story she'd already told Stamaty. She was the lead vocalist with Delpakian's group, Mind Set, and

worked part-time at the conservatory as a voice coach. Her role with the Civic Band was unofficial—she'd been helping Chaffin and her father plan the pops concerts. She'd heard Chaffin and Luthenborg talking about wiring the speakers and had even urged Chaffin not to try climbing along the ledge, but she hadn't been there when he did it, or when he fell.

"I was on the stage, working on the seating chart," she said. "Jonk went back to talk to Thorne, but he came back almost immediately. Then my dad went out to tell him something, and *he* came back. After that I saw Mr. Luthenborg going across the stage, and I think he went out to where Thorne was working but I can't be sure. And then Thorne fell."

"Did you or any of the others hear him cry out when he fell?"

"I didn't. I don't think anyone did. Jonk just went back to talk to him and found him lying there." She had an odd way of emphasizing certain words unexpectedly, saying them on a higher note and then blinking vigorously as if she'd scared herself.

"How long after Delpakian left the stage did he come back to report finding Chaffin?"

"I don't know. Less than a minute. At first he didn't see Thorne because he expected him to be up above, on the ledge."

"Did you go back there as soon as Delpakian told you what had happened?"

"We all did. It was—horrible. I can't stop thinking how he looked."

"Was he breathing or moving?"

"No."

Very cautiously he raised the question of Delpakian's argument with Chaffin over the group. She assured him there was nothing in it and that Delpakian was, in her opinion, incapable, both morally and physically, of knocking Thorne Chaffin off the ledge.

"I guess I'd better see these other people. Are they both here?"

"Mr. Luthenborg should be in the MIDI lab in the basement. Jonk's probably out there somewhere waiting to take me to lunch. Here's what he looks like." She showed him a publicity photo of Delpakian's group and pointed him out in the middle, a lanky youth with hair like a shaving brush. Chaffin was in the picture, too, grinning sardonically from behind an electronic keyboard.

On his way into the men's restroom, Auburn nearly put his finger into the eye of a man just coming out. "Easy on the face," said the other goodnaturedly. "I'd like to keep it together. I think I'm a pretty good-looking dude."

"I'd trade faces with you any day," said Auburn. "I might even keep the earring. I said *I might*. You're Delpakian."

"Jonk." Delpakian proffered a big flat hand splayed like a bamboo rake. His affable mood cooled slightly when he saw Auburn's badge. "It's about Thorne," he said, unconsciously echoing Anton Draechlein.

"It's about Thorne. Got a minute?"

Delpakian led him to an empty practice room, a bare windowless box with an unnerving echo, containing nothing but an upright piano and bench. Neither of them sat on the bench.

"I'm sorry if you were looking for me out at the park," said Delpakian. "Finding him lying there like that made me kind of sick. I felt like I had to get out of there."

"You okay now?"

"I think so."

"Can you tell me what happened at the park this morning?"

Delpakian put his back against the piano. "I don't know who you've already talked to. Thorne was out at the bandshell with Dr. Draechlein, the music director of the Philharmonic, to start planning the summer pops concerts. Ed Luthenborg, the audio engineer, was with them, and Melody Draechlein and I tagged along to help out."

He moved away from the piano and started pacing in a tight arc, jingling keys in his pocket. "Ed couldn't reach a speaker to attach some wires, and Thorne tried to climb up to it by inching along a ledge on the back of the shell. Apparently he lost his footing or tripped on the wire when nobody was there to help him, and he fell head first all the way to the ground."

"How did you come to find him?"

"I went behind the stage to talk to him and he wasn't there. I waited around a minute, and then just happened to look over the edge of the platform and saw him. The way he was lying, I knew he had to be dead."

"Where was the wire when you found him?"

"The wire? Sort of draped over his legs, I think. There are a lot of weeds there."

"You said nobody was there to help him. Where were the others?"

"They were all working on the stage."

"When you left it?"

"Yes, and they were still there when I went back to tell them about Thorne falling. Why—doesn't my story match theirs?"

"I haven't talked to all of them yet. Is there any reason why everybody shouldn't be telling the same story?"

"I don't know. You tell me. You're the police." Behind his faintly brava-do tone Auburn failed to discern the least trace of anxiety or guilt. He decided to dispense a few inches of post office twine.

"I've been given to understand that you and Thorne Chaffin had a pretty serious argument this morning, right before he fell."

Delpakian nodded. "Melody told you that." He ran two fingers along the front edge of the piano lid and examined them for dust. "I was the one who was mad, though. Things like that didn't faze Thorne. He had skin like an alligator."

"I think you're saying you don't believe he fell because of a—disturbed mental state."

"Absolutely not."

"And *your* disturbed mental state didn't have anything to do with his falling, either?"

Delpakian suddenly woke up to the posture of affairs. "Absolutely not," he repeated, but this time the piano strings took up the refrain.

"Okay, son. Stay cool. Nobody's saying they saw you knock him off the ledge. But nobody saw him fall, either. I have to file a report, and I'd like to get it right the first time. If you pushed him off—no, just listen

a minute—if you pushed him off, or pulled him off, it was obviously unpremeditated, a sudden act of anger. If you come clean to me now, before my investigation turns up evidence to incriminate you, you may get off without a jail term. I can't promise that, of course. But I can promise you this: if you keep this thing to yourself, you'll never have an hour's peace or a decent night's sleep again as long as you live, whether I manage to nail you for it or not."

Delpakian folded his long fingers together almost as if he were praying. "Officer, I didn't kill him, okay? He was an arrogant, phony, overbearing creep. I'm not sorry he's dead, but I didn't kill him. And you won't find any evidence that I did."

"You said phony. I guess you don't think he was such a genius, then?"

"Correct, I do not. With all due respect to Dr. Draechlein, I think Thorne had him hypnotized. Thorne had talent, yes—more than I have, for instance. But he was too lazy to develop it fully. He used it the way a rich person can use money to impress people and gain influence, without ever spending any of it." He looked at his watch. "Are we about through? I have a lunch date twenty minutes ago."

Auburn made a note of his address and phone number and let him go.

The musical instrument digital interface lab—MIDI for short—proved to be a maze of soundproof cubicles in the basement, each equipped with a computer screen and two keyboards, one like a typewriter and one like a piano. Fol-

lowing the sound of voices, Auburn found a middle-aged man in a rumpled lounge suit arguing with himself in a workshop at the back while overhauling what looked like an electronic eggbeater but probably wasn't one.

Yes, he was Luthenborg. Yes, he was free to talk. He led Auburn to a small office decorated with sports trophies. He told Auburn exactly what the others had told him, no more and no less. Chaffin had still been climbing when Luthenborg had left him, and all the others had been on the stage until Delpakian went back and found him lying on the ground.

Luthenborg had a long fleshless nose, as thin as a credit card. His manner was reserved, even stuffy, but Auburn had a hunch there was something on his mind and that it would all come forth in a flood if he could only find the password.

"Could Chaffin have gotten an electric shock from that wire?"

Luthenborg shook his head with a decisive snap. "Impossible. It wasn't connected to a power source."

"How well did you know Chaffin?"

"Not very well. He was just another student to me. They come, they go."

Auburn made some notes on a file card to give Luthenborg time to loosen up and start talking, but it didn't happen. "Looks like computers have invaded the music world," he said finally. "You've got a whole orchestra of them here." (He knew better than to say "band." You don't take computers out in the rain.)

"Some of them are just synthesizers. Some are MIDI units, where

you can play a tune on the keyboard and the computer will display the notes on the screen. Or vice versa. Some are programmed for arranging, some for composing.”

Auburn arched his eyebrows. “Can a computer really compose music?”

“Sure. Compose it, score it, print out the individual parts, and play it on a synthesizer. It’s all in the software. You can let a cat walk across a keyboard and the computer will store the notes it plays and write you a set of twelve variations on them, in the style of Vivaldi, scored for period instruments. Or a symphony movement in sonata form, with your choice of tempo markings, in the style of Haydn, from whichever one of his five decades you pick. And there’s an orchestration program to keep you from writing a note for a B-flat clarinet that it hasn’t got, or a cadenza that a violinist can’t play without sprouting a couple of extra fingers.”

The floodgates had opened but the subject matter didn’t seem very promising. “How much music is actually written that way nowadays?” asked Auburn.

“Not much. Mostly MIDI is a teaching tool. And a labor-saving device. Take, for instance, Dr. Draechlein. He can sit down and improvise for ten or fifteen minutes and then have the computer play it all back to him and display it on a screen so he can edit out the junk and keep what he wants. If he doesn’t like it as an organ piece, he can use a program to score it for strings, or a wind group, or a symphony orchestra. Or a barbershop quartet.

“Say an orchestra or a choral group somewhere commissions a piece from him to open or close their season. With the right software he can grind out a tone poem or a cantata from scratch in a couple of hours—and that’s with all the parts printed out separately as well as a master score for the conductor. Even Mozart couldn’t produce music that fast.”

“I didn’t know Dr. Draechlein was a composer, too.”

“What do you mean, ‘too’? Composing is his main thing. That’s how he got his job here, and his position as music director of the Philharmonic.”

“He’s that good?”

“Don’t ask me good. I’ve got perfect pitch and I can hear an ant clear its throat across the street, but to me one piece of music is just as good as another. Or just as bad. I tune pianos for a living. For fun I go fishing and coach kids’ baseball.”

This wasn’t getting Auburn anywhere, but at least Luthenborg was still talking. Auburn let him demonstrate a MIDI program and even composed a hymn tune himself by choosing a series of note sequences from a menu. On the synthesizer it sounded pretty dreary, but printed out as his Opus 1 it looked impressive enough.

He was a little surprised when Luthenborg knocked off work for the day and left him alone in the lab, playing floppy discs of Draechlein’s music through a synthesizer. “Lock up when you leave, will you?” he said. “There’s about three and a half million bucks’ worth of equipment in here.”

Auburn spent some more time at the computer and then started poking around the department. There wasn't much in Luthenborg's office except books of schematic diagrams, parts catalogs, and files of invoices.

When he left the lab, he found the stairs to the lobby dark and the building dead quiet. The opportunity to snoop further without the formality of a warrant was too good to be neglected. Without locking the lab, he made his way back to the fourth floor and Draechlein's office.

True to his training, he started with the wastepaper basket. One oddity surfaced immediately. Everything Draechlein had thrown out—advertising circulars, interoffice memos, personal correspondence, scraps of music in manuscript—he had merely crumpled up except for one sheaf of pages that had been printed out by a computer. These he had systematically torn into small squares—so systematically that in less than five minutes Auburn was able to reassemble them on the floor. They were Thorne Chaffin's proposed programs for the eight pops concerts.

Borrowing paper and paste from another office, he mounted the programs on blank sheets and went back down to the MIDI lab. He was still there when, at nine o'clock, the rumbling in his stomach started drowning out the music he was playing.

During the course of the following morning, the coroner's office faxed a preliminary report of the autopsy on Chaffin to police headquarters. Death was due to respiratory arrest as a consequence of

cervical fracture with high transection of the spinal cord. The skull was fractured as well, and brain injury was listed as a contributing cause of death. Two fingernails had been torn out by the roots as Auburn had seen for himself, but otherwise there were no marks on the body below the chin. No drugs or other toxic substances were found in the stomach contents or the blood.

Later Stamaty brought copies of his pictures across the street from his office in the courthouse, but they told Auburn nothing new. Background checks on the four persons who had been at the bandshell with Chaffin drew blank.

Even though the case was panning out as an accident, Auburn got a key to the basement of the bandshell from the Bureau of Parks and returned to the scene of Chaffin's fall to do some further investigating.

He went over every inch of ground around the bandshell and explored the cluttered, musty storage space under the stage. He wandered across the deserted park to the river, and while watching the geese, he pondered the psychology of the people in this case. They were all musically oriented, but each of them thought and reacted in a different way. One was an instrumentalist, one a singer, one a composer, one a technician—and one was dead.

He was ready to head back to the office when he saw the plastic bag and the tracks in the mud.

Luthenborg didn't seem particularly pleased to see Auburn again. "I was out at the bandshell this

morning," Auburn told him, "and I'm still not satisfied about that speaker wire. If somebody wanted to kill Chaffin, they could have connected it to the power lines in the basement."

"What somebody? You're talking about me. I handed him that wire. And I'm telling you it wasn't connected to anything. Why would I want to kill the guy, anyway?"

"Yesterday you told me you didn't know him very well. According to the coroner's report, he rode to the park with you yesterday."

"Because we were both going to the same place and he was having some kind of trouble with his car. Just tell me this. Am I really under suspicion?"

"No. But there's a suggestion that Chaffin's death may not have been accidental. That means we go ahead with a full-scale homicide investigation, no holds barred. All the witnesses, including yourself, agree on the sequence of events. According to that, you were the last person to see Chaffin alive.

"If you had anything to do with his death, you should tell me about it," Auburn said, and recited to Luthenborg much of what he had told Delpakian: ". . . I *can* promise that if you keep it to yourself, you'll never have an hour's peace, or a decent night's sleep—"

"That I can believe," said Luthenborg, and suddenly he looked haggard and old. "You can call off your investigation right now. I think I probably killed him."

Auburn gave him his rights before letting him proceed.

"It was an accident. You've got to

believe that. I handed him the end of the wire and started around the back of the bandshell, unrolling the spool as I went. When I was about halfway around, I felt a jerk on the wire, and I jerked back on it, sort of like a reflex, and kept on going. I didn't think any more about it until I found Chaffin—"

"You found him?"

"I found him. When I went back across the stage and out on the platform again, I saw him lying on the ground. I figured I'd pulled him off when I jerked on the wire. I knew he was dead—I know dead when I see it—so I just went back on the stage and waited for somebody else to find him. I'm not proud of that, but I sure never meant to kill that kid."

His face knotted up like a walnut, and the tears came. When he'd settled down, Auburn gave him a card and instructed him to report to the address indicated, during the hours indicated, to make a statement to Lieutenant Savage. Then he went looking for Draechlein.

He found him giving an organ lesson in a small auditorium off the lobby. He waited almost half an hour while Draechlein frothed and squawked at the pupil, a very young boy whose feet barely reached the pedals. When the lesson was over, they went up to Draechlein's office. Auburn waited until they were there to talk business.

"Yesterday at the bandshell," he said, "Thorne Chaffin showed you the programs he'd worked out for the eight concerts this summer."

"He may have," Draechlein conceded with a vague nod. "I don't remember."

"I think you do. You brought them back here, tore them into little pieces, and threw them into that wastepaper basket. What was so objectionable about those programs that you didn't want anybody to be able to read them?"

Draechlein regarded him with a scowl. "What does all this have to do with Thorne Chaffin's death?"

"A lot. Each of those programs included one of your compositions. And in each case the selection that came right before it—a standard work in the light classical repertory—was obviously the source of one of the themes you used in your piece."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and neither do you," snorted Draechlein, thrashing restlessly in his chair. "You're getting Rimsky mixed up with Korsakoff." He didn't think it was funny today.

"When I told you I didn't know anything about music," said Auburn, "I was exaggerating a little. I took a year of piano in the fifth grade, and I sang in my high school glee club for four years. And I collect classical jazz records."

"That doesn't qualify you to pass judgment on the work of a front-line modern composer."

"Maybe not, but it helped last night when I was playing disks in the MIDI lab. You compose your music by improvising at a computerized keyboard—"

"Sometimes."

"—and using software programs to edit and orchestrate it. I doubt that Chaffin was the only one who noticed something about your music that you yourself couldn't or didn't want to hear: that lots of your

phrases and themes were lifted bodily from the works of other composers. Probably that happened accidentally while you were improvising."

"The number of possible sequences of tones," announced Draechlein sententiously, "is not infinite. You can't patent a theme. It's not what themes you use, it's what you do with them. Elgar recycled the same basic set of chord progressions through at least half of his concert pieces. The third movement of Mahler's first symphony—"

"Yes, but it wasn't just the themes that you copied, Dr. Draechlein. Rhythm, phrasing, harmonies, thematic development—consciously or not, you assimilated all that from other composers and called it your own work. A person would have to be tone-deaf not to see that that was what Thorne Chaffin was foolish enough to try to point out when he planned those programs. What was it—a kind of blackmail threat?"

Draechlein shook his head as if in pity. "Officer, you've gone off the deep end. There isn't a scrap of sense in what you're saying. And even if there were, I would hardly have chosen that time and place to kill him."

"I wasn't suggesting premeditated murder. You knocked Chaffin off that ledge in a moment of anger, immediately after looking over the programs."

Draechlein inhaled deeply. "Are you actually accusing me of that?"

Auburn had grown tired of hearing himself threaten suspects with a lifetime of remorse and had decided to vary his tactics. "Let me tell you a little detective story," he said.

"You don't have to believe every word. I might exaggerate here and there, because I'm the hero of the story.

"I was out at the park this morning, and I went down to the part of the riverbank opposite the end of the bandshell where Chaffin fell. Down along the water I saw a row of footprints in the deep mud. They were streaked out, like the person who made them was running, only they stayed in the mud instead of coming up on the dry ground. It looked as if somebody had tried to get away from there without moving up to the bank where he could be seen from the bandshell.

"Where the footprints started, I found a plastic bag on the ground, the kind loaves of bread come in. It had dew on the underside, so I knew it had been there since yesterday. Inside it were four little nuggets of cake—what they call doughnut holes. And inside each cake ball was a stone—not round pebbles from the riverbank, but pieces of crushed rock from a driveway or a building site.

"At first I thought some sadistic crank had been planning to feed them to the geese. Then I looked across to the island and saw a groundhog just disappearing into the woods, and I realized that whoever had dropped those cake balls had come prepared to toss them over to the island for the groundhogs. The stones gave them enough weight to get across the water, and the groundhogs, eating with their paws and being smarter than geese, wouldn't try to swallow them."

Draechlein glared balefully at him but said nothing.

"The bread sack had a bakery logo on it. I took it and the cake balls and started driving up one street and down another all through the Riverside Park neighborhood, stopping at every grocery, deli, and convenience store. Some carried that brand of bread but no cake balls, and some had cake balls but not that brand of bread. Only one store had both, and it was about a hundred yards from a culvert lined with crushed rock.

"That's an old neighborhood, and everybody knows everybody else. The people at the store told me who bought those cake balls, and they told me where to find her. She's retired and widowed, and she takes a walk through Riverside Park every morning before breakfast. She was there yesterday morning, down on the bank feeding the groundhogs. She happened to look over towards the bandshell, and she saw something that scared her so bad she dropped the bag and ran for cover. What do you think she saw?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"I think you do. This lady follows local cultural events closely, and she recognized you from your picture in the paper, with no prompting from me. She saw the whole thing, Dr. Draechlein, and if the county prosecutor puts her on the stand, your picture is going to be in the paper again."

Draechlein leaned back, suddenly calmer than Auburn had yet seen him. "All right," he said with a deep, rattling sigh. "Let's get it over with. For practical purposes, everything you said is correct.

"Thorne was a prodigy when he

arrived here, but soon enough he evolved into an *enfant terrible*. He thought his genius made him a law unto himself, and he just went too far. For months his arrogance had been driving a wedge between us. Some kind of a crisis was inevitable, and he precipitated it yesterday. Those programs were, just as you said, a blackmail threat—to show that he could make me look like a fool, or worse, to the musical world, any time he chose.

"I don't think I meant to kill him when I went back behind the stage. I only wanted to assure him that not one of those programs would be performed in this city as long as I was director of the Civic Band. He saw I was furious, and he climbed out of my reach and laughed at me. When I saw him balanced on that ledge, with the wire draped around

his legs, my anger got the better of me. Then I did want to kill him, and I saw how easy it would be to jerk on the wire and throw him off."

Auburn left Draechlein in a conference room at headquarters with his daughter and his lawyer. First he called Luthenborg to tell him he'd had nothing to do with Chaffin's fall. Then he caught Stamaty just leaving work for the day.

"On that Chaffin case," he said. "We're calling it a homicide."

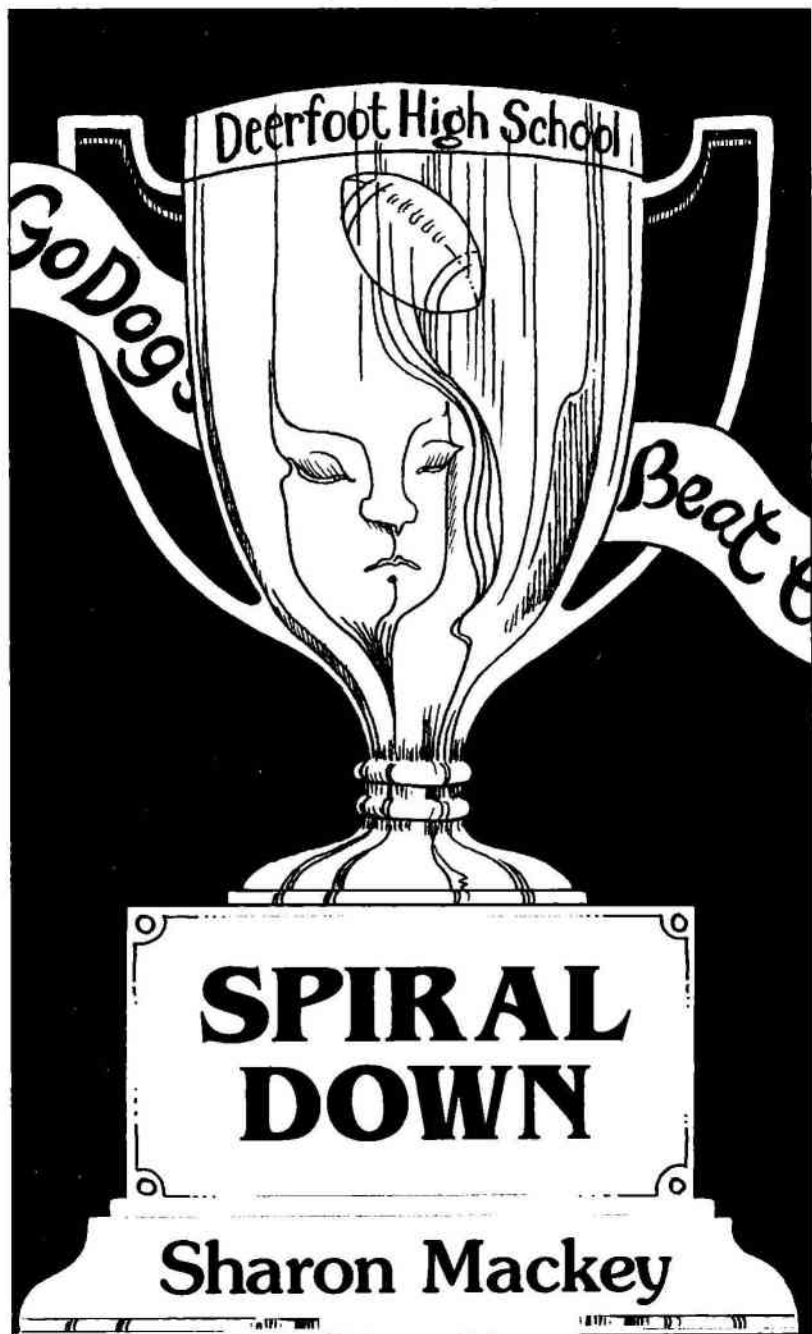
"You really think this Delpakian knocked him off?"

"No. Dr. Draechlein just signed a confession."

"What, the girl's father? Things must have been happening in the last couple of hours."

"Well, Nick, it's like this. When you run out of post office twine, you've got to spin a little yarn."

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As a rule, one would rather eat chalk dust than suffer Thursday's Bushwhack Casserole and Shrimp Shapes in the cafeteria at Deerfoot High.

But on occasion, standing in line for simulated shrimp seems like the thing to do, especially when you're in the throes of severe hunger after having left your bagged lunch of just-ripe-enough-to-eat banana and cucumber sandwich at home.

I winced. The cafeteria was borderline pandemonium. We the faculty were bemoaning GET SPIRIT WEEK, the by-product of a hyperactive cheerleading squad and a thus far undefeated football season.

Red and white banners sagged above the doors of the adjoining Mosely Gym: RED DOGS WILL REIGN, BEAT THOSE VIPERS, RED DOGS EAT SNAKE MEAT. It was all in preparation for the big football game on Friday night.

The line was moving too slowly, and I was having homicidal thoughts about the cackling mob of freshmen behind me. At least I was exempt from lunch duty, unlike Clint Knuckles and the short-skirted, wide-eyed Ellen Kidwell, who stood across the feeding frenzy gesturing some form of primitive communication in the midst of nearly pure chaos.

Clint smoothed his too-long, almost-blond hair, stroked his perfectly chiseled jaw, caught my eye, and waved more generously than usual, a bold mid-air stretch. Then he tapped his own shoulder and thrust a pointing metacarpal in my direction alerting me to something imminent. His face had that barbed

expression like a distressed Clark Gable, and I was clueless.

I found myself mimicking his motions in miniature, arms behind, reaching. My fingers skimmed the flimsy edge of paper on the back of my dress. I yanked it off, warm-faced, signaling a thank-you to Clint. He folded his arms and smiled painfully.

It had been attached with double-stick masking tape, written in purple magic marker: ALIEN ALERT. It wasn't the first time. Last Valentine's Day I'd been tagged with a KISS ME OR ELSE directive. Ha ha.

I gave my heartless evil eye to the now cowering mob behind me. They exuded innocence but conceit, mercy but self-righteousness.

Trying to seem unaffected, I smoldered up to my second floor classroom and filed the evidence. It would be difficult tracking the offender. They were all savages, all ruthless. And I wouldn't give them the pleasure of my off-duty company for oysters on the half shell much less a handful of counterfeit shrimp. I'd rather rummage in the teacher's lounge for packaged saltines.

I took a detour into the girls' restroom, slid the lock on a metal door, and tugged on an unruly undergarment, reminding myself that truisms are often forged from such experiences. Hunger can be abruptly subdued and perhaps overcome by public humiliation and the unrelenting discomfort of Spandex elastic in places attainable only behind closed doors.

My train of thought was crudely interrupted by the shuffling of feet

attached to two juvenile females mocking me in an elderly falsetto. The imitation sounded like Julia Child, nothing at all like my real voice, which is a comfortable alto, something my late husband Jeb used to describe as a sultry purr. That was in our earlier days, before Jeb decided the purrs on the other side of the fence were sultrier.

I could tell right away it was Lisbeth Huddleston and Ann Marie Logan, a couple of juniors to whom I'd just dispensed a homework assignment of five word problems having something to do with the speed of airplane A and southerly tailwinds.

"She just loves this stuff," said Lisbeth, slamming what sounded like an armful of books down on the sink. I could hear the clackety-clack of cosmetics being opened and closed, water faucets twisting on and off.

"Yeah, I've had *enough* of her dad-blamed homework," pouted Ann Marie. She then recited a rather sloppy rendition of me at the overhead projector. "Shoot, don't Ol' Murdock know it's couples' night at the roller rink?" She quickly retrieved a hairbrush that had fallen dangerously close to my shin.

"Are you kiddin'? She's probably never even seen a pair of roller skates. Algebra is her *life*, remember?" said Lisbeth with an artificial flourish I detested. They snorted respectfully.

I was thinking I could skate circles around the entire student body when Ann Marie said, "She found out who murdered that lady this summer, though. My mom couldn't believe it. Who woulda thought Ol' Murdock could track down a killer.

Marcy Murdock, *P.I. Weird*."

"Yeah," said Lisbeth, "but she was sort of trained for it. Her husband was that lawyer who died from that heart attack, and he did all kinds of criminal work. She helped him out a lot, digging up witnesses for his cases and stuff. She's probably lonely, though, being a widow and all. My mom said if she doesn't get a perm she'll probably wind up a spinster."

"I heard Mr. Knuckles finally asked her out and she stood him up."

"Yeah, they were suppose to see that movie at the Hippodrome—"

"I think he still likes her."

"Does she like him?"

"Hard to tell. She's got an attitude."

They were quiet. I breathed carefully. I was on trial, awaiting my final verdict of innocence or guilt.

I folded my arms ever so slowly, feeling the backs of my pantyhose against cold porcelain when Lisbeth said, "Don't tell anybody but I think I might, you know."

Silence again.

"Don't look at me like that, you're eyes are gonna pop out," she told Ann Marie.

To which Ann Marie replied, "With Luke?"

"I said I *might*. I told him I'd think about it, that it was a big decision. He said he was crazy about me and he couldn't wait. We *are* going together."

"Luke Wilder?"

"Duh, who else?"

The bell rang, and they were gone, two silly magpies into an untamed, brutal world.

I looked at my flushed reflection in the mirror. Ol' Murdock? I was the third youngest teacher at Deerfoot High, which hardly qualified me for the nickname. And why did I feel responsible for the possible consummation of a Mickey Mouse romance, surprised to hear that nature was taking its predictable course between two hormonal, spoiled-rotten teenagers who had nothing better to do than ooze desire in the hallways?

Furthermore, I'd stood up Clint Knuckles for good reason. My explanation to Clint had been awkward, since he was new in town and had taught history at Deerfoot High just since last Christmas and was no doubt used to dating normal women.

Also I wasn't sure he believed I'd actually been chasing a crazed murderess. He'd been friendly since the "mix-up" but hadn't offered me so much as a ride in his '71 Plymouth convertible. And I wasn't the type to beg.

One thing was certain, spoiled rotten or not, Lisbeth Huddleston's self-respect was in jeopardy. She needed help, immediate intervention.

I stood outside the restroom peering through the flurry of red, white, and denim. In the midst of the noise I could hear my name being called, followed by a whistle. It was Gene Lipscomb across the hall, vying vigorously for my attention.

"Miss Murdock!" His Adam's apple was pushing full throttle. But my eyes were on the clump of football players standing against the trophy case looking like gorillas in

a monkey cage. Fullback Doyle Handy was under six feet tall, shorter than the others, with a neck the size of Ann Marie Logan's waistline. (Ann Marie was Doyle's current steady.) Quarterback Ronnie Lee Decker, freckled and lean, was whispering something luscious to a gum-chewing brunette, and Luke Wilder, our goodlooking, six three, dark-haired halfback, star of the football team, likely recipient of a major college athletic scholarship, had Lisbeth Huddleston in a bodacious lip lock against the end of the trophy case.

Doyle nudged Luke, who extended his foot to trip a turtlenecked freshman carrying a detailed papier-mâché rendering of a winged Greek character. The freshman stumbled, balanced, lost control.

The six of them threw their heads back in clannish amusement like royalty at the opera. They strolled stairward. Even the janitor plastered himself against the wall to let them pass, the kings and queens of Deerfoot High.

My hands were in fists at my sides. I shoved my way toward them just as the tardy bell blared. The halls miraculously cleared. The turtleneck vanished around the corner, two wings dangling from a toga.

In fact all was magically and suddenly desolate except for Gene Lipscomb. Still calling my name. And I was still avoiding him. He'd led my first period class in the theme from *Green Acres* while I erased an anatomy part I suspected he'd covertly written forty-two times on my blackboard.

I was in no mood for an apology.

Besides, it was my designated personal hour, and I was working up the stamina to spend the better part of it lecturing Lisbeth Huddleston on the hazards of men in general.

"Miss Murdock, Missss Murr-dock!" Gene hissed.

I faced him squarely. "What is it Gene, and shouldn't you be somewhere?"

"Right now's my study hall, and I got permission to talk to you. It's real important." Gene was a wiry kid with puppy dog eyes, elephant ears, and a crewcut. He stood on one lanky leg, then the other, switching back and forth.

"Can't it wait?" I asked.

He sighed heavily, tapped his black and white Adidas. "No way. Nooo waaay. Please, Miss Murdock?" There was no doubt about it. Gene was a notch past desperate.

I sat behind my desk drumming a ruler on my rollbook while he squeezed into an undersized desk near the window. "This better be important, Gene. I have pressing matters to take care of as soon as possible."

He looked concerned. "You need a Valium or somethin'?"

"No, Gene. I am fine," I said crisply, fresh out of any virtue remotely resembling patience. "I do not take Valium, and offering a teacher a prescription drug is certainly worth two days' detention."

"I ain't got none, I just thought it might—it was *just* a suggestion. Miss Kidwell takes 'em." He rearranged his knees under the desk, slapped at an ample ear.

"I am not Miss Kidwell, and it's

'do not have *any*,' Gene. Say it." I was gritting my teeth.

"Geeze, okay. I *do not have any* Valiums."

He slumped, and I launched into an impromptu speech about grammar and the order of the universe and the ever present opportunity to succeed, at the end of which I was standing at the window looking out at the first red tips on the maple leaves feeling somewhat soothed.

Gene stood beside me, thumbs hooked in his jeans pockets, the beginnings of a pencil thin mustache on his upper lip.

"You ever been in love, Miss Murdock?" he said.

The nature of his voice took me by surprise. He wasn't angry with me at all, or embarrassed.

I nodded slowly. "Charlie Holden. Ping-pong champion at Deerfoot High 1978. Sandy brown hair, blue eyes, heck of a smile."

He listened, concentrating on the maples, folding his arms tightly.

I should've known. The misbehavior, the backtalk. It was all because of a girl. She'd dumped him, and his life was suddenly worth nothing. We both knew he was talking about Lora Stanton; sophomore, honor student—

"Me and Lora, well, we're kind of an item now, and when a guy loves a girl, he wants to spend time with her someplace other than church or the roller rink and—" he let out a breath—"well, me and Lora were doing that. Sort of. We drove out to the old Pridemore Pool Hall to be alone and, uh, we found a body or something, Miss Murdock, over at the empty pool hall down at Briar

Creek, you know the old Pridemore place that's empty now—"

"What body?" I asked, my brain editing his redundancies. "Was it human?"

He put a fist under his chin, rubbing lightly back and forth. "Heck if I know, Miss Murdock, I didn't see it. We were in Lora's mom's car just talking and stuff; then she got the big idea to explore inside the pool hall and I told her it was dark and rundown, there was nothin' in there but a buncha old beer bottles. She got in there before I did and came back real quick, looking weak. Said she saw a body or something, and that's when I realized it was after eleven and we needed to get back. I told her I'd let you know, since you are a private, uh, investigator. Sort of."

"Part-time, sort of," I mumbled. I hadn't seen a paying case in months and was considering shucking the business altogether. "Gene," I began calmly, "you're supposed to report things like this as soon as they happen. The police, your parents? Don't you know—"

"But I thought Lora'd seen an old drunk and it'd be best to leave him alone. It was real late when we got back home, and I had my hands full explaining to Lora's dad where we'd been 'cause we were s'posed to come home after church youth group but after that we went to the old Pridemore place. The one that's empty. I promised Lora I'd—"

"Okay, Gene. Thank you. I'll check it out. You'd better get to study hall." He walked out of the room stepping somewhat lighter than when he'd walked in.

I rolled my eyes. If GET SPIRIT WEEK didn't let up, I was changing my name to Blondie, buying a platinum wig, and moving to an island where public education was a criminal offense.

I didn't call him. Even though Sheriff Don Earl Keck would definitely consider body hunting his venue. Even though I was tired, in desperate need of a comfortable chair and a cold drink. Even though my idea of relaxation was not traipsing through weeds from a gravel parking lot to an abandoned pool hall in search of a would-be body three miles from a town ten miles from a fast food chain.

But I couldn't drag Don Earl way out to Briar Creek on Gene Lipscomb's word entirely. I might as well ask him for a free ride to the moon. Not to mention my reputation if the body was nowhere to be found, and I wasn't at all sure it would be.

I whacked at weeds with a twisted tree limb and stopped at the entrance, where a pile of cement blocks had once obstructed the open doorway. A burnt-wood POOL HALL sign hung by a nail over the threshold. I vaguely remembered a front page picture in the *Deerfoot Gazette*, a man by the name of Vance Doughtie. He'd bought the place after the former owner, Curly Pridemore, died. Vance was going to fix it up, open Deerfoot's first "family fun" center, make a fortune. The photograph had been in color, and Mr. Doughtie had been standing proudly in front of the pool hall, the burnt-wood sign hovering above a sizable

head of hair. The ending hadn't been as newsworthy. Vance Doughtie had married a floozy who'd bankrupted him on credit cards. He never got the remodeling loan.

Slits of sunlight seeped through the vertical pine planks on the inside of the pool hall, one large front room and a smaller back office. The place was semi-dark, somewhat cool, and littered with beer bottles, a dented dustpan, broken light-bulbs. On one wall an empty cue rack hung crookedly above an unplugged, rusted jukebox. The odor was slightly metallic, unpleasant toward the left corner of the room, where an overturned pool table shrouded more clutter. I followed the smell, burying my nose in my sweater.

She'd been wearing athletic shoes, white with an aqua stripe, splattered with mud and elongated black smudges, as were the white anklet socks. Her legs, what I could see of them from behind the pool table, were lying awkwardly sideways and crossed, stiff. I moved away, inhaled, then leaned over the table to get a closer look. There were massive contusions of all sorts along the right side of her neck, arm, and shoulder, but little blood, and the torso was also turned sideways, arms in front, face against the green felt of the overturned table.

She'd been attractive, shoulder length, very blonde hair with the same charcoal-colored striations on her nylon shorts and sleeveless top. A headband hung loosely around her neck. I'd never seen her before. I backed away, relieving my lungs, breathing deeply.

The small office was furnished with a plywood bulletin board, a three-legged desk, and a loosely hinged back door opening into a stand of weeds and endless woods. The weapon, whatever it had been, was nowhere in sight.

I stepped through knee-high weeds back to the truck, organizing my thoughts. Tomorrow would bring the school week to its end. A half day of classes was scheduled, then parent-teacher conferences, then a late afternoon pep rally before the big game. And Lisbeth Huddleston's reputation had to be dealt with. Soon.

The steering wheel felt cold, icy. This one was going to be nasty. I could taste it. The fear was there already, a hollowness in my throat, a tiny knot in the pit of my stomach.

And maybe I was worried about other things. Clint. As much as I hated to admit it, Lisbeth and Ann Marie had been right. I had an attitude. I was hard to read, too protective of my feelings. And Clint had been intelligent enough to keep his distance.

I had no doubt he'd soon set his sights on somebody like Ellen Kidwell, who had plenty of time for breezy afternoon excursions or two-hour romantic features at the Hippodrome. A regular Doris Day.

I found an obscure classical station on the truck radio and drove into town.

The victim was twenty-eight-year-old Sissie Doughtie, wife of Vance Doughtie. The two had been entangled in bitter divorce

proceedings the past few months. She had filed on grounds of physical abuse, and he had counter-filed on grounds of mental and emotional abuse.

I'd reluctantly given Sheriff Don Earl Keck the names of Lora Stanton and Gene Lipscomb. He assured me they would have to answer only a few routine questions. When I left, he was taking the bright yellow wrapper off a stick of chewing gum, shouting orders to get an arrest warrant ready for Vance Doughtie.

I rent the upper half of Deerfoot's only landmark, a turn of the century Queen Anne Victorian complete with stained glass, fish-scale shingles, and a landlady by the name of Prudence Geasley, who inhabits the floor below.

The only entrance to my portion is a service porch alongside the house. A flight of stairs opens into a spacious loft area with a few adjacent rooms, one being Jeb's former law office, now my investigative hub.

After Jeb died, I sold half our belongings and, last month, the overpriced house he'd purchased years ago. I'd moved into my half of the Victorian. Prudie hadn't been crazy about it. Especially since my living quarters now resembled an auction house—stacked furniture in dusty corners, unpacked boxes blocking passageways. In her words it was a "make-do arrangement" until I could find the nice neat home of my choice. She'd made it clear she intended to rent the upstairs for business purposes only.

At least she was a decent cook.

Earlier she'd summoned me with several thumps of a broomstick from below. I'd fetched and eaten the dinner of corn chowder and spoon bread she'd prepared and was now seated at my pressed pecan desk among my dining room furniture, sulking at the graded algebra exams piled before me.

The average score was just tolerable despite the after-school tutoring sessions I'd endured, weeks of stooping over desks, scanning, correcting errors. But once again, why was I surprised? The first week of school they'd begun whining, and I'd presented a hard cold fact: the variable x would be one of the first, and the least of many, obstacles to impede their young lives. I knew I was in trouble when they left the classroom asking each other to define impede.

Prudie was conversing again. Three quick thumps, one loud whop. Morse code: the Broomstick. Probably had some year-old Russell Stover's she was ready to part with.

I ignored the thumps, heeding the slam of my screen door, footsteps upward. Clint? I thought.

Vance Doughtie snooped around the doorway, then stepped into the office. He was large, barrel-shaped, wore wrinkled khaki pants and a Hawaiian shirt. Deck shoes, no socks. His hair, prematurely silver, was curly and thick, pulled back in a ponytail. He glanced around, pale eyes engulfed in bewildering gray eyebrows, and frowned at the crowded conditions, then at Jeb's framed print of Thomas Jefferson. "You the P.I.?" He was out of breath.

"I am." I reclined, swiveled in

Jeb's old desk chair, entrenched myself in sarcasm. I was thinking how great it was I was getting a new case. And one from a man who'd just gone bankrupt. Chances were, he didn't have a dime. And the money he did have, he'd need for bail after the arrest.

"Vance Doughtie." He offered a quick handshake, and I motioned toward four dainty antique chairs and a barstool. He perched on the barstool, twisting a large turquoise ring. "I'm, uh, in trouble."

"I know, I've seen the body," I said.

"Yeah, well, I have, too, and believe me, I didn't do that. Geeze, I'm not a brute. It's true we didn't get along, she took everything I had, but I could never do anything like *that*. You've got to help me. The sheriff, they were all vicious down there, asking me where was I last night, didn't I ask her to meet me at the pool hall, didn't I pick her up and take her over there. Heck, they think we had some kind of quarrel. Sissie and me never quarreled. She took everything she wanted, then she left me. Heck, I've been at home alone every night this week watching *Wheel of Fortune* reruns. It's *Wheel of Fortune* week on the game channel." He leaned way over, voice low. "I don't even own that rattrap pool hall any more. For what it's worth, the bank got it. I haven't been over there in six months. Swear."

"Your wife declared physical abuse in her divorce file," I said.

He covered his face with a huge hairy hand and revealed his eyes slowly, whimpering like a wounded Saint Bernard. "It was never true. You gotta believe me. I never laid a

hand on her. She was a con. A beautiful con. Got me to marry her, took my money, then claimed I hit her. Ask any of my ex-wives, I'm gentle as a lamb. Heck, I ain't even got a temper."

I rolled my chair forward, elbows on my desk. "Okay, Vance. Can I call you Vance?"

"Sure. Sissie called me Vancie," he sniffled, twisting the ring.

"I'll stick with Vance. Have any idea who could have done this? Was your wife seeing anyone else, have any enemies at all?"

He shook his head before I'd finished. "None that I know of. She worked the afternoon shift at that market way down Fourth Street, Peg's Market. Worked till dark."

"Peg and Maynard Wilder's store? Luke Wilder's folks?" Something stuck in my throat.

"That's the one, yeah. Kid's one heck of a halfback."

I made a note on the back of an envelope. "Now, the way Sissie was dressed—"

"Oh, she was a runner. Ran them 10K things all the time. She was in good shape. That's one of the things attracted me to her. She had the cutest little round—"

"Did she usually jog at night, Vance?"

He nodded. "Always. She wasn't a morning person, if you get my drift. Slept till noon, then went to the market. When she got off work, it was dark. She took her jog around eight thirty, nine o'clock sometimes. Ran for 'bout an hour, came home and showered, used a ton of baby powder, came out with a towel tucked right between her—"

"She had some black marks, smudges, on her clothes and body, Vance. Have any idea what they might've been?"

He shook his head again, tossing the turquoise ring back and forth between his knees.

"Where did she live?"

"Horseshoe Lane, little road behind Yocum's Motel. She rented the house with the porch, black shutters."

I scribbled. "Have a key?" He shook his head. "Okay. One more thing, Vance. Do you have any cash, some collateral?"

"I'm broke, but I'll find a way to pay you for your services, I promise. I got a canoe and a fortune in bowling balls the bank knows nothin' about. I promise I'll find a way." He put the ring back on his pinky finger.

My face went slack.

"Bowling balls?"

He nodded. "They're marbled, purple, blue, green. I got two with inlaid glitter. Pretty nice." He actually looked pleased.

I told him I'd take the case, and he left, hope afflicker beneath his overgrown eyebrows.

Prudie had put away her broomstick, and I was pondering a man stupid enough to clobber his wife and leave her in a building he'd recently owned, a place that would doubly connect him to the murder. Vance Doughtie wasn't the brightest star in the sky. But he didn't seem like the violent type, more like the dumb teddy bear type. The charcoal coloration on Sissie Doughtie's body made me restless. Strange

sooty smudges. I shook the thoughts and tipped my lampshade out for more light, trying to focus on my paying job.

At least Gene Lipscomb had performed tolerably on the exam. Doyle Handy and Ronnie Lee Decker had failed completely. Luke Wilder's paper looked like it had been in a landfill, wrinkled and speckled with pen scratches where he'd tried to correct his mistakes. He'd drawn a muscle man carrying a football with the jersey number twenty-five, Luke's number. Cute. Except he'd barely passed the algebra test.

But Luke's future was football, not school. He only had to maintain average grades. College football scouts had been seen in the stands his junior year. He was agile, tough, "a strapping young man, a promising athlete" as quoted in one of the *Deerfoot Gazette's* many articles featuring him. It was a heady experience for a seventeen-year-old, had to be. Luke was the man of the year, and Deerfoot hadn't been this close to fame in decades.

A boy like that could ruin a girl like Lisbeth Huddleston. Lisbeth, living on the coattails of a football star, basking in his glory. To her, school was one long hot rendezvous with Luke Wilder.

Dusk had almost arrived. I drove Jeb's pickup truck down Fourth Street, then another mile following a stretch of country road into Deerfoot's old "business district": Yocum's Motel and a one-pump gas station. A left turn took me around Horseshoe Lane behind the twelve room motel into a sparse, quaint neighborhood thick with white pines and

hemlock. I found Sissie Doughtie's white, black-shuttered house at the upper curve of the horseshoe.

Drooping yellow mums in clay pots were strewn across the front porch between clusters of pink-cushioned white wicker furniture. I poked around the house. No loose windows, no open doors, all shades and blinds had been pulled. Don Earl had stuck a handwritten DO NOT ENTER (ESPECIALLY YOU, MARCY) note on the front door. He'd obviously run out of yellow tape.

I browsed along a dim brick path around the downward curve of the horseshoe. Streetlights were scarce, as were neighbors, potential witnesses. I'd just decided to head back when I encountered the flailing form of a woman being walked by a young black Labrador.

It was Tish Huddleston, mother of Lisbeth, wearing lavender angora and orange lipstick, her straight black hair streaked with gray pinned on top of her head. I'd met her once before at a cosmetics party I was forced to attend. She'd sold me a jowl mask in piña colada and a triple phase treatment for the dimpled thigh, two items she'd insisted every woman would need before the age of forty.

She was being dragged, leash in hand, down a steep, sharply lit asphalt driveway and allowed to one-handedly retrieve a newspaper from her mailbox. "Miss Murdock?" She squinted at me and stuffed the mail under an arm while the dog yelped at the asphalt. Her eyes were bright but small, and framed with more eyeliner than Cleopatra's.

"Nice dog," I said, keeping my dis-

tance. I had on freshly washed sweatpants.

"Lucy, down!" barked Mrs. Huddleston.

"I didn't realize you lived here," I nodded toward a new brick house surrounded by healthy rhododendrons at the top of the driveway.

"We built here six months ago. Finally have room for a dog. Lisbeth had wanted a dog for soooo long. A black Lab named Lucy." Tish Huddleston smiled at her slobbering mistress. "You working on the Doughtie case?" she said in a hush-hush voice.

"Did you know Sissie Doughtie?"

"Not really. It's like I told the sheriff. I've just seen her take off down the lane a few times wearing that skimpy outfit. She was a target for some lunatic, jogging at night like that with that—that *garb* on. I hear Vance Doughtie picked her up in some bar in Knoxville. The marriage lasted less than a year, not long enough to shake a stick at—" she suddenly lurched forward with the leash.

And my conscience was being a nuisance. I didn't exactly know how to broach the subject. Mrs. Huddleston, I was eavesdropping on your daughter in the restroom—Mrs. Huddleston, I'm afraid your daughter's hormones are quite out of control—

"Mrs. Huddleston?"

"Yes?" She pushed Lucy into a sitting position, sorted through her mail, and looked up from a shiny picture postcard.

"Mrs. Huddleston, your daughter—"

"Oh, you didn't come all this way

to talk about—is this about Lisbeth? Well, why didn't you say so, Miss Murdock!"

Lucy was panting, drooling—just like Luke Wilder.

"Mrs. Huddleston, your daughter has been—"

"You don't have to say it, Miss Murdock. I know all about Lisbeth. Math never was her thing. She wants to be a dancer." She waved the postcard in the air, teasing the dog. "A classical ballerina. She's quite good, I've spent a fortune in lessons at that studio in Jones Fork. I've told her, I've said, 'Lisbeth, you'll need math to figure income and such,' but you know kids." She was beaming.

"Oh yes. Yes, I do, uh, know kids. But you see, Luke Wilder is—"

"Oh, you're worried about Lisbeth and Luke. Well, don't you worry, Miss Murdock. Everything is under control. Luke comes over here all the time, drives his daddy's Cadillac like it was a Rolls-Royce, and he always leaves on time. And he absolutely insists on meeting his curfew of ten o'clock sharp. Even for school in the morning when Lisbeth picks him up, he is never late. And courteous. He's just so polite, such a nice, nice boy. He was here just last night. He and Lisbeth sat on the sofa and studied the Civil War together."

"Lisbeth has her own car?"

"Yes. A red Trans Am. We got it on her sixteenth birthday. Her daddy let her choose. Isn't that precious. Her first car. Red."

"Precious," I said.

"And Luke's house is right on the way, almost into town on Fourth

Street, and they have never been late for school. Not once. Luke's getting a car on his eighteenth. January."

My better judgment took a flying leap. "Mrs. Huddleston, your daughter has been acting like an ogle-eyed, kissy-faced juvenile in the hallways at Deerfoot High. I think you should be aware she is contemplating serious consequential fleshly activity with Luke Wilder." I stomped my foot mildly. For once, Lucy was still, at attention.

"Fleshly?" She shrank away from me, wielding a sarcastic orange smile, eyelashes bubbling. "I am acutely aware of my daughter's intentions. She is a *good* girl, and I think perhaps you have an attitude problem! Yes, an attitude! That's what Lisbeth says!" She jerked on the leash and stumbled up the driveway, dog first, junk mail littering her trail like losing lottery tickets.

Sheriff Don Earl Keck had been barely polite on the phone at seven A.M. on Friday morning. He informed me it was too early and he was a busy man. I told him that's why I'd called so early, I knew he was a busy man. He gave me a three second silent treatment; then he let me know the weapon had not been found—but it was heavy, with rough edges. The murderer, he thought, was a man, a big strong bear of a man who took the weapon, weighty and loaded with evidence, away from the crime scene. He said we'd probably never find it, killer probably tossed it in a lake somewhere, that

Sissie Doughtie had obviously been lured to the pool hall, maybe jogged there for a clandestine meeting of some sort. He mentioned how these things happen all the time, especially during divorces, that I shouldn't waste my time meddling, that Vance Doughtie would be in custody as soon as the body was examined.

The morning had proceeded normally. There had been plenty of commotion, plenty of talk about the big game, but no unexpected misconduct. Classes had been dismissed at noon so the entire community could gear up for the pep rally of the century. At three o'clock everybody who was anybody would be in Mosely Gym gawking at cardboard cutouts of Red Dogs bearing the hand-painted faces of first string football players.

Parent-teacher conferences were almost over. I'd seen eleven pairs of parents so far, all of them connected to students who were doing well in my classes. The parents you need to see never come.

During my last twenty minute lull of the afternoon I took a cherry Coke into the converted chemistry closet we'd dubbed the Teacher's Lounge. I could distantly hear the cheerleaders practicing somewhere. "Go, go, Red Dogs, *Stomp* those Vipers. *Snakes* are mean, and they wear *diapers*." At least that's what it sounded like.

I popped the top on my can, and Clint Knuckles walked in with Ellen Kidwell. They were a little too close, a little too chatty. Clint looked fine. Black flannel shirt, tweed jacket,

dark blond hair curling at the nape of his neck. He threw his handsomely sculpted chin my way and poured himself a cup of coffee.

The greeting was an insult after the small but meaningful amount of time we'd shared. We were colleagues, had collaborated in curbing insolent behavior at its peak, had almost seen a movie at the Hippodrome theater together, for Pete's sake.

I mumbled, "Hello."

Ellen began showing an interest in Clint's watch, inquiring about the time in China, crooning about how that watch just knocked her socks off. I got up to leave, and Clint met my stare. It lasted two seconds. Blue-green eyes, asking a question I didn't have time to answer.

When I returned to my classroom, Peg and Maynard Wilder, Luke's parents, were sitting in the folding chairs I'd set up opposite my desk. The Wilders were last on my list. They had scooted the folding chairs together, and Maynard's bulging arm was draped around Peg's tiny shoulders. I could see where Luke got his size. Maynard Wilder looked like Godzilla in loafers and a crimson V-necked sweater. Mrs. Wilder was a petite blue-eyed redhead with oval wire-rimmed glasses. "Go, Red Dogs! Beat them Hornets!" she peeped as I sat down.

"Vipers, Peg. It's beat them Vipers," said Maynard with a chuckle.

I exerted a smile. "We'll get right to the point, since it's almost time for the pep rally."

"Don't want to miss that!" chirped Mrs. Wilder.

"It's gonna be a foot-stomper!"

said Maynard. They wiggled like toddlers in church.

"The truth is, Mr. and Mrs. Wilder, Luke is barely getting by in algebra. I'd like to think he could do better if he'd spend less time thinking about football and more time thinking about school. Also, he's been displaying unsightly behavior in the hallways with Lisbeth Huddleston. Did you know your son and Lisbeth Huddleston are on the verge of—"

"Well, I never heard such talk!" said Peg, visibly disgusted.

Maynard looked as if I'd just cursed God himself. He leaned forward with reverent saucer eyes, almost whispering, "Luke's a football star, Miss Murdock. He's going to play in college. Did you know that?" He cuddled up with Peg again, kissing her on top of the head.

I was ill. Peg Wilder had removed her glasses. She was crying huge tears. "I don't know how you can say such things," she wailed, "he's been so good about school lately, and he's been helping out around the house. Why he even did a load of laundry after football practice yesterday—"

"Didn't even know he knew how the dang thing worked!" added Maynard.

"He cleaned out Maynard's Cadillac with shampoo and everything. And brought home every single textbook for studying. He never did that before. He never even brought home one book. He always did his homework in study hall. He said he had homework in every subject last night."

"—and he's been meeting his cur-

few, too," said Maynard. "All except for Wednesday night. He was about an hour late, but he and Lisbeth, well—"

"—they're in *love*." Peg smiled sadly, tiny white teeth.

Gene Lipscomb's words surfaced in my mind like a drowner gasping for air. He'd said it was after eleven o'clock when he and Lora discovered the body.

And Luke had arrived home at eleven, one hour late, the same evening. Laundry, car, late for curfew. It was possible. Pursuing it would be unthinkable.

I opened my mouth, hesitated. "Mr. and Mrs. Wilder, this may seem off the subject, but I'd like to say how sorry I am about the recent death of one of your employees, Sissie Doughtie."

Peg buried her face in Maynard's shirtsleeve, making high-pitched staccato noises.

"Peg worked at the store with Sissie for a while. Sissie would complain about how mean Vance treated her, you know, girl talk," Maynard explained while Peg got control of herself and replaced her glasses.

"He was a monster," Peg said. "Poor Sissie."

"Poor Sissie," I said, genuinely.

Excusing myself, assuring them I'd be back momentarily, was the easy part. I jogged down the hall to the teacher's lounge and stuck my head in the door. Ellen Kidwell was ensconced in a plastic chair with a *Vogue* magazine, a bottle of prescription pills, and a cup of black coffee. She was alone.

"Where's Clint?" I said.

She didn't look up. "I don't know."

Probably went to the pep rally. I'm playing hooky. I hate those things." She turned a page.

I knew she had Luke Wilder in class. "Ellen, did you assign any homework last night to Luke Wilder?" She looked at me vaguely, giggled a no, and finished studying a fashion quiz. I needed more time. And where was Clint? The pep rally started in fifteen minutes.

I backed out and turned the corner, bumping smack into the smell of new wool and washed flannel. "You okay?" Clint took a backward step.

"I'm fine. And thanks again for cuing me about the—" I tapped my shoulder. I couldn't say it. My pride was still wounded.

"They're after you, Marcy. Means they like you. They know you can take it."

"I need you, Clint," I blurted. He insinuated a smile, dimples invading his half-day-old stubble. I quit twirling my hair, got hold of myself. "I mean I need you to do something for me. Did you assign homework to Luke Wilder last night?"

The smile ebbed. "No. I collected annotated bibliographies yesterday. Luke's was on," he squinted, then relaxed, remembering, "varying accounts of the Civil War from Lookout Mountain, Chattanooga. Could've been interesting. He turned in three pages, no footnotes, copied straight from *Britannica*. Is there a problem?" He watched me carefully.

"Clint, go to the office and get Luke Wilder's locker combination. Meet me at the third floor lockers in ten minutes. Please."

He half-saluted, checked his watch, and hustled down the stairs.

I headed back to my classroom telling myself it was nothing, that Luke Wilder emptying his locker of his textbooks, cleaning his father's car, doing laundry, being late for curfew on the night of Sissie Dough-tie's death, was all coincidence.

The Wilders were standing now, hand in hand.

"I'm sorry I broke down," said Peg, "Luke's just always been such a darling, and of course we've spoiled him rotten, but he's always been such a talented—" blah, blah, blah. I was praying Clint would hurry. We needed to get in Luke's locker before the pep rally came to an end. And it was a longshot anything was still there.

"—won the local peewee wrestling championship at age five, and from then on we knew we had a little athlete on our hands," Maynard was saying. I could hear the beginnings of the pep rally coming from the gym near the cafeteria downstairs. Couldn't they hear it? Three cheers for Luke Wilder.

"—Little League coach just couldn't believe Luke's pitching arm, it was stronger than any he'd ever seen." Peg took a breath, giving me my long awaited chance to fake a migraine and swoon toward the door. I directed them into the hallway, holding my forehead, feigning a moan. They finally departed, calling to me from yards away how Luke had taken cherry aspirins for headaches since he was a baby boy.

I took the stairs by twos up to the third floor. Clint and I would probably be reprimanded by the school

board for searching a student's locker without permission. Gossip was a sure thing, and at the very least, I'd be shunned by the entire community for irreverence of a Deerfoot High football player.

The third floor was like an unfamiliar tomb. Eerie, void of the usual clamor, and not my territory. All light switches had been turned off. I could hear faint, roaring thunder from below, students and faculty alike proclaiming faith in the Deerfoot High Red Dogs. There was no sign of Clint. It had been a good twenty minutes since he'd gone for the combination. The lockers were located in two separate hallways on either side of the "auditorium," an ancient wooden stage built inside a large classroom. I had no way of knowing which locker belonged to Luke.

I wandered into the science room, Mr. Teague's room, feeling a draft of autumn air from a row of open windows along the back wall. A life-sized replica of a human skeleton hung on a metal rod near the windows. The bones rattled slightly. Posters of the human body stripped down to muscles and vital organs were taped to the walls. I settled on an elevated chair behind a black laboratory table and waited, a tall chrome faucet dripping into a square sink to my right. I twisted the cold water knob, shutting it off. Finally I heard footsteps, quick and deliberate.

I edged toward the door and watched Luke Wilder stroll past, hands free at his sides. He didn't see me. I heard the clicking sounds of the combination lock, the swing

of the locker door, the hollow bang of his elbow against sheet metal, then a grunt. Where was Clint? The locker door slammed shut.

I stepped out into the hallway. Luke saw me this time.

"What the—" he glanced over his shoulder, then back at me.

"Shouldn't you be at the pep rally, Luke? They'll miss you."

"I left early, not feeling too good. There's a lot of pressure on me right now. Big game tonight."

He was impressive, almost irresistible. Dark-haired and distinctly athletic with hazel eyes that mocked yet charmed. He carried a black nylon duffel bag zipped tightly around the shape of something rectangular, heavy. He worked hard to hold the bag up by the straps with his right hand. I was yards away. One good lunge, one good swing with the duffel bag—but he didn't try it.

"What's in the bag?" I said.

"Just stuff."

"Looks heavy. Books?"

"Look, it's nothing, just some gear for the game."

He turned around, shuffled down the hall. I swallowed. "That the cement block you used on Sissie Doughtie?"

He froze as if something had zapped him immobile, then dropped the duffel bag and faced me. He was pale, not so charming. "How did you—who else knows?" he said.

"Nobody else. Yet."

"Let it go," he said. "You could if you wanted to. Please, please, it's not what you think. Let it go."

"Just let it go. So simple."

And I realized I could. And if I were sixteen and beautiful, I prob-

ably would. He would probably have that effect on me.

I could let him go, and he would sink the weapon in a lake somewhere and it would never be found. There might not be enough evidence to convict Vance Doughtie, and the case would go on file as unsolved, as hundreds of others had before.

I imagined letting him have his way, his limelight, he'd worked so hard for it. But there was Vance Doughtie, pleading, innocent Vance. "Was she dead after you hit her with the Cadillac?" I asked.

He rubbed his eyes, the back of his neck. "Yeah. It was an accident. I was driving back home from Lisbeth's trying to meet my ten o'clock curfew, and I was late. The lady, she was jogging across the street back into the lane, I bumped her pulling out onto Fourth. It was dark. I'm not the best driver in the world. I panicked."

"There were black marks on her body, tire marks—"

"Yeah, it was awful. I couldn't leave her there. It would've been obvious. I was in the lane same time she was. My parents would've died." He kicked at the wall of lockers. "What college would've taken me with a record? Reckless homicide, I looked it up in the library."

"It was accidental, Luke. A hit-and-run is a misdemeanor. Even if you'd left her there, left the scene, you would've walked." He leaned against the lockers, frowning. "Because you're Luke Wilder," I reminded him. "The crime now is abuse of a corpse, also a misdemeanor, no real problem. But concealing evi-

dence, obstructing justice, is a felony. That'll be the hard one. But still, you could be okay."

"You don't understand. I—me and Lisbeth, we'd been drinking. Wild Turkey."

"Oh." I looked at the ceiling. "Second degree manslaughter."

"It's not just the charge, second degree whatever. Don't you get it? I'd be ruined, they'd all see me as some wino out runnin' over innocent women instead of—" he threw his hands up, grimaced beautifully.

"Instead of Luke Wilder, greatest football player in the world?" His back was against the lockers, arms folded. I spoke to his dogged profile. "And now they'll see you standing over Sissie Doughtie's corpse with a cinder block. Not pretty, Luke."

"It wasn't like she was *somebody*." He shot me a hasty, contorted grin. "Dad said she was just a gold digger—"

"You recognized her from the market, knew about her divorce, that Vance Doughtie used to own the pool hall, so you took the body there. Luke, you set up an innocent man?"

"The pool hall was just a couple of miles away. I told you I panicked."

"And the cinder block—"

"It was the only thing I could find."

"You had to make it look like a beating, instead of a hit-and-run. You smudged the tire marks."

He kicked at the duffel bag. "I should've thrown the thing in the creek, but there was no time. I was already an hour late for curfew. I wrapped it in an old sweatshirt and kept it in my room all night, then

stuffed it in the duffel bag Thursday morning. When Lisbeth picked me up for school, I told her it was a prop for the pep rally, a surprise."

"Some surprise."

He inched toward me, trancelike. "I've got a set of keys to her car. I need to go, get rid of it. Now. Nobody else will see me."

He was compelling, captivating, almost convincing. We could hear the noise beneath our feet, muffled, fading applause. "I did it for Lisbeth, she would've left me. Who'd want a boyfriend with a record hanging over his head? I did it for her, I did it for love."

I heard movement behind Luke at the other end of the hallway.

"Love? Incredible." It was Clint. He came forward cautiously.

"What do you know about it?"

Luke pivoted, glared at Clint.

"Plenty."

"You don't know anything. You don't know what it's like to watch the ball spiral down at you and land in your gut for the win. I see their faces every day, all bright and happy, I mean really happy, and all because of me—because I can get up when I'm knocked down by some tenth grader and finish the play—"

"Because you know where the ball's going when nobody else does." Clint's voice was smooth, monotone. "Because you can move, you can run, you can win. And you know it's a gift. All yours. A marvelous gift."

"You don't understand, you're just a history teacher, my folks can't afford college—"

"I was there once, Luke. Basketball. I wasn't the biggest guy, but, man, I could shoot the hoops, even

from thirty feet, and they loved me. I got my scholarship, got a knee injury my freshman year at Kentucky, then got red-shirted. It was an adjustment. The knee kept flaring up. I never played competitive ball after that, but I finished college, even did some grad work. I know how it feels to be the big guy in town everywhere you go. All the friends you want, anytime. You can't imagine life without that feeling. But it's not real life, Luke. And it wasn't going to last more than two, maybe three years. You're not that good."

Luke pushed hard at Clint, then dived toward the stairs leaving the duffel bag behind. We watched him from the stairwell, spiraling downward, out of sight.

We found it on the riverbank chained to a fifty-year-old white oak, just where Vance Doughtie said it would be. It was weathered and roomy, painted a dull green with the words *JUST CRUISIN'* hand-stenciled on one side. The canoe, my rather generous compensation, paid in full.

We got the thing in the water, Clint explaining for the second time how the school office had been locked and he'd combed the pep rally hunting for the secretary, Mrs. Pritchard. When he hadn't been able to find her, he'd tracked down a janitor, who'd let him in. By the time he'd arrived with the locker combination, Luke Wilder was within seconds of a confession.

"Wish I'd gotten there sooner. We could've avoided a confrontation, had the evidence to the sheriff be-

fore Luke knew what was up." Clint was sitting on a canoe slat uncorking the bottle of wine he held between his knees. He balanced an open inverted book on one thigh, *Historical Romances* by Mark Twain.

I relaxed at the other end of the boat, the sun in my eyes, an empty, ready glass in one hand. Water lapped gently around us.

"Don Earl needed the affirmation of a confession," I said. "Something I wouldn't have gotten if you'd shown up on time. Luke thought if he was charming and 'fessed up, he could talk me into letting the whole thing go."

"Don Earl? You're on a first name basis with the sheriff?" Clint uncorked the bottle and poured.

"I'm afraid so." The chardonnay was dry, cool.

And the view of the bank was

hazy, fiery maples and Clint's white Plymouth convertible chock-full of the picnic we would later consume by the water's edge.

"I don't know how you do it, Marcy," he said, "school, and then this private eye stuff." His voice sounded quiet, sincere. He tucked the wine bottle in a towel and leaned back in the boat awaiting my illuminant answer. "Come on, you can tell me. You're shrewd, cunning, very smart. In a word, sagacious." He grinned. Dimples.

"Mmmm." I let my fingers touch the cool surface of the water. "I don't know, Clint. Most of the time, it's just . . . attitude." A maple leaf floated beneath my palm.

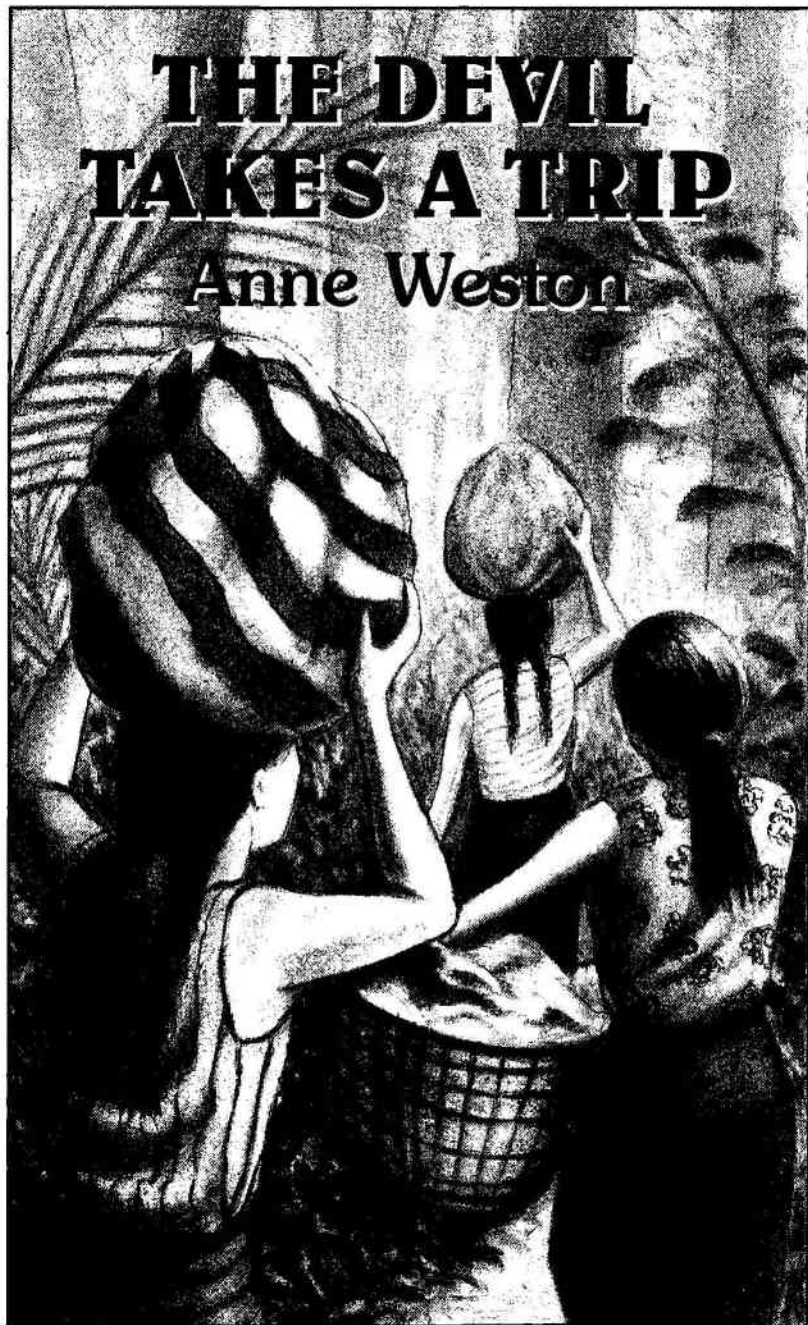
"Yeah. Maybe that, too." He said it thoughtfully, downed his wine, then rowed into a dappled cove with one eyebrow raised, Clark Gable style.

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FICTION

THE DEVIL TAKES A TRIP

Anne Weston



“When I was little,” Sulema said, “my sisters and I would sneak off to look at the Devil where he lay in the riverbank.

“We knew he was the Devil because two horns grew from his head. The roots of a strangler fig, like giant fingers, grasped the stone slab and held it against the soil. His image was cut into the rock deep enough for me to fit a finger into the lines. He was larger than a human and turned sideways, one knee lifted for a running start. In each hand he carried a traveling bag.

“The Devil was going someplace in a hurry, and we wanted to know where.” Sulema paused to thread her needle. Warm light from the oil lamp flickered over her face. Rain hissed on the palm-thatch roof.

Efraín smiled with anticipation of the story to come. He turned the tree gourd, studying its surface. He would need this new drinking-water carrier when he had to be out in the field all day picking corn. This evening he would carve some decoration on its surface. A hibiscus flower? A hummingbird? His hands would tell him as he worked.

“So where was the Devil going?” he asked.

“That’s a mystery for *you* to solve.” Sulema glanced at the baby sleeping soundly on the little bed Efraín had made for him and took up the tale:

A river bordered my family’s farm on one side. It wasn’t a *big* river, just deep enough for us to wade in in summer, with smooth flat rocks good to wash clothes on and a little pool where we took our baths every morning.


We didn’t have many neighbors. Mostly there was forest around us. On the other side of the river lived a man we didn’t like much. He only showed up at our house when he needed to borrow an axe or something, and he wouldn’t bring it back when he finished. Papa would have to send us kids to get it. We called him Señor Hediondo, Mr. Stinky—never in my mother’s hearing, though.

But our biggest trouble with him was that he’d cut the forest all the way to the river’s edge on his side. On our side, when Papa and my big brother Claudio made our field, they left a wide band of forest along the river. We knew the river needed shade so it wouldn’t dry up—what would we do for water if it did? Mr. Stinky had a spring for drinking water near his house. There was only one of him. He never bathed. He wore the same shirt and pants every day of the year, and the only time they got washed was when he was caught in the rain. He didn’t need the river. We’d never seen him near it except when he was clearing its bank.

Papa asked him then, politely, why he was cutting trees on the riverbank. Mr. Stinky snapped back, “To make my farm look bigger if I ever decide to sell it and move someplace where I won’t have nosy neighbors.”

Even with his side of the river bare, as long as ours stayed shaded, the river was safe. What wasn’t safe was our land.

Whenever we had a long hard rain, the river rose higher than my head



and ran fast. The bank on our side had tree roots to hold the soil in place, and leaves and bushes to cushion the force of the rain.

On Mr. Stinky's side there was nothing to slow the rain as it hit the ground and drained off. It rushed along, the rivulets concentrating into bigger and bigger streams. By the time the runoff reached the river, it was a powerful jet. It joined the river at a spot where, on our side, the bank dipped low and the soil was extra soft. Mr. Stinky's runoff pushed the current against our side. The river began to cut a new channel.

"The river's slicing into our land," Papa lamented. "Eventually it'll cut right through our field and connect up with the main part of the river again. A big section of our land will be an island."

"And then the river will wash that island away," added Mama. "Our farm will end up smaller."

We didn't know what we could do about it unless someone bought Mr. Stinky's farm and had the sense to let the riverbank grow up again.

Every morning my sisters and I would carry the laundry to the river to wash. We'd walk across the field, then into the band of forest where a narrow path wound between big trees down to the river. The water felt good on our bare feet after the sun-baked earth of the field.

When we finished the laundry, we'd climb Mr. Stinky's riverbank and sit on some logs—a couple of balsa trees that he'd cut down. We'd look across at the Devil's cage and make up stories about the kind of family we wished would buy Mr. Stinky's farm, or about where the Devil might be trying to go. We'd watch giant blue butterflies, and big howler monkeys in the thin strong vines that draped from trees on our side of the bank.


As the sun rose higher, we knew we'd better get back to help Mama with lunch. But before we picked up the wrung-out clothes, we'd wade over to see the Devil. There he'd be, glaring out from the strangler fig roots. We'd asked Mama and Papa where they thought the Devil was going. They said they didn't know, but as long as he was going away, it was all right.

Mama would have cheese made by the time we got back to the house—my brother always milked the cow at dawn. She'd have corn *masa* ready, too. We'd shape the *masa* into little balls, flatten them, and toss them on the griddle over the fire. When the tortillas were done, we'd wrap them in Mama's red and white kerchief along with a big hunk of cheese. My big sister Telma balanced this on her head and carried a jug of coffee. I took a clay bowl of beans. My little sister Claraluna carried the spoons. We'd head into the field to wherever Papa and Claudio were working.

When they'd finished lunch, we'd tie up the bowl and spoons in the kerchief and start toward the house. But sometimes, if the weather was very hot, my big sister would stop when we were out of sight of Papa.

"Is there anything we *have* to do back at the house?" she'd ask.

"I don't think so." Claraluna would answer.



"You're not expecting any young men to call on you this afternoon?" she'd ask me.

I'd giggle. "No."

"Let's go check on the Devil, then."

It was as good an excuse as any to cool off in the heat of the day. We'd follow her through the forest and down to the river, sparkling where sunlight filtered through the leaves. We'd tie our skirts above our knees and wade to where the strangler fig hugged the bank. The Devil would always be there, keeping his destination secret.

One day we were there with the Devil, about to head home. My sisters had already turned upstream. The river bubbled cheerfully.

Claraluna screamed. I whirled around.

"Hush!" said Telma. "It's only Mr. St—I mean, our neighbor." Claraluna hid behind Telma.

Mr. Stinky had a stranger with him. They walked toward us down the middle of the river.

"*Buenas tardes*," the stranger said to us. He looked at Mr. Stinky.

"The neighbor kids," muttered Mr. Stinky. He glared at us. "What are you doing here, wasting time? Doesn't your mother give you enough chores?"

Claraluna peeked around Telma. "We only came to see the Devil," she explained.

The stranger gave us a peculiar look.

"Pay no attention to these fool kids," Mr. Stinky told him. "Let's go on." He started walking.

"Wait a minute," said the stranger. "What are you talking about, girls?"

"Oh—nothing. Just something we say about that rock." Telma waved a hand at the strangler fig.

The stranger stepped over and peered through the roots at the stone slab. He gave a start and said a word that Mama won't let my brother say.

He looked up. "Pardon me," he said.

At that moment my brother and my father came charging through the woods and down the riverbank. "What's wrong?" yelled Claudio, sliding the last few yards and landing in the water between us and Mr. Stinky. "We heard Claraluna scream."

"She was scared to see someone else here in the river, but it's just our neighbor," said Telma.

The stranger spoke up. "I'm sorry for startling them. I'm Ricardo Trejos. This gentleman was just showing me the boundaries of his farm. I'm thinking of buying it. My wife and children and I have been living with my parents in town, but we'd really like our own place."

"I see," Papa said. He appraised the stranger. "Well, nice to meet you. I'm Ernesto Sandoval, the father of these girls. What are you girls doing here, anyway? You should be home by now."



For once Mr. Stinky helped us, though unintentionally. "Listen, Trejos, we'd better keep walking if we're going to finish by dark," he said before we could answer. "Then I can go to town with you in the morning, and you can give me the money for the farm."

The stranger coughed. He glanced toward the carved stone. "I have to think about this a little longer," he said. "That does look like the Devil on that rock. Sometimes the people who were here before left signs, you know . . . things that still have power."

Mr. Stinky gave us a shriveling look. "More fool you, if you pass up a good deal like this farm because of something these stupid girls say," he snarled.

"Be careful who you call stupid—" Papa began. He paused. I could tell he was thinking. So was I. We knew hardly anything about this stranger, but at least he had a few manners and clean clothes. It would be nice to have some other children around. Just about any neighbor would be better than Mr. Stinky.

"The fact that the Devil is on that rock isn't necessarily a bad sign," Papa said carefully. "It's all in interpreting it correctly." He wrinkled his face. "He's *imprisoned* in the rock. Maybe that means that whatever evil is around here is bound up and can't escape. That would be a *good* sign."

"Hmm," the stranger said. "I don't know . . ."

I decided Mr. Trejos needed clear direction. "Most likely it means that the Devil's here now, but he'll go away if you buy the farm," I suggested.

There was a pause. Claudio snickered. "Sulema!" Papa snapped.

The stranger made up his mind. "Sorry, but I can't buy your farm till I'm sure it's safe. I want to consult a certain person. I'll let you know." He turned and walked back the way he'd come.

"Hey!" cried Mr. Stinky. "You can't lead me on and then leave!"

"Sir, it's really an *excellent* farm," Papa called, but the stranger kept going.

"I can't wait to get away from you and your meddling family!" growled our neighbor. He hurried after the stranger.


"No more than we can't wait for you to go away from us!" Papa yelled after him.

The Devil watched us through the tree roots, mocking our tribulations. I suppose he felt that as long as he was stuck there, he might as well entertain himself by causing problems for mortals.

Papa kicked the nearest rock. "It's starting to cloud up. We'd better finish picking those beans before it rains."

The rain held off that night. Next morning the sun shone weakly through increasing clouds. Mama and Papa walked to town to buy a couple of sacks to put the beans in when they'd dried. I'd had my turn at going along the last time they went to town.

"My turn now," Claraluna crowed.



She rode off on Papa's shoulders. Mama walked proudly beside them, wearing a new dress she'd sewed. My brother was going, too. He carried a large bunch of plantains to sell. Telma and I were left with the chores.

We sped through them. Then, with no one home we needed to prepare a meal for, we picked a huge juicy papaya and gobbled it up for our lunch. As soon as we finished, Telma jumped in the hammock with a movie magazine Papa had brought her from town when he sold the last rice harvest. It had pictures of elegant women and handsome men, and Telma never tired of looking at the fashions.

I didn't think much of those clothes. "How would you ever walk to the river in shoes like that?" I asked her. "With long skinny heels that make you walk on tiptoe? You'd break your leg. And tell me one day of the year when you could wear a fur coat here and not swelter to death. Let's play something instead. I know where Claudio hid his jacks."

But she wanted to look at her magazine.

I took some pieces of papaya that were left from lunch and sat under the papaya tree in the yard. I rested my arm on my knees, palm up with the chunks of bright orange papaya in it, and tried to stay as still as a tree. Maybe my friend would visit.

After a while air rushed above me. The papaya tree shook as he landed on it. I didn't move or raise my eyes to look. He clacked his beak. Finally the toucan dropped past my face, red-black-yellow feathers brushing my cheek, and landed heavily on my arm. His big blue feet dug into my skin, but I didn't flinch. That would scare him away. He seized a papaya chunk with his long beak and tossed it into the air. He caught the fruit neatly and gulped it down. When all the papaya was gone, he cocked his head at me and flew off. He never stayed long.

Papa and Mama came home. They didn't look happy even though they were back early. As soon as they'd reached the road, a half hour's walk from our place, a truck had happened along and given them a ride.

"So what's wrong?" I asked. "Didn't the storekeeper have good sacks?"

"Yes, he did," Mama said. "He also told us that Mr. Trejos is his cousin, a fine person with a nice family." She sighed.

"That's good!" I said.


"It just makes it harder, what we heard later."

"What did you hear?" Telma asked.

"This morning Mr. Trejos consulted that old lady on the far side of town," Papa answered. "You know, the witch. She told him that as long as the Devil is there on the boundary it's a definite warning not to buy the farm."

Claraluna piped up. "Papa, why don't you and Claudio just carry the rock someplace where the man won't see it?"

"It weighs too much, honey. Our whole family put together couldn't lift that rock. Even if we had enough people to drag it away and hide it in the forest, it would leave a track of smashed plants and ripped-up



earth. Mr. Trejos would get suspicious, follow the trail, and discover the stone. He'd know that humans carried it away, not a power from the world beyond. If the stone vanished, he'd accept it as supernatural only if there were no other explanation. It looks like we're stuck with Mr. St—with our current neighbor."

"We could break the rock into little pieces," Claudio suggested. "Mix them in with the other rocks in the river. Mr. Trejos won't notice a few extra chunks of rock lying around."

"No," Papa said. "It's not a good idea to destroy those ancient things. As Mr. Trejos said, they still have power."

"I'm not afraid of some old rock," Claudio boasted, but not very loud.

Claraluna began to cry. She knew that losing the new neighbor was her fault because she'd told him about the Devil.

"Don't worry, Claraluna," Mama consoled her. "Remember, the Devil's all packed and ready to leave. He's just waiting for someone to give him a ride." Mama had an odd gleam in her eye.

All the next day the storm clouds built. A brisk wind blew across the field and made me shiver. I found Papa's good longsleeved shirt, the one he saved for wearing to town, and pulled it on over my blouse.

"I bet you'd wear a fur coat today if you had one," Telma sniffed, her nose in the air.

Papa did something strange that morning. He went to visit Mr. Stinky.

After lunch Papa told Claudio to come along, they had a chore to do before the rain hit. They hurried toward the field. They had nothing with them but their machetes, which they always carried.

"Be careful," Mama called after them.

Dusk came early with the gloom of the approaching storm. Papa and Claudio hadn't come back. I stood in the doorway, watching. "I'm going to look for them," I finally announced.

"No, you stay here," Mama said. "I'll go." She stepped out as the wind whipped the first stinging drops of rain into the house.


Before long I heard them all coming back across the field, laughing. They were soaking wet.

"What's so funny?" I asked as they came through the door.

"Nothing—yet," Papa said, looking at Mama. She giggled like Claraluna. I pestered them with questions, but they wouldn't say anything else.

I had a plan, though. I made Claudio's favorite food for dinner, corn fritters. Before he had a chance at seconds, when no one was looking, I scooped the remaining fritters out of the pan and onto a dish towel. I tied the bundle in a corner of my skirt.

"More fritters, please, Sulema?" Claudio asked when I came back to the table. "I really worked up an appetite this afternoon—" He grinned, someone with a secret.



"A-hem!" said Papa.

"I wasn't going to say anything else," Claudio countered.

"Oh, Claudio, there aren't any more fritters on the stove," I told him, and watched his face fall. "How about some rice instead?"

After dinner Claudio stepped outside to make sure the canvas hadn't blown off our pile of stove wood. I followed him, unwrapping the fritters. I held the fritters where he could smell them but not grab them out of my hand.

"What were you and Papa doing this afternoon?" I demanded.

Claudio salivated. He started to speak. He stopped, a young man torn between appetite and honor. I moved the fritters closer.

"The Devil's going to take his trip at last," he blurted out. "But that's all I'll say. I promised not to tell."

I couldn't squeeze anything else out of him. I relented and gave him the fritters. "You'll figure it out, Sulema," he said through bulging cheeks. "You're smart."

It poured all night. At dawn, when the rain let up, from our house we could hear the river roaring.

"Maybe the Devil washed away in the night," Claraluna said to me as we collected eggs.

"Not a big heavy rock like that," I told her regretfully.

The river was still loud. We didn't bother taking the laundry there; the water would be too high and fast for us to wash. The sun shone all day, and by evening the river quieted down.

The next morning dawned cloudless. We gathered the laundry and walked through the muddy field pretending we were doing something called "ice-skating." There was a picture in Telma's magazine that showed people sliding along on one foot, the back foot in the air. I guess it's something you have to practice, or else mud's different from ice. When we reached the river, we *and* the laundry were a lot dirtier than when we started. It was fun, though.

The river was its sedate self again. We could tell it had risen almost to the top of its bank in the storm. All the loose debris, leaves, cut bushes, and tree trunks left from when Mr. Stinky cleared his bank had washed away. In the riverbed some of the small rocks had been pushed around a bit, but the big rocks that we scrubbed clothes on hadn't moved. The monkeys complained from nearby trees. Apparently their routine had been upset by the storm: their bridge of vines looked less substantial than before, and they hesitated to use it.

Mr. Stinky's runoff had pushed the river farther into our land.

While Telma and I finished the laundry—it took more scrubbing than usual—Claraluna waded over to see the Devil. She reached the strangler fig, grasped its roots, and peered in. She turned and looked at us, eyes wide.



"He's left," she announced.

"What do you mean?" I waded over and stuck my head through the roots.

The Devil was gone.

We ran home, leaving the laundry piled on a rock.

"Mama! Papa!" I yelled, coming into the yard. "The Devil went away! Now Mr. Trejos can be our neighbor!"

Mama stepped out of the house. Papa looked up from the coconut he was cracking open for the chickens. They glanced at each other.

"We'd better go see," Papa said.

We set out across the field. Claudio caught up with us halfway to the river.

The river in its rage had torn the strangler fig's roots loose from the riverbed.

"Are you *sure* the river didn't wash the rock away?" Claraluna asked.

"The river could have knocked the rock off the bank when those roots came loose, but it would have sunk to the bottom right away. The water couldn't have carried it off," I told her.

We walked downstream in case the force of the water had managed to move the stone slab a short distance, though I didn't see how it could have taken the rock far. Papa and Claudio kept walking as far as the end of our property, just to be sure.

They found no trace of the Devil.

We picked up the laundry and went home.

In the morning, Papa mentioned that he was going to visit his brother in town. "Sulema, you and Claraluna can come," he said. "Your mother and Telma will take care of things here."

Mama drew me aside just before we left. She put her face close to mine and whispered, "Do you understand how the Devil left?" I shook my head. "Think about it. Think about what you didn't see."

I thought. "Oh," I said at last. "*That's* it."

Mama smiled. "Have a good time in town."

We arrived at our uncle's house. Papa reached in his pocket and handed me some coins, a *lot* of coins. "You girls take this. Go to the store and buy yourselves a soda," he said. "A couple of ice creams, too. Ask the storekeeper to tell you when it's eleven o'clock, and come back here then. Don't hurry—you'll have time to play with the storekeeper's kids." He sat down in a comfortable rocking chair on the porch. Our aunt brought out a pitcher of lemonade and fresh cookies. "Go on now," Papa added.

For a moment I wondered why Papa had given us real cash money to spend on food at the store when we could have stayed and eaten right there for free. Our aunt and uncle looked puzzled, too.



Then I understood. "Come on, Claraluna," I told my little sister.

We feasted at the store. The storekeeper's children gave us expert advice about the best flavors of ice cream. We had enough money left over for candy. We'd never bought so much at one time.

Our wealth overwhelmed Claraluna. She wanted to try some of everything. I told her stop munching before she got sick. "I bet these kids haven't heard about the mysterious departure of the Devil," I said, distracting her from the candy.

"That's right!" She lit up with excitement and regaled them with the details. The storekeeper's kids listened openmouthed. Claraluna finally ran out of words and devoured another peppermint before I could stop her.

None of the grownups in the store had paid attention to Claraluna's story. It wouldn't do any harm to repeat it. I raised my voice louder than normal. "Yes, he was the Devil all right."

The grownups pricked up their ears.

"The Devil locked in a stone slab," I continued. "Trying to go somewhere. Who knows how long he'd lain in the river between our farm and Mr. St—our neighbor's? The ones who were here before put him there for their own reasons . . . now he's vanished. What could it mean?"

I glanced around the store. I had my audience in the palm of my hand; the children big-eyed, the adults leaning closer. Even the storekeeper bent over the counter to hear better.

I read his watch upside-down: three minutes before eleven. Perfect. I went on. "Maybe an ox team could have dragged that stone away through the forest—but the earth's not ripped up. Nobody carried him away." The storekeeper was leaning so far over the counter he was about to topple. There wasn't a sound or a movement in the place.

I looked all around, then whispered. "No *human*, that is."

A sigh and a shiver ran through the crowd.


"Oh my," I said in my normal voice. "I'm not supposed to be talking about this. And I almost forgot—we have to be at my uncle's house. Let's go, Claraluna." I grabbed her arm and half carried her as I ran out of the store and down the street, as dramatic an exit as I could think of.

The next day was uneventful. Claraluna checked the riverbank when we did the laundry. The Devil hadn't returned. The strangler fig had begun to sink its roots back into the riverbed. The monkeys were using their bridge again, hesitantly.

The following morning Mr. Trejos arrived at our door.

"Good morning," he said.

Papa invited him to have a seat on the bench under the mango tree. Mama brought out coffee. I decided it would be a good time for me to put new nest material in the hens' nesting boxes, which happened to be near the bench.



I pulled dry banana leaves and took them to the nesting boxes. As I crushed the leaves and arranged them in the nests, I listened to the conversation.

Papa and Mr. Trejos discussed the rain, the present bean harvest, the prospects for the next one. They talked about the flu that had been going around and which of Mr. Trejos' relatives it had affected and what was the best remedy.

I noticed a pair of small brown legs dangling from a branch above me. I wasn't the only one eavesdropping.

While I remade the nests for the third time, Mr. Trejos finally got to the point. "I heard something odd happened out here the other night," he said.

"Ah . . . about that rock," Papa said.

"Yes."

"My youngest daughter was the first one to notice. Come out of the mango tree, Claraluna, and tell Mr. Trejos how you discovered the Devil was gone."

Claraluna scrambled down and told her story. When she was through, Mr. Trejos asked if Papa would go with him to the river. I trailed along.

Mr. Trejos searched the riverbed. He quartered the forest looking for drag marks, a scrape on a tree, or broken branches—anything to show that the stone had been pulled through it. Those signs would have remained after the rain.

He examined our field and Mr. Stinky's for ox tracks, thinking that oxen might have been used to pull the stone away. Oxen with so heavy a load would have left prints deep enough to survive the rain.

He couldn't find anything suspicious.

"I have to consult someone," he said at last. "I may be back tomorrow."

Next morning we were eating breakfast when Mr. Trejos showed up.

"She—this person who knows things—says that if the Devil's gone, it means the farm is safe to buy," he announced. "Mr. Sandoval, would you be kind enough to come with me to your neighbor's to witness the sale? I hate to interrupt your breakfast."

"No trouble at all," Papa said.

"And so," Sulema concluded, "Mr. Stinky sold his farm to Mr. Trejos, who became an excellent neighbor. He let his land near the river grow wild again, so our farm was safe. My mother got along well with his wife, and we enjoyed having the kids to play with."


"What happened to Mr. Stinky?" Efraín asked.

"He vanished just like the Devil."

Efraín smiled. "Not *just* like the Devil."

Sulema laughed. "Tell me now, how did the Devil leave?"

"That's easy for a country person to figure out. Mr. Trejos, being from town, wouldn't have thought of it."



"Your father knew there would be a hard rain that night," Efraín went on. "He told Mr. Stinky to meet him and your brother in the river that afternoon. With saplings for levers, they rolled those light balsa logs down your neighbor's bank and across the shallow river to the strangler fig. They cut some lengths of vine—that's what upset the monkeys later, finding their bridge thinned out.

"A little tugging would have freed the strangler fig's roots from the riverbed. Then the men made holes with sticks through the wet soil behind the stone slab. They slid the vine ropes through those holes. They levered the balsa logs next to the rock and lashed the logs and the stone together.

"Only one thing could happen when the heavy rain made the river rise that night. The balsa logs floated and lifted the rock. The current carried away the logs, with the Devil strapped under them.

"The only danger was that the homemade raft might catch on a bend in the river, or break apart, before it left your property. I'm sure your papa was relieved not to find it when he walked down the river. I doubt that the rock traveled very far past your farm." Efraín stopped talking and turned the tree gourd toward the lamp to see what design his fingers had been carving.

Sulema had finished her mending. "You're right," she said. "That's what they did." She stuck the needle into a piece of coconut fiber and set it aside. "When that foreign man was hurt and staying at Catalino's house a few months ago, I described the rock to him. He said the ancient Indians cut designs like that into stone. He told me the rock probably showed a shaman dancing. He said the horns were only a headdress, and the hands held symbols of power, not suitcases." Sulema paused. "The foreigner is entitled to his opinion, of course."

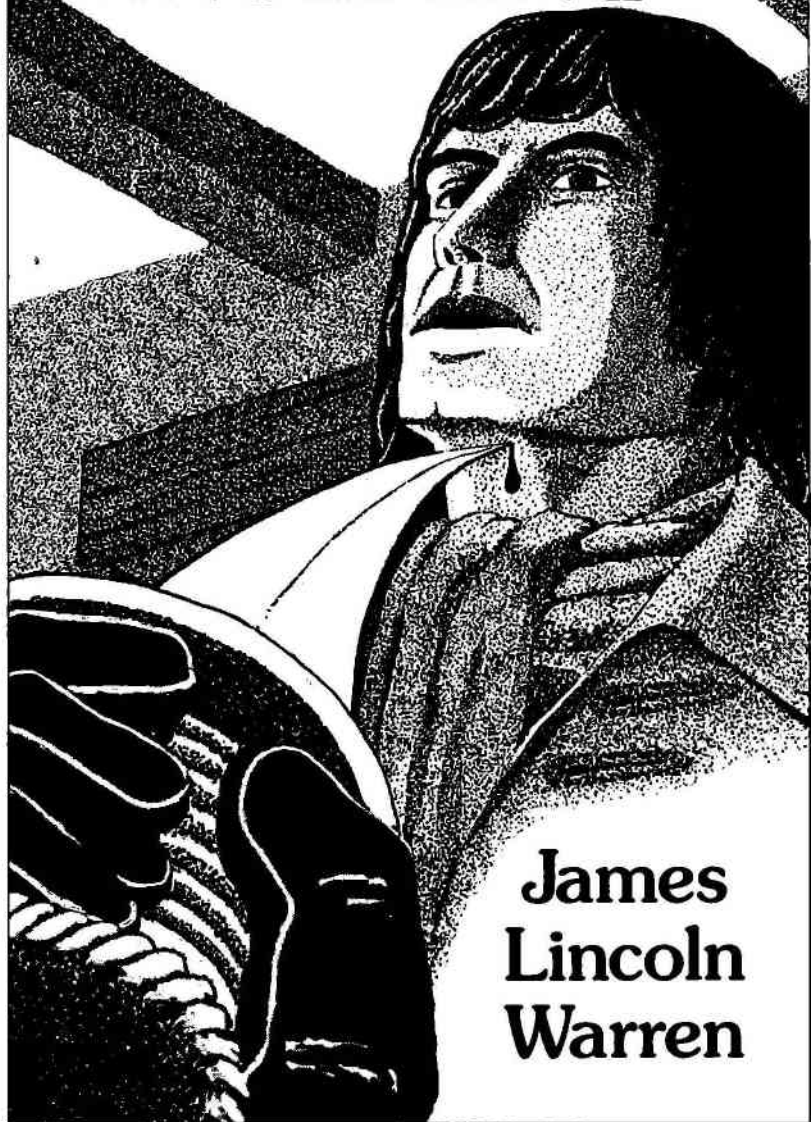
"Of course. Did you ever walk downstream beyond your farm to see where the Devil had made his new home?"

"Yes. Once I made Claudio go with me, and we walked most of the day in the river till we came to the ocean. When we got back to the house, it was the middle of the night, and we were in a lot of trouble. And all for nothing. We hadn't found the Devil."

Efraín studied the design in the lamplight: a toucan, head tossed back. "He must have gone far away, Sulema," he told her. "Farther than the river or even the ocean. He didn't want to tangle with a family like yours ever again."

FICTION

THE IPHIS INCIDENT



James
Lincoln
Warren

Alan Treviscoe stepped with as much stealth as he could muster down the stairs leading to the common room of the old Shropshire coach inn. The hostelry was well over two hundred years old, having probably been built during the reign of the last Henry, and the steps were prone to creaking. He stepped slowly and lightly, favoring the edge rather than the center of each sagging tread, wincing at every soft moan of the ancient wood. Not that such sounds would carry far: the wind whipped and whistled around the building, tugging at the shutters and making them rattle against the windows.

The room ahead was in almost complete darkness, but now and again a detail emerged, lighted by the varying glow of the embers in the enormous fireplace: here the edge of a table, there a knot in a floorboard, then darkness again. It smelled strongly of ale and tobacco smoke, in contrast to the pungent odor of tallow in his room.

He listened keenly for any sound that might indicate that the room was occupied. He slowly entered the room. He could see no one. His disappointment was palpable.

From behind him and to the left, a strong hand seized him by the throat. He reached up to grab it with both hands and felt a tug at his swordbelt. The hand released him and suddenly spun him around as he heard the slither of steel against leather, and the next thing he knew, the point of his own smallsword lightly touched his left jugular vein just below the jaw.

He reached for the pistols in his pockets but was dissuaded by a sudden prick in his neck. He felt blood bead at the sword point before it slowly slid down his skin to stain his neckcloth. The tension behind the long sliver of steel was expertly controlled, and he knew that the puncture was designed to warn rather than wound.

"Hands out to the side, monsieur," said his assailant. The voice was high, husky.

He obediently held out his arms.

Slowly his eyes adjusted to the rise and fall of the embers' glow.

The gently curved length of the triangular blade terminated in a gloved hand. The elbow behind the hand was tucked inward, bent just enough to enable a simple thrust to pass the steel through his neck and out the back.

"Now speak!"

"Twere easier without a sword at my throat," he whispered.

"*Mais bien sûr,*" came the reply. "But you must forgive me if I cannot trust you. I have seen you at Lloyd's."

"You have indeed, madame," Treviscoe replied.

Three weeks before, as it had been for the entire spring of 1771, London was ablaze with a bizarre rumor. It was said that the Chevalier Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Thimothée d'Eon de Beaumont, once accredited to the Court of St. James as the French Plenipotentiary Minister but now a political exile in disgrace with the Court of Versailles, was—a wom-

an! How the chevalier had managed to keep such a secret, especially as a captain in the French cavalry during the campaigns of the Seven Years War, was a matter for wild speculation, but not as wild as the speculation inspired by whether or not the rumor was true.

Thousands of pounds were pledged in frenzied betting at virtually every coffee-house in Town. Not even the New Lloyd's Coffee-house in Pope's Head Alley, recently established to repudiate indiscriminate gambling in favor of sound and responsible business, was immune. In keeping with the very practices that had led to the secession of its most respected underwriters, however, Old Lloyd's in Lombard Street was at the very center of the wagering, and it seemed as if the old ways were again in the ascendant. A veritable ream of contracts had been drawn up, at Old Lloyd's and elsewhere, and the betting had spilled over into such fashionable premises as Almack's Coffee-house, where the doyennes of society held sway. There had even been bets laid in the Royal Exchange. The wagers proliferated and grew increasingly large until entire fortunes depended on resolving the matter of *Sieur d'Eon's* sex.

Alan Treviscoe of New Lloyd's, recognized by many as the best qualified man in London to discover the truth, was offered exorbitant sums to ferret it out. Most he politely refused, never betraying the momentary twinge of regret he felt at refusing a fortune, instead insisting that his specialty was the detection of fraudulent claims against the

maritime underwriters and that the circumstances concerning the Frenchman could not qualify as a suitable object of his indagations. His honor held him back, despite his need for funds, for he knew that if he once accepted a commission to be a spy, or something tantamount to a spy, his carefully nurtured reputation as a man of discretion would be irretrievably ruined. To some of the betting men he was forced to be more pointed in his rejection than a simple refusal, and tempers got frayed and words of anger were exchanged.

Once he was challenged. He coldly declined, stating he might only present himself on the field of honor, where honor itself was at stake. The challenger, whose pique had momentarily overcome his judgment, immediately apologized, belatedly recognizing how near he had come to an appointment with the undertaker. Treviscoe's reputation as a swordsman was enough to dissuade all others from like attempts.

It was therefore with some impatience that he met with two gentlemen who declared a similar interest.

"Mr. Treviscoe, I am Mr. Peter Fountain and this is Mr. Humphrey Cotes," said the more forward of the two. "We are the friends of the Chevalier d'Eon."

"You surprise me, sir," replied Treviscoe curtly, the edge in his voice conveying warning. "Would the chevalier himself describe those as *friends* who desire me to discover what has been madly bet on by all of London? I rather think he would not, if the challenge he made in March to duel with Mr. Bird is

any indication. Every soul in the 'Change had it demonstrated then that he did not count Mr. Bird, at least, among his friends?"

"The chevalier was much distressed on that occasion, sir. Mr. Bird, mercifully, apologized to him," said Mr. Fountain, who had heard of Treviscoe's similar experience, "even after advising him that legally, only the king, the queen, and their children cannot be insured so—"

"Cannot be wagered upon, to speak plainly," snapped Treviscoe.

"Precisely, sir, but England is otherwise a free nation—"

"Free to invade the privacy of a man's very bedchamber in the pursuit of lucre? I believe that might even be described as burglary."

"You leap to the wrong conclusion," said Mr. Cotes hastily. "That is, what we wish you to discover has nothing whatsoever to do with the wagering, at least not in any direct sense."

"Then in what sense do you mean?"

"In the sense that we fear for the chevalier's very safety. I must say, it was your own conduct 'pon refusal to settle these pernicious wagers that decided us on seeking your services, for it was clear you were—are—a man to be trusted. We care not one whit what the chevalier's proper sex may be—well, not so much as to wager on't—but with so many contracts abounding, you must be aware that the temptation has arisen to settle the matter once and for all through the expedient of disposing the chevalier of his life."

"He has gone missing, sir," said Fountain quietly, patiently, "disap-

peared, I mean, and so placed himself beyond the protection of those who value his welfare. We have placed a missing-person notice in the newspaper, promising a handsome reward to whomever can give intelligence of any concealment or violence done to him. There have been no replies, and so we came hither. You are our last hope."

Treviscoe paused to light his pipe.

"I cannot be surprised that he has chosen to absent himself from London," he remarked. "Has it occurred to you that he might be safer out of the public notice?"

"If he *is* safe, and not already the victim of mischief! At least in London his comings and goings are attended by the fascination of the people," replied Cotes. "T'would be most difficult for any assassin to assay an attempt on so public a figure whilst he abides in the capital. But if he *is* in hiding, and if his hiding place were discovered by one unscrupulous—well, I shudder to think."

"And yet *Sieur d'Eon* is renowned as a soldier and swordsman, is he not?" asked Treviscoe. "I understood he was awarded the *Croix de Saint-Louis* for valor by the French king. Any footpad must think twice before trying such a man, I trow."

"He is not *Argus*, I think, to have fifty eyes awake on guard while the other half hundred slumber," said Fountain darkly. "Even the vigilant chevalier must sleep at some time."

"And so you wish me to find him for you, and convince him to return to London, to endure the heartless crowds like a Christian before the lions in the Colosseum."

"He has powerful friends in London," answered Cotes, "with political influence at Westminster and at court. There is no place in England where he would be safer than here."

"But how am I to find him?"

"That, sir, we leave to you. We can tell you that he was last seen on the afternoon of this Tuesday past, on the seventh of May. He wore a coat, scarlet faced with green with his Cross of St. Louis; had a plain new hat with silver button, loop, and band; and with him his sword, but was without his cane. He went out alone, leaving orders with his servant to call for him at a friend's house at ten o'clock, but had not been there nor been heard of since."

"That is most strange," said Treviscoe. His interest had been aroused, but he doubted the motives of his potential employers. "I cannot say that it is quite in my line. I must consider this carefully."

"Then perhaps a commission of five hundred pounds may help to persuade you."

Treviscoe's scowl relaxed into an expression of listless boredom, his most usual affectation. "It might indeed, sir. It might indeed. Who was the friend he was to visit?"

"Mr. Frederick Hixon. The chevalier was expected there for a game of chess."

"Hixon, the Radical member of Parliament? The Wilkesite Hixon?"

"The very same."

"And the chevalier a chess player, too!"

"A devoted player. The chevalier counts Monsieur Philidor amongst his friends."

"Does he indeed? I admire Philidor most particularly, myself."

Treviscoe puffed thoughtfully on his pipe.

"And there is one more singularity in the case, sir, one that may perhaps lend credence to the idea that *Sieur d'Eon* has met with foul play, which is that his valet, a Strasbourgian called *Abelard*, has not been seen nor heard from since the fateful night. This *Abelard*, sir, has every appearance of being a faithful servant, but it is known that he has contracted serious debts."

"Debts? To whom?"

Cotes shrugged. "Tradesmen, fellow French expatriates, perhaps others."

"But not to any gentlemen of leisure, I take it."

Fountain laughed. "A *valet*, indebted to a gentleman? I should hardly think so, sir!"

"It occurs to me that if any man should know the truth of the chevalier's sex it must be his valet. That would make him a natural target for anyone who has wagered immoderately on the issue. You have set me a pretty puzzle, gentlemen, but I know not yet whether to accept your terms. I will give you my answer on the morrow."

The next morning in his lodging above the shop of Mr. Nave the Wigmaker Treviscoe regarded his chessboard. The small carved horsehead of a white knight occupied his attention: a knight, or in French *un chevalier*. It was the only piece on the board that did not move straight along a rank, file, or diagonal but in a hook movement, useful for prying into otherwise inaccessible niches.

That the Chevalier d'Eon had

made such a movement the night of his disappearance Treviscoe could scarcely doubt, but a chess piece cannot be hidden while it is in play. He thoughtfully advanced a pawn to the last rank and automatically exchanged a queen for it. He looked up to where his opponent, had he one, would have sat across from him.

He closed his eyes. His hero Philidor was famous for being able to play blindfolded, maintaining the positions of each piece in his head. It did not matter whether they were visible—the pieces were there, fixed in his imagination.

The chevalier had somehow thrown a blindfold over everyone's eyes and trusted that their imaginations were not strong enough to see what was there.

He was still undecided as to whether he should accept Fountain and Cotes' commission. The problem intrigued him, but he was unsure he had any moral right to seek out a proud man who had deliberately chosen to be hidden—he did not believe that the chevalier had been killed without the fact's becoming known, not with so much money depending on the question of his sex. Could Treviscoe in good conscience track down a man whose only crime was to flee humiliation?

But five hundred pounds! It would go a long way toward solvency. He remembered how he had arrived in London less than two years before with nothing but his sword, a brace of pistols, and a few books. He had certainly risen in the world since then, but not to the extent that five hundred pounds could lift him. He gazed absently at his newly won

queen on the board and furrowed his brow.

Revolving these considerations in his mind, he stepped out into the street and nearly knocked a man over who had been waiting by the door.

"A thousand pardons, sir! Why, it's Mr. Benson, I believe," he said, bowing slightly and lifting his tricorne. "I hope the day sees you well."

"Passable well and thank 'ee," said Benson, straightening himself out, "but I am sent to fetch you for an urgent consultation before you should make your way to New Lloyd's."

Treviscoe's eyes narrowed. He had met Benson during the Tremaggisto affair, the murder investigation that had made his reputation, but he had not expected to meet him again and certainly not for a consultation. Benson was an employee of the Secret Office, the department of the post office charged with intercepting and reading diplomatic mail. There were not more than a score and ten of men who even knew of its existence.

"I would be honored, sir," he said, bowing again, and at Benson's signal a coach and four rattled up to the curb. Treviscoe was surprised to see the coach already occupied by an elderly gentleman, wearing purple vestments and a fine white full-bottom wig. He climbed in, but Benson did not follow.

Treviscoe removed his hat in respect to one of the Lords Spiritual of the Anglican Church.

The bishop smacked the roof with his walking stick, and the coach lurched forward.

"So you are young Treviscoe," the bishop said at length. "I am advised you are a Romanist."

"That is true," said Treviscoe, "but I have no quarrel with the Church of England, Your Grace. I am fixed in the loyalties in which my father instructed me and first among them has ever been to king and country."

The bishop smiled. "Well said, sir. 'Tis a matter of king and country which brings me hither. I have understood that you have been offered a not inconsiderable sum to discover withal the fate of the Chevalier d'Eon."

"I am not to deny it, Your Grace, but I haven't made up my mind as to whether I will accept the offer. My mind is uneasy regarding its propriety."

"Then let me put your mind at rest, if a simple Anglican priest can perform such a function for a man of another faith," the bishop said, his eyes crinkled with amusement. "It is in the interest of the realm that you do accept. The chevalier has been in England for many years and is to be regarded as a man of honor, yet honor itself may be pulled in different directions. Do you read the French?"

"Fluently, Your Grace."

"And have you read d'Eon's *Lettres, mémoires, et négociations*? An infamous book, even these six years later."

"I have not had that pleasure."

"I know not whether any pleasure be in it. The book contains French diplomatic dispatches that were beforehand secret, in an attempt to justify the chevalier's grievances against the French government,

and argues that his recall, which was ignored in the event, was not justified on any grounds, not even by the astronomical expenses for fine Tonnerre wine he charged to his government. Within the covers of the book he retaliates agin the French court even to the extent of accusing the French ambassador of an attempt on his life. Such a charge was not to be contained solely inside a book, you can be sure! It is a messy business, sir, but for us, it was not without its enlightening passages. It convinced us of what we had theretofore only suspected, *videlicet*, that Sieur d'Eon is a spy."

Treviscoe sat in shocked silence.

"When I say *us*, you understand, I speak of certain circles of estate, best left unidentified, and not of the spiritual variety."

"I understand, Your Grace. But a spy? Embarrassing his own government? It surpasses all comprehension!"

"I need not minutely describe the indicia, sir, to assure you that the conclusion is one not difficult to decide: the French government is like an octopus but that any tentacle may, nay, with frequency *does*, writhe and grab unbeknownst to the other seven, even as all its movements are driven by a secretive brain. You may by my word depend on it."

"I see why our own gov—that is, why that certain estate you alluded to just now, may be alarmed by his disappearance. It passes him beyond the recall, and if I may be so bold as to hypothesize, the control of said estate. He might therefore be considered a considerable danger to

the kingdom, and if not so himself, then whatever agency made him disappear *must* be inimical to the interests of England."

"I could not have put it better myself. I hope I have eased your conscience somewhat."

"You have done, Your Grace."

"Then you will appreciate that if you had not been offered the job we should have been forced to take it upon ourselves, with an attendant risk to our secrecy, but your involvement obviates such a necessity, having been made in public and motivated by your trade. Accept the commission, and we ourselves shall not be ungrateful if you succeed. I am empowered furthermore to charge you to instanter inform us of your progress, and I believe you know by what means."

"For your eyes only, Your Grace."

The bishop smiled. "I had no doubt you would find me out."

The coach stopped. "Here we are," said the bishop. "New Lloyd's Coffee-house, I perceive." Treviscoe was aided out of the coach by a footman. He stood in amazement as it drew off. He had never before met Edward Willes, Bishop of Bath and Wells and the head of England's elite Cryptography Branch. Treviscoe entered the coffee-house, where Messieurs Coles and Fountain anxiously awaited his answer, and the contracts were signed.

Before conveying himself to the home of Frederick Hixon, M.P., his next most logical stop, Treviscoe visited a Grub Street bookseller and acquired a copy of Chevalier d'Eon's book. He noted that a sequel had

been promised within three months of the original but that it had never been published.

Thrusting the book in one of his pockets, he walked to the Westminster address that had been provided him by Coles and Fountain. A footman at the door accepted his card and letter of introduction, and he was ushered in to a sparsely but luxuriously appointed sitting room, there to wait for Mr. Hixon.

In the center of the room was a fine chessboard of white oak and ebony, the game *in mediis rebus*, the proud pieces made of delicately carved ivory and onyx. He was studying their relative placement, finding no particular genius in their disposition, when his host arrived.

Hixon paused at the entrance to the room before entering, posing like a portrait of Charles II, updated to the current *mode*, one generous and silken-clad calf artfully turned forward. His left hand was poised open-fingered on his hip, showing several brilliant rings, while his right hand, likewise bejewelled, rested lightly on the knob of an expensive cane.

His clothes were very fine but extravagant to the very edge of *ton*. Embroidery and brocade were everywhere in evidence, and his neckcloth and shirtcuffs were filigreed with ornate Alençon point lace. The peaked lapels of his double-breasted waistcoat, trimmed with silver piping, extended outside his coat. His tie-wig was of the flamboyant toupee style, the hair pulled over a tall lozenge above the forehead that stood up like a bishop's mitre, if not so high. It was powdered a dazzling

white, and the queue, falling nearly to the seat of his breeches, was secured in two places by brilliant blue ribbons that matched his suit.

He was not what Treviscoe had expected of a Radical, a self-proclaimed Man of the People. Macaronis, after all, were not renowned for their civic conscience. For a brief moment, filled with a sense of his own plain appearance in grey broadcloth, his own unpowdered and undisciplined brown hair carelessly dressed, he felt completely out of place.

"So you are the bloodhound, what?" cried Hixon, striding forward.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The fellow to ferret out dear d'Eon," Hixon amplified, apparently not minding a mix of metaphors.

Treviscoe stiffened at the low description *fellow* but maintained his temper.

"I have been engaged to make inquiries," he replied neutrally. "Allow me to introduce myself, sir. Alan Treviscoe, of New Lloyd's in Pope's Head Alley, at your service." He bowed deeply.

Hixon limply waved him up. "Know that, dear man. But how can I possibly help you? The chevalier did not arrive here on the night he fled, don't ye know. Haven't the slightest idea as to where he's run off to."

"I am here on the chance that you might know something, perhaps insignificant in itself, that may *put me on the scent*," Treviscoe said, sarcastically acquiescing to Hixon's conceit. Hixon took no notice. "Fled, you say—I can assume that you do

not consider him the victim of mischief."

"'Course not!" said Hixon. "A proven man of war, always ready with a sword or pistol, what? No no, he ran away. Must have done. Can't think of what else I might add." Hixon produced a snuffbox from the recesses of his coat's huge folded left cuff and ceremoniously sniffed, his face presently screwing itself into a grimace auguring a violent sneeze. "Ah-chew!" His silken handkerchief, spotted with brown tobacco, fluttered in the explosion. He replaced the box in the cuff without offering any to his guest and stuffed the handkerchief up his sleeve. He then looked at Treviscoe with a glazed, vacuous stare.

"I was told that the chevalier came here for a game of chess," said Treviscoe, pointing down at the board.

"We have an ongoing dispute concerning whether the Modenese school or that of Philidor is superior," said Hixon. "I am for the Italians, just as he is in favor of the pre-eminence of his countryman. The chevalier desired to put our respective theories to the test, you see, and I agreed. But I suppose this is all Greek to you."

"As Greek as a phalanx of pawns," replied Treviscoe, "which is one of Philidor's signal stratagems, I believe. 'Twas intended as a singular combat between your skills, then—I take it you were not in the habit of entertaining *Sieur d'Eon*."

"No, I—that is, no. But I have been his guest oftentimes enough, usually in the company of Mr. John Wilkes, his particular friend and

my political ally. The chevalier set a magnificent table."

"Sieur d'Eon is very fond of wine, I believe."

Hixon laughed. "He's a Burgundian, what? The vintages from his own estate in Tonnerre were his especial favorites. Never without 'em."

"I have a taste for burgundy wine myself. Would you perhaps know the name of his vintner?"

"I believe he made his arrangements through Justerini and Brooks."

"You said that Mr. Wilkes was his particular friend. Was the chevalier in sympathy with Mr. Wilkes's political convictions?"

"They have everything in common, sir, excepting Mr. Wilkes's taste for the fair sex; the chevalier's as celibate as a monk, or perhaps I should say *nun*, ha ha! Why, even their political troubles began at near the same time—Mr. Wilkes's *North Briton* No. 45—the famous No. 45!—was published in the year before the chevalier's own *Lettres*. I can't help but believe that Sieur d'Eon was inspired by Mr. Wilkes's example."

"John Wilkes survived his exile from England, indeed, even returned home in triumph. Perhaps this further example is a source of hope to the chevalier for his own reconciliation with France."

"I couldn't say."

"I suppose not. And you cannot shed any further light on the chevalier's disappearance?"

"In truth, I begin to see the attraction this puzzle may hold, even for a man of information as myself. I have often thought it is the duty

of an educated man to use his superior faculties in aid of the less fortunate. Studied law, never called to the bar. I was at Leyden, y'know."

"Heidelberg."

"No, dear man, Leyden is in Holland."

"I meant that my own university was the Ruprecht-Karl-Universität in Heidelberg, whence I was graduated as a Bachelor *summa cum laude*."

Hixon's eyes widened in surprise. He regained his composure and continued. "I was about to say, that I see the attraction, and I was about to ask if you were a betting man."

"I will not bet on the Chevalier d'Eon, sir."

"Nevertheless, I will wager you that I can find Chevalier d'Eon before you do. What's it worth to you then?"

"Nothing, sir, nothing. I wish you well with your search. As I said, I will not bet on the Chevalier d'Eon, for to do so would be in distinct opposition to the ethics of my unique profession, or any ethics at all. But I see that our interview is at an end."

Hixon frowned. Had he been accused of moral turpitude? Pursing his lips, he could think of no fitter retort than, "Good day to you, then, Mr. Treviscoe."

"Your servant, sir." The farewell bow was not so deep.

Treviscoe left with the uneasy feeling that he had stupidly made an enemy, or at least stimulated a rival with great resources. But the interview had not been in vain for all that.

Neither Mr. Justerini nor Mr.

Brooks was to be seen at their celebrated eponymous establishment. Treviscoe inwardly sighed his relief, thinking it would be a much simpler matter to get what he wanted from a lowly clerk. But when he saw the clerk, whose studious air was dignified by his outthrust chin in imitation of gentlemen of taste, he began to feel some doubt.

Putting forward his most supercilious expression, he glibly greeted the clerk. "You are just the man to help me!" Treviscoe cried. "I am desperate for some burgundy wine, to wit, the extraordinary *vin rouge* of Tonnerre. I have been reliably advised that this is the place and that you are the man—you *are* Mr. Justerini, I expect? Or perhaps Mr. Brooks?"

"Your pardon sir," said the clerk stiffly, "but you have the pleasure of addressing nobody so august. My name's Jones, sir, and I regret to tell you that there's no Tonnerre *vin rouge* to be had at all." He opened a ledger, and his fingers flew down the columns until he found the pertinent entry. "Special order, it was. Shipped off, too."

"Shipped off? Shipped off? Disaster, alarums! Shipped off to where?" Treviscoe asked, leaning forward to look in the book.

Jones snapped the book shut.

"'Twould be my situation, sir, to disclose what's a confidence, like. Mr. Justerini wouldn't like it, no, nor Mr. Brooks neither."

"But if there is no Tonnerre wine to be had here, and if this is the only place that deals in it, then I must speak to the man who bought it all. Perhaps I can convince him to part

with some of it withal. Otherwise, the chevalier is certain to be disappointed."

"What's that, sir?" The clerk's face showed surprise.

"I seek the particular vintage of Tonnerre in order to more hospitably entertain the Chevalier d'Eon, a French gentleman who I have been led to believe hails from those parts. I am told he has a preference for it above all others."

The clerk laughed. "Which it's the same chevalier who has bought it all and had it sent to a lady friend!"

Treviscoe feigned shock. "Stap me! So he has had it all shipped off? Then I can hardly expect him to attend my little *soirée* this Friday. Most awkward! One might even say *gauche*! What *will* Lady Dorston say? The chevalier must have somehow forgotten to send his regrets. 'Tis a sad pickle, I can tell you! Lady Dorston will be affronted, suspicious, perhaps—a great beauty she is, you know, worth ten thousand a year, a worthy catch if I may be so bold—and I cannot but be sure she will affix all the blame onto me!"

"Then you must let her know he won't be in attendance, sir, that another lady has got in first."

"Have you not been listening? But perhaps you cannot understand, my good man. If she learnt from his own hand that he cannot oblige, 'twould be well enough, but should she hear such news coming from me, she will suspect the invitation were nought but a ruse to lure her to my environs, especially if I say that the chevalier has preferred another of her sex! She'll think I am some common spark!"

Jones smirked. He obviously thought Treviscoe *was* a spark: a rake and fortune hunter.

"Ah. I understand. But I cannot help you, in no wise, sir."

"Balderdash, man! Help me you must certainly do! If I wrote to the chevalier explaining all, he, being a gentleman, could not fail to provide the excuse, and Lady Dorston would therewith be satisfied, might even attend the *soirée*, what?—and all would be well."

"I cannot tell you where the wine was sent," said the clerk, suspicious again.

"No, no! Of course not! But if I were to give you a letter, you could forward it to where the wine was delivered, hey?"

Mr. Jones looked doubtful. "I don't know . . ."

"And I'll buy a case of this fine claret to seal the bargain," offered Treviscoe, judiciously lifting a green bottle of bordeaux filled with purple-black nectar in his hands. "That will still the indignation of Messieurs Justerini and Brooks, hey?"

The clerk frowned but cocked an eyebrow.

"And a half crown to you personally in recompense for your trouble, I think?"

Jones nodded. "All right, then, sir. Done."

"Fetch me a quill and paper, and I will write straight away."

Treviscoe wrote a quick note, passed it to the clerk, and watched expectantly.

Mr. Jones laughed and wagged his finger at Treviscoe. "Now, no you don't, sir, for I an't Jack Adams to be fooled into giving you the address,

thank 'ee! Your letter shall be posted, sure enough, but I must wait to address it till after you're gone."

"Yes, of course," said Treviscoe with a faint smile of embarrassment.

"Now there's the wine, sir. And the matter of half a crown."

With a sigh, Treviscoe reached for his purse.

Treviscoe did not knock before entering the modest premises off Abchurch Lane adjacent to the Foreign Office, but his arrival was not unnoticed.

"Now, sir, you can't come in here!" a footman pronounced, leaping to his feet.

"I need to speak with Mr. Benson and I could not risk being turned away at the step," Treviscoe explained urgently. "'Tis a matter of some import."

"Then just you wait right here," said the footman, "and I'll fetch him forthwith. Don't you move!"

"I shouldn't dream of it," replied Treviscoe, taking the footman's chair.

He didn't have to wait long. Benson appeared, panic displayed on his face like a pennant in battle.

"Are you mad?" Benson demanded, grabbing Treviscoe's elbow and leading him out the door into the street.

"Never, Mr. Benson," replied Treviscoe, falling in step with Benson, who seemed in terrible haste to get anywhere away from Abchurch Lane, "but it involves my commission from His Grace."

"But to come precipitately into the very *sanctum sanctorum* of the Se-

cret Office!" Benson hissed in an explosive whisper. "It—it—" his eyes darted aimlessly as if searching for the right word—"well, it an't *prudent!*"

"Mayhap it an't," said Treviscoe, "but if I am to succeed in my indagation, I find myself in need of the singular services of the post office."

"What can you mean?"

"I mean that I need a letter intercepted." Treviscoe punctuated this by removing his elbow from Benson's iron grip and stopping dead in the lane.

"Tis illegal to interfere with the mails," said Benson, outraged, "and in any case it can have nothing to do with the—" he suddenly lowered his voice—"Secret Office! We deal only with foreign communications."

"This fact of domain is well known to me if to few others," said Treviscoe calmly. "Odd's vitals, man, behave with some measure of normality! This theatric delivery is bound to call attention to us, in what is indubitably a sensitive discourse! But with regard to your charge as to the illegality of my request, that, as you know, is mere flummery. 'Tis not illegal for the post office itself to intercept and open the mails, or must I remind you of the Postal Act of 1711?"

Benson opened his mouth to protest and blushed brilliantly. "But still we can do naught," he finally said. "Did you not acknowledge that we deal only with foreign communications?"

"Where 'we' are the Secret Office, you are of course correct," said Treviscoe. "But can you imagine that I have knowledge of the Secret Office

and yet were ignorant of the Private Office?"

"The—the P-Private Office?"

"You heard me correctly: the Private Office, your sister agency, sir, dedicated to the interruption of *domestic* enciphered messages. They have the power for the warrant I need, and you have their ear. All you need do is whisper into it. Or must I seek another audience with His Grace?"

"Not that," replied Benson hastily. "Very well. Tell me about the letter, and I will act."

"It need never have its seal broken," Treviscoe said, "for I am only interested in the address."

Treviscoe returned to his lodgings to pack for a journey. Informing Mr. Nave of his intended trip, he gave instructions and a few pence for the care of his cat Sedgwick during his absence and turned to go up to his room.

"I almost forgot," said Mr. Nave. "I have a letter for ye. From Mr. Frederick Hixon. Now, have you seen his wigs, sir? Right handsome, I say, though not my own work. What I would give for *his* custom! Might you be inclined to mention me kindly to him?"

"I should be honored to do so, Mr. Nave," said Treviscoe, accepting the letter, "were I of the opinion that Mr. Hixon held me in esteem, but that, alas, seems not to be the case."

Nave frowned. "Which I wish you wasn't so likely to offend gentlemen, Mr. Treviscoe! It will ruin my trade."

"Nonsense, Mr. Nave, not with such wares as yours! Any macaroni with any sense of *ton* at all should

be worrying at your door like a terrier."

Nave brightened. "D'ye think so?" He frowned again. "But you never wear a wig."

"Buy a wig? I can barely afford to pay rent," said Treviscoe. "How much would you appreciate a customer who took your wig but failed to pay you for it?"

Mr. Nave nodded sagaciously and withdrew into his shop. Treviscoe broke the seal and read the letter.

WESTMINSTER, 14 May 1771

TO MR. ALAN TREVISCOE, BACHELOR:

In light of our recent Conversation, concerning the Disappearance of M. le Chevalier d'Eon, and my Challenge to you that I should be First to discover what hath happen'd to him—fairness obliges me to inform you of my Discoveries, which have been duly communicated to Messrs. Fountain and Cotes. I have likewise forwarded Copies of this Letter to Members of what the Right Honourable Mr. Burke hath called the fourth estate in Grub Street.

To review the Facts: the chevalier was last seen the Afternoon of 7 May—his Appearance was minutely described—and he never attended his announced rendez-vous with my Self. Now there are only two Possibilities which the Facts will admit: that M. le Chevalier was forced not to appear, or that M. le Chevalier deliberately chose not to appear.

Now in the first Instance, we should have learned of what became of him, for such an Eventuation could only be for the Purpose of settling the Matter of his Sex. To withhold such Information would be to

defeat the Purpose for which he was abducted. As there has been no Word concerning him, it then becomes necessary that the second Instance represents the Truth, and that M. le Chevalier deliberately chose to absent himself from our scheduled Soirée.

Whither, then, he? The answer is Simplicity itself, easily discerned by apply'd Logick in three Steps.

Primus, He could not return to France: that is certain. But in his haste to escape the Controversy attendant to him in London, he clearly must seek a Place where he was unknown. He must needs leave England behind, but Holland is too close to England, Switzerland too close to France, and Italy or Russia, where he accomplish'd his earliest Triumphs, are too far from either. Where else then but—Germany!

Secundus, He had made his Intentions known that some Day he desir'd to tour the German States.

Tertius, When his Description was provided to an Exciseman of my Acquaintance, the Exciseman was able to provide the Name of a Boatman, who remembered such a Gentleman, boarding a Vessel on the Thames bound for Hamburg, outbound on the Ebb Tide on the Evening of 7 May. Q.E.D.

If you desire to earn your Commission from Messrs. Fountain & Cotes, I urge you to seek him hither, or be expos'd for a Fraud and Mountebank. I have the Honor, sir, to remain your Obdt. Servant,

*The Right Hon. FRED: HIXON,
M.P.*

Treviscoe erupted into laughter.

"Bravo, Mr. Hixon, no—*Bravissimo!* You have solved half the puzzle—albeit the wrong half!"

He packed his belongings with high spirits.

“You have injured me, madame,” whispered Treviscoe. “To me it is nothing, but my laundress will be appalled: blood is very difficult to wash out, you know.”

“Do not make the jokes, monsieur,” the skirted figure behind the small-sword replied. “This matter is not for jokes.”

“I apologize, madame, for making light of a situation that you plainly find threatening,” Treviscoe said softly, risking the use of his voice, “although I assure you that you are in no danger from me, at least.”

“Then what do you here?”

“I am pursuing a commission from two friends of the Chevalier d'Eon, a gentleman who has recently gone missing from London. These friends, whose names are Mr. Humphrey Cotes and Mr. Peter Fountain, are much in fear for the safety of the aforesaid chevalier and hired me to seek him out and to attempt to convince him to return to the City, where they will undertake to ensure his well-being.”

The sword-point did not waver.

“I swear it is the truth, madame, and I am not given to swear lightly. For proof, I offer a contract, now in my pocket, with their names affixed thereon, confirming the truth of my claim.”

“Let me see it. With care, monsieur!”

Slowly, Treviscoe pulled the contract out from his right coat pocket. He was careful not to disturb the pistol that rested there. Madame snatched it from his fingers, and the point of the blade slipped and scratched Treviscoe's neck as her concentration momentarily lapsed. Reacting quickly, Treviscoe pushed the triangular blade away from his jugular with the back of his left hand, and just in time. The anticipated lunge slid by his ear, and the sword struck a wooden beam behind Treviscoe's head, embedding the sharp point.

He hurled himself forward before his assailant could pull the blade out from where it was stuck. He collided with her and sent her sprawling, knocking a chair and a bench to the floor with a loud clatter in the forward rush. He had barely enough time to withdraw and cock one of the pistols before she was on her feet again. The sword slowly vibrated up and down from where it was held fast to the beam, the red reflection of the embers moving up and down the blade's polished length. Seeing the pistol, madame paused.

“Now then, madame,” said Treviscoe breathlessly. “If you abandon your attempt to run me through, I shall pocket this pistol, and we shall light a taper for enough light to examine the contract. I swear I have told you the truth, and I would be loath to do you or anyone harm, except in self-defense.”

There was noise from above stairs. The innkeeper appeared bearing a lit candle. “What's all this noise about, then?” he demanded.

Treviscoe nonchalantly concealed the pistol behind his back.

"Madame and I collided in the dark," he explained. "Neither of us knew that t'other was there, you see, it being so dark."

"And why are you about at this hour?" cried the innkeeper.

"For myself, I had a craving for a spot of brandywine," replied Treviscoe smoothly.

"A similar craving decided me," said madame.

"Brandy, is it?" the innkeeper said. "Ye'll never find it in the dark!"

"Yes, well, I have a candle here, you see, which I was about to light when the lady and I collided." Treviscoe pulled a candle stub out of his left pocket.

"Hmph," said the innkeeper. "Very well, then, have your brandy. I suppose you intended to pay for it?"

"Of course," said Treviscoe as madame simultaneously said "*Bien sûr!*"

"Then I'm to bed," the innkeeper announced, and turning on his heel, he climbed back up the squeaking stairs.

Treviscoe barked a short laugh. "He never saw the sword!"

"Give me the candle," said madame. She swiftly lit the wick and examined the contract. "And so it is true. My apologies, monsieur."

"Accepted with all my heart, madame. And if I may be so bold, I request of you that should you encounter this chevalier you may be so kind as to relay the message I have given you concerning him."

"What?" she asked in disbelief. "Then you have not *found* le chevalier?"

"Oh no, madame," said Treviscoe earnestly. "It is my understanding that the chevalier fled London because circumstances there had made it impossible for him to sustain his dignity, and I, having accepted terms to serve his friends, could never be party to compromising that dignity."

"Then you have no interest in the wagers surrounding him."

"That, madame, should compromise *my* dignity."

She nodded. "How came you to this place, if I may ask?"

"By following the grape of Tonnerre, madame. By several accounts, the chevalier has a pronounced preference for the vintages of his own estate, and I reasoned that if he were not without them in his exile in London they should follow him anywhere."

Madame laughed, then looked at him searchingly. "Are you familiar with the Latin, monsieur?"

"Intimately, madame."

"Then allow me to commend to your attention the last story in the ninth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I think you will find it edifying."

Treviscoe resisted a smile. He knew very few ladies who could understand Latin and fewer who dared read Ovid, whose principal fame depended on erotic verse. But the *Metamorphoses*, at least, were not amatory in aspect.

"I think I shall retire, madame," he said at length, "and in the morning I believe I shall return to London. If it is your decision to return thither, I should only be too glad to accompany you to whatever destination you choose."

She laughed—it was a deep chortle, a hearty, unfeminine laugh. Treviscoe carefully kept his face nonresponsive.

“Do you think I am so incapable of looking after myself?” she asked, pulling the sword at last out of the wall and handing it over.

“By no means, madame.”

“Then *bonne nuit, et adieu*,” she said, smiling crookedly. “But wait! I believe you can with confidence inform the chevalier’s friends that he is safe and will shortly return.”

“That is good news. Well, good night then. Your servant, madame.”

On the twentieth of June, a Thursday, the Chevalier d’Eon reappeared in London, none the worse for his absence although the controversy surrounding him had grown rather than abated. He explained that he had traveled to Hamburg but, becoming aware of the alarm his absence had occasioned, had chosen to return.

Several instances of betting fraud had in the meantime been exposed, for which much blame was laid upon the chevalier himself, so at Treviscoe’s urging he let scarce a week pass before making his way to the City Hall, where he swore in an affidavit before the Lord Mayor that he was not a party to any of the wagers and insurance policies concerning him. He said nothing regarding his sex.

But even before his return certain parties in London had been poised for his reappearance, among them his friends Cotes and Fountain—and the Bishop of Bath and Wells. Treviscoe’s reports had pre-

ceded the chevalier. Cotes and Fountain were simply informed that the chevalier was safe and was soon to return. The Secret Office and Cryptography Branch required considerably more detail, however, some of which Treviscoe did not trust to the post office—having learnt from recent personal experience that no one’s correspondence was entirely safe. So it wasn’t until after d’Eon’s reappearance and his declaration to the Lord Mayor that Treviscoe made his final report to Bishop Willes, once again ensconced in the discreet confines of the cryptographer’s coach.

“Twas a brilliant fancy to follow the wine,” said His Grace. “You are a clever young man, Mr. Treviscoe. But how came you to discount the evidence of Mr. Hixon, and how came the chevalier to support it?”

“As for the chevalier’s support of Mr. Hixon, of course he would not embarrass his political allies in England, having learnt to his chagrin what the cost was of embarrassing his *own* government. I am sure he has had enough of that for a lifetime. Mr. Hixon made his conclusions extremely public. It would not do to be forced into a retraction—a politician wrong on such a point might easily be construed to be wrong on many others.”

“Hixon’s a fool.”

“But we should not forget that Sieur d’Eon wanted all along for people to think that he had gone to Germany, and Mr. Hixon was fooled with the rest of ’em. For you are wrong, Your Grace, in assuming I *discounted* Mr. Hixon’s evidence; quite to the contrary, it supported

a thought I'd had earlier—for I differed from Mr. Hixon only in the *interpretation* of his evidence. There are several little twists in the tale, but I got the first inkling as I played alone at chess in my rooms—I advanced a pawn to the last rank, you see, and exchanged it for a queen. I did not at the time regard its significance."

"The chevalier is a hand at chess, I believe."

"That is true, Your Grace, but it is not directly germane—for when I was told by Mr. Hixon about the chevalier's admiration for—indeed, emulation of—Mr. Wilkes, it was then that my exchange of pieces on the board came back to me and gave me the inspiration."

"How do you mean?"

"You recall that Mr. Wilkes was forced to flee the country after the warrant for his arrest subsequent to the matter of the infamous No. 45."

"Of course."

"But did you know that Mr. Wilkes escaped London by the simple artifice of *disguising himself as a woman*? In chess, the restrained and powerless pawn changes his sex to become the mightiest and most mobile piece in the game, thus gaining the liberty of the entire chessboard—I reasoned that this was exactly what the chevalier had done, that he had tired of being a pawn and had longed to achieve the perquisites of royalty. No one would expect him to appear in public as a woman, not given his tireless opposition to the wagers concerning his true sex! As a woman, he could go whither he wished.

"I was therefore almost certain that should I hope to find the chevalier it were a woman I must look for and not a man. And then the clerk at Justerini and Brooks confirmed that the chevalier's wine was sent to a woman although charged to d'Eon—even after Hixon observed that the chevalier's chastity is absolute, emphasizing the point with a crude joke. Whyever would d'Eon send such an extravagant gift—every last drop in England of the very vintage he could not himself live without, by all accounts—to a woman? Why, only because the woman was he!"

"But what about the appearance of the chevalier on the ship to Hamburg?"

"You recall, Your Grace, that the chevalier's valet, Abelard, was also missing. He is a native of the Alsace, sir, a fact which suggests that he is probably as fluent in German as in French. It was he, disguised as his master, who was seen by the boatman, all according to d'Eon's plan of escape, to lay a drag before the hunt, as it were, and give the hounds a false scent."

Treviscoe allowed himself a self-satisfied smirk before continuing. "Hixon compared me to a hound, but *he* was the one baying at the wrong quarry! I was more cautious because I suspected some such stratagem the moment I learnt Abelard was missing. His instructions, no doubt, were to fetch Hamburg and then to blend in among the crowds there. I might remark, sir, that Mr. Hixon was in error when he assumed that d'Eon is unknown in Germany."

"While the chevalier himself attempted Ireland, where he is completely unknown," reflected the bishop. "But are you satisfied he was on no mission of reconnaissance?"

"Tolerable certain, Your Grace. It is my strong opinion that the wiles of a *womanly* spy are quite beyond the chevalier's capacity." Treviscoe had a twinkle in his eye.

"What makes you so certain? He will not speak on the issue of his sex!"

"In his travesty, Your Grace, he has all the feminine allure of an old ass, and had d'Eon been in Eden instead of Eve, Adam could never have been tempted. And then there were his parting words to me in Shropshire, directing me to the ninth book of the *Metamorphoses*. Are you familiar with it?"

"It has been many years," said the bishop. "Ovid is not exactly the sort of reading a churchman finds instructive."

"This particular tale is instructive enough, Your Grace. The end of the ninth book deals with the story of Iphis, a young maiden of Phæstia who was disguised as a boy from birth in order to protect her from

the irrational hatred that Legdus, her father, held against girl-children. In the story Iphis is trained in all the arts of manhood and is believed by one and all to be a male youth. Only she and her mother Telethusa share the awful secret."

"Then the chevalier as much as admitted to you that he is female!"

"I know not what the world will decide concerning this matter, Your Grace. It may well be that for reasons of his own the chevalier desires to be thought of as a woman, or thinks of himself as a woman. But—but—"

"But what?"

"Allow me to harken back to Ovid and his story, Your Grace. Iphis grows very sad, for her entire life is a fraud. On Iphis's appointed wedding day she is in despair: not even her intended bride, the beautiful maiden Ianthe, knows her intended is no man. Finally Iphis and Telethusa repair to the temple of Isis, where with tearful prayers they conjure the goddess to intercede. And then? A miracle, Your Grace! The poet tells us that *femina nuper es, puer es!* In the end, the gods turned Iphis into a man."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images

That's not going to work. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 143.

A WILD JUSTICE

B. K. Stevens



“She might do,” Carla Tate said.

She stood with arms folded skeptically, taking her time as she looked me over. Carla Tate is the sort of woman who's always intimidated me: hair just so, make-up just so, figure—oh dear Lord, figure—just exactly so. The azure of her jacket picked up the lighter threads in the weave of her skirt, her delicate gold earrings coordinated with the slender chain around her neck, her purse complemented her shoes without merely matching them. On my best Saturday nights I don't look half that put together. On my wedding day, if I ever have one, I won't look half that put together. And this was just nine A.M. on a regular Tuesday.

She turned to her boyfriend. “What do you think, Charlie? Will she blend in at a support group meeting?”

“Sure.” Charlie Mazelli barely looked up. A casually dressed, sturdily built man, he lounged in a chintz armchair, his attention fixed on the cookie he held. It was the Professor's recipe—peanut butter and Tabasco—and he snapped it in two and sniffed before committing himself to eating it. “She'll fit in fine. She looks like the kind of woman a guy would walk out on.”

That earned him a smack on the shoulder. “I'm the kind of woman a guy would walk out on,” Carla said, “or have you forgotten my first two husbands? Every employee I have is the kind of woman a guy would walk out on. Almost all my clients are the kind of women guys would walk out on.”

“Yeah,” he agreed cheerfully. “Except your male clients. They're the kind of guys women would walk out on.”

Exasperated, she sat down, leaning forward to talk to Miss Woodhouse. “So you've heard of Kids Collect?” she asked.

“I have.” Miss Woodhouse couldn't look more different from Carla Tate, but I bet she didn't feel intimidated. She's almost six feet tall, broad-shouldered, lean, black-grey hair pulled back hard and caught at the nape of her neck with a thick blue rubber band. She never bothers with makeup and generally wears boxy, beige dresses that do precisely nothing for her. But you get the impression she looks the way she wants to look.

She picked up a pencil and began gnawing. “As I understand it, you help custodial parents secure back child support, and you locate irresponsible non-custodial parents who fail to honor—”

“Iphigenia!” Professor Woodhouse cut in, and we all looked up. As usual she was sitting in her rocking chair near the bay window in the big sunny parlor that serves as the office for Woodhouse Investigations, and she was rocking at an angry pace. “Take that pencil out of your mouth, you nasty girl. If I have never before told you what a loathsome habit that is, I am an irresponsible parent myself. Permanently marring a perfectly serviceable writing implement with dental impressions—wasteful, weak-willed, wrong. And I know why you do it. You are longing for a cigarette, and using that guiltless wood-cocooned graph-

ite as a substitute. Well? Do you deny it?"

Carla Tate didn't intimidate Miss Woodhouse, but her mother never fails. Already the pencil was hidden in a desk drawer, and Miss Woodhouse's hands were folded meekly. "I don't deny it, Mother. I'm very sorry. I won't do it again."

Still huffing, the Professor tossed her head, whipping her long white braid in an arc behind her. She reached into the big cardboard box by her side, pulled out another clothes hanger, snipped it in two with her wire cutters, and twisted the pieces sharply before weaving them into the jointy structure taking shape on her mahogany table. I couldn't yet tell what she was sculpting, but it was already two feet tall, already interesting.

She was too angry to speak again, and Miss Woodhouse was too ashamed. Carla Tate and Charlie Mazelli looked at each other doubtfully as if thinking they'd better haul out the yellow pages and find a different detective. Rats, I thought. Miss Woodhouse hired me as her secretary, and I've ended up doing so many odd bits of work that now she calls me her assistant. But I sometimes think my main job is keeping the conversation going when things start getting weird and clients start walking out.

"So," I said heartily, "did I introduce myself? I'm Harriet Russo. Your work sounds fascinating, Ms. Tate. How can we help? Is some deadbeat dad proving too hard to trace?"

"It's not that." She hesitated. "Actually, I'm not sure I *need* help. Af-

ter all, I'm a detective myself. We've got an eighty-seven percent recovery rate. I've got three full-time employees, four part-timers, and every one is a woman who's had trouble collecting support. So we've been there. We're motivated. We—"

"You do *one* kind of detecting," Charlie Mazelli said. He tasted the cookie, seemed to enjoy the first bite, noticed the Tabasco, set the cookie aside. "Tracking guys down, dealing with courts—you're the best. But this is burglary—two burglaries—and assault. Next thing you know, it could be murder."

That got Miss Woodhouse going again. Nothing perks her up like murder. "What is it?" she asked. "Are you closing in on a deadbeat who doesn't want you that close?"

"It's one theory." Carla shrugged. "I might as well tell you. Last Thursday night someone broke into our office, made a mess, stole some files, wiped out our hard drives. If I didn't make backup files, we'd be dead. Then, on Saturday, my apartment was burglarized—even bigger mess, hard drive on my home computer erased. But the only things stolen were my computer disks. So I figure this burglar didn't come to steal. He came to search."

"A reasonable assumption," Miss Woodhouse agreed. "Do you know what he was searching for?"

"Well, since he broke into the office first," Carla said, "it's got to be something related to work."

"And small enough to fit in a briefcase," Charlie added.

"Ah." The Professor didn't look up from her sculpting. "An allusion to the aforementioned assault, I as-

sume. So someone attacked Ms. Tate and stole her briefcase. When?"

"Last night." He looked at the Professor in surprise—people generally look at her in surprise when they realize how sharp she really is. "Carla worked late, and when she went out to the parking lot, this jerk jumps her from behind, smashes her head against her car, snatches her briefcase. But she managed."

For the first time she smiled at him. "Well, I don't have a boyfriend who's a black belt for nothing. Charlie's taught me a few tricks. And my koo baton's attached to my key chain, so—"

"Your koo baton!" I said. I'm a big fan of koo batons—just wood, just six inches long, but nifty little martial arts weapons when you know how to find pressure points. "I've got a baton on my key chain, too. Let's see—he was behind you, so you spun around, right? Jabbed him in the temple? In the neck?"

"Smack in the kidney," she said proudly. "And while he was doubled over, I caught him on the upswing and raked his face with my keys. But he took off before I got a good look at him."

"She's not even sure it was a him," Charlie said. "All she saw was someone medium height, medium build, bulky jacket and ski mask. Coulda been Crazy Madge as easy as Jason the Louse."

"So we have specific suspects." Miss Woodhouse picked up another pencil, remembered, put it down in a hurry. "Crazy Madge and Jason the Louse," she repeated. "Police monikers?"

"Office nicknames."

Carla blushed. "Crazy Madge—that is, Dr. Madge Bixby—came to us a year ago. And we don't usually refer to clients by unflattering nicknames except that Dr. Bixby can be rather loud, rather demanding, rather—"

"Rather a pain in the butt," Charlie cut in. "She's always barging in to Carla's office, grouching about how it shouldn't take so long to find her ex. And she treats Carla's employees like—"

"Language, Mr. Mazelli," Miss Woodhouse said sharply, with an anxious nod at her mother.

He caught the nod, understood, adjusted. "—like she doesn't respect them as human beings. Especially poor Edna. Edna's a part-timer, a great investigator. Usually, she tracks guys down within a month. This time it's taking longer. And Edna's sorta meek, and that makes Crazy Madge think she's stupid. Madge can't talk to her two minutes without making a crack. She makes Edna feel like—like she's not respected as a human being."

Miss Woodhouse smiled at him gratefully. "And is Crazy—is Dr. Madge Bixby connected with Jason the Louse?"

"His ex-wife," Carla said. "They got divorced eight years ago, after their second son was born. He signed a generous child-support agreement—he's a computer whiz, rich as hell—then disappeared. I can't tell you exactly what he owes without violating confidentiality, but it's well into six figures. Last year Madge asked us to find him and make him pay up."

"Seven years," Miss Woodhouse



observed. "That's a long time to wait before seeking payment. Is that unusual?"

Carla sighed. "Not very. Women find lots of excuses for waiting—they hope state agencies will handle things, they hope their exes will sprout consciences and come forward, they're still in love and don't want to ruin chances for reconciliation. And Madge is a dentist—she can support her sons on her own. But now the older one's a year away from college, and she needs some help. Plus she wants her sons to get to know their father, form a relationship before it's too late. That's what she says."

"Is it what you *believe*?" Miss Woodhouse asked.

Carla looked away, and Charlie took over. "It's not what I believe," he said. "I'm no expert—I'm a tax accountant, best in town, reasonable rates, here's my card—but I've met Madge, I've heard Carla's stories, and I think this broad's out for revenge. I think she's behind the stuff going on. Not that I've got any sympathy for Jason Bixby. Guys like him make all divorced dads look bad, even ones like me who pay up regular every month, pay for extras no court ever ordered. But chances are Jason Bixby's in China by now, doesn't even know Carla's after him. Madge knows. Maybe she thinks Carla's getting close and if she grabs the records, she can snag her ex by herself, cheat Carla out of her commission. Twenty-five percent of six figures—lotsa people would commit burglary and assault to save that much."

"A moment," the Professor said,

"for clarification. Ms. Tate, you said that when your office was burglarized, 'some files' were stolen. Which files? Ones relating to Jason Bixby? Is that why you and Mr. Mazelli suspect Mr. and Dr. Bixby?"

Carla smiled. "Not bad, Professor. Yeah, the Bixby case files were the ones stolen. The *only* ones stolen."

"But that's stupid," I said. "So stupid it looks like a setup. It points suspicion right in his direction—or his ex-wife's. Would a computer whiz be that stupid? Would a dentist?"

"Dentists," the Professor said solemnly, "can definitely be that stupid. Practical wisdom, my dear Harriet, does not always co-exist with technical proficiency; indeed at times the two seem mutually exclusive. And I imagine computer experts have no automatic claim to wisdom any more than dentists do."

"You got that right," Carla agreed. "'Computer-smart, life-stupid'—Madge calls him that all the time at support group."

Miss Woodhouse hunched her thick, nearly archless eyebrows. "You have twice referred to a support group and have raised the question of how well Miss Russo would blend in. Is this support group a service you offer your clients? And is it your plan that Miss Russo attend this support group, posing as a client, and insinuate herself into the confidence of Dr. Madge Bixby?"

"It's not what you'd call a real plan," Carla said. "Just a longshot Charlie and I talked over. I can't go to the cops—if I sic them on a client, it won't exactly be good for business."



"True," Miss Woodhouse agreed. "When does the group meet?"

"Tuesdays at eight. We talk about problems like how to tell a kid why dad doesn't want to see him, doesn't care if he needs braces. Madge never misses a meeting. Now that she's finally taking action, she's a big make-the-bastards-pay advocate. If Harriet said her husband dumped her and her kids but she's not sure what to do, Madge might take her under her wing and—"

"But I don't have any kids," I objected. "I've never been married. I wouldn't know how to act like a deserted mother."

"You will do splendidly," the Professor said, smiling at me. "You are a clever girl—far cleverer than Iphigenia cares to admit. But since you doubt yourself, I shall go along, to supply apt comments should you feel at a loss for words."

Miss Woodhouse stared at her. "Harriet can manage on her own. And you hate to go out. I don't—"

"You are not the proper person," her mother said sharply, "to tell me what I hate or do not hate. I shall pose as Harriet's grandmother. Tell no one our true identities, Ms. Tate, not even your employees. Let us not gamble on their acting abilities—they will behave more naturally if they believe us to be what we profess to be. Do you also want Iphigenia to locate Mr. Bixby?"

"Charlie thinks it's a good idea," Carla said, shrugging. "I think it's a waste of time. Edna worked hard at tracking him down, but every lead dried up. If we can't find him, he can't be found. We're motivated. We've been there. We—"

"Undoubtedly," Miss Woodhouse said. "But since in this case your usual methods have failed, it makes sense to let someone else try. Do you have a copy of the Bixby case file?"

With one last shrug, Carla gave her the file. That settled it. Carla wrote out a check, Charlie swallowed a cookie whole as if to seal the deal, and Miss Woodhouse saw her new clients out. I walked over to the Professor's rocker to admire her sculpture.

"That's a great-looking tree, Professor," I said.

She looked up wisely, sweetly. "It is not a tree," she said.

"Sorry," I said. "And I'm sorry I hesitated about the support group. I can handle it. So don't feel you have to—"

"I don't feel I have to," she said. "Very seldom, these days, do I feel I have to do anything. I want to go."

She gave me an oddly sad little smile, sighed an oddly sad little sigh, and snipped another clothes hanger. Something's going on, I thought, but I don't have a clue as to what. That's all right. Since I've started working for the Woodhouses, I've gotten used to not having a clue. It hardly bothers me any more.

At seven fifty that night the Professor and I arrived at the High Tides Plaza in Arnold. Annapolis suburbs don't have centers. There's the historic district, there's the mall, but those are the only true centers for this whole stretched-out urban area sprawling halfway to Baltimore in one direction, halfway to D.C. in the other. There aren't

many places where you can shop for more than half a dozen things at a time. Instead, every few blocks, you find a place like High Tides—a low, L-shaped brick complex squeezing together a card shop, a seafood restaurant, an office building. Kids Collect was on the second floor of that building, between a podiatrist's office and a realty. I helped the Professor up the stairs—she avoids elevators on principle—and opened the door with the bright green Kids Collect logo.

About a dozen women were gathered in the reception area sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups. It was a standard reception area—your usual earth tones, your usual carefully bold splashes of brightness—but your attention snapped straight to two huge wall maps of the United States. The one labeled CUSTODIAL PARENTS was adorned with hundreds of pastel-headed pins concentrated in Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware. The one labeled DEADBEATS was pierced with an almost equal number of black-headed pins spread out clear from Florida to Maine, from Georgia to Oregon.

A middle-aged woman walked over, blonde hair cut in a precise pageboy with blunt bangs, thick glasses well scratched. She managed a smile. "I'm Edna Mackey, an investigator for Kids Collect. Are you Harriet? And this must be your grandmother, Professor Russo. Carla said a new client might come."

"A possible new client," I corrected, sliding into my role. "I haven't decided. There are lots of issues, lots of feelings—"

"We'll help you cut through all

that," a strident voice said. The hair was metallic auburn, the oversized watch was the one concession to jewelry, the suit was so no-nonsense and so mercilessly ironed that Patton would have judged it a bit severe. It had to be Crazy Madge. She seized my hand and diminished it. "Here's the issue. He's got the money, your kids deserve it, you need it. That's all. Now, how do you feel about *that*?"

"Not so good," I admitted. Already, I felt like making the bastard pay—although there in fact was no bastard. But I wanted to be part of whatever it was Madge Bixby was selling. She must be one hell of a dentist, I thought. She can probably talk patients into root canals without taking X-rays.

"You bet not so good," she said with a fierce nod. "Edna? Shall we start sometime this millennium?"

"I'm sorry." Too timid to look Crazy Madge in the eye, Edna hunched down her shoulders and stared at her watch, methodically unclasping and reclasping the slender metal fastener on the yellow plastic band. "But Carla's not here yet. Maybe we—"

Thank goodness Carla rescued her by sailing into the office, taking charge instantly, greeting everyone, deftly pulling chairs into a circle. She was working her way around, asking each woman to introduce herself, when Madge broke in.

"We can cut this crap," she said. "Everybody knows our sad stories. Everybody except Harriet. So, Harriet. How many kids do you have, and when did the bastard stop paying?"



"One kid." I'd worked this out in advance. "Billy, two years old. And the bas—my husband left last year. I don't know where he is. We never got divorced, and he never signed an agreement, so maybe I don't have a right to demand payments or—"

"You do," Madge broke in. "He makes the kid, he makes the payments. And these guys who take off without bothering to get divorced, they're the worst. *You* know that, Edna. Tell her. Don't let her make the same stupid mistakes *you* made."

Edna fiddled with her watch clasp again. "I *was* stupid. When Lew walked out on my daughter and me, I took years to get up the nerve to look for him—that was long before I worked here. When I found him, he was broke, out of work, sick. He died of cancer a month later. I never collected anything. Instead, since we were still legally married, I got stuck with his medical bills. That was ten years ago. I'm still in debt."

"You'll *always* be in debt," Madge assured her. "You'll die in debt—especially now that your kid's in college and you keep taking out new loans to pay off the old ones. See, Harriet? You don't want to end up like Edna—working a job and a half, still so far behind you'll never catch up. Me, I don't need a man to pay my bills. I'm a professional, not a department store clerk—"

"I'm not a clerk." Edna looked up almost defiantly. "I'm in Customer Service. I'm in charge of billing now. I—"

"We know," Madge said, bored. "You've worked at Doyle's fifteen

years, you've fought your way to the top of Customer Service, you must make a full dollar above minimum wage now. The point is, Harriet, I make a damn good living, but I've got a kid headed for college, too. Even for me, it's a stretch. And I sure as hell deserve help from that louse, after all the years I waited on him. Do you know, he never once took the garbage out? All he cared about was his damn keyboard and his dumb league. I had to do everything. He hated the outdoors, so I had to coach Brian's Little League team. He hated to make phone calls, so—"

"—so you had to deal with lawyers and stockbrokers," one of the women said wearily. Obviously, she'd heard this litany a thousand times, and would rather recite it herself than listen to it again. "And he hated to shop—"

"—so when he needed a shirt," another woman chimed in, "you had to go to a store, bring five home, let him choose the one he wanted, return the others. He hated to balance the checkbook—"

"—so Madge did it," Carla finished. "She had it bad. We all did. Compared to my third husband, Jason was a dynamo. The question is, what do we do about it? What does *Harriet* do?"

"She'll hunt the bastard down!" Madge declared, thumping right fist against left palm. Then, with an effort, she softened. "But not just for the money. For the relationship. Rotten as he is, he's still her son's father. It's a horrible thing for a boy to grow up without a father."

"And equally horrible for a girl to



grow up without one," the Professor said softly, more softly than I'd ever heard her speak before. She sat with eyes downcast, hands clasped in her lap, no rocker to keep her in motion, no art project to provide vital distraction. The hands kneaded each other uselessly. "My husband," she said. "So fine a violinist—at times, when I close my eyes, I hear his music still. He went on his Journey when my daughter was six. He took his boat out on the Severn one day, he said he needed peace to think, the boat was found in the mid-Atlantic weeks later. The police ruled it a suicide, I led my daughter to think it an accident, but I knew he had chosen this way to leave us. I received one postcard from him thirty-two years ago from Prague. He may still be alive. I do not know." She gave herself a shake, and the long white braid trembled.

Every woman in the room was moved—even Crazy Madge had tears in her eyes. That Professor is one hell of an actress, I marveled. To make up that story on the spot, tell it with just the right degree of emotion—brilliant. Madge is bound to see the Professor as an ally now, bound to warm up to both of us.

Determined to do my bit to keep the drama going, I took the Professor's hand. "Grandma," I said. "You never told me."

"And you must never tell Iphi—your mother," she said. "You have never seen a child who so adored her father, or a father so seemingly devoted. She must be allowed to cherish that image. I tell you only so you will be spared what I endured, so you will not be forever haunted

by unanswerable questions and unquenchable hopes. Find your husband, Harriet, and resolve matters—amicably if possible, antagonistically if necessary, but resolve them."

Madge leaned forward. "Your grandma's right on the money. She knows how it is—never knowing if he's alive or dead, every day half hoping and half fearing he'll just show up, and never collecting one damn cent. You don't want that, do you?"

"No." I tried to force tears, settled for a sigh. "But I'm so confused. It's hard to think with so many people around."

"Then we'll talk it over tomorrow," Madge said. Carla was right; she was an eager recruiter. "I take Wednesday afternoons off. Come to my house at one. I'll make my famous crab salad, we'll polish off a bottle of wine. Your grandma's welcome, too."

"No, no." The Professor waved a hand. "I seldom go out, and you girls will do better without an old woman around. Harriet needs to talk things through with a woman her own age."

Madge beamed—she's got to be twenty years older than I am. She loved the Professor now, and that made my job a lot easier. I could hardly wait to get back in the car before I thanked Professor Woodhouse. "You made that lunch happen," I said. "What a story you made up! What a performance!"

She stared straight ahead, almost melting the windshield with her gaze. "It was not a performance. I made nothing up."

I stepped on the brake, too hard. "But I always thought—"

—what I wished you to think,” she said. “Iphigenia has always thought it, too. She must continue to think it. I had not intended to speak tonight. But I found myself for the first time in the company of women who have endured sufferings similar to my own and were not ashamed to speak of them. I could not hold back. Now you must hold back. Tell Iphigenia nothing.”

She didn't make me promise.

This could be part of it, I thought—part of the reason she had her breakdown or whatever it was some fifteen years ago, part of the reason she made Miss Woodhouse break her engagement and resign from the police force, part of the reason she's been sweet and sharp but a tad strange ever since. This could be a clue to the sadness hanging over the Woodhouses—and maybe, since Miss Woodhouse is so much smarter than I am, she can use it to solve the whole mystery, get the Professor back to normal. Maybe Miss Woodhouse could finally marry the still-faithful police detective she'd regretfully turned away so long ago. So I was glad the Professor forgot to make me promise not to tell. Maybe she forgot on purpose. But I wouldn't say anything yet. I'd wait and see how things went.

The next day things went quickly. When I got to Madge's mini-mansion in Severna Park, her sons were out by the basketball hoop attached to the garage, taking turns at free shots. The seventeen-year-old ambled over to my car.

“Harriet, right?” he said. “Mom just called. A root canal turned into a major deal, so she'll be late. She

said to give you a Coke or whatever.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I'm not thirsty.” I pointed to the hoop. “I used to be pretty good at this. Mind if I give it a try?”

“Help yourself,” he said.

We agreed on five shots each. I sank three, the eight-year-old sank two, the seventeen-year-old sank all five. Five foot eight—you wouldn't think basketball would be his game. But with that easy, athletic build, he could dominate any game he wanted. We agreed on another five shots.

I sank my first and handed the ball to the older boy. “You're Brian, right?” I said. “And your brother?”

“Nate,” he said, shooting and sinking. “And you've got a son named Billy. Mom told us about you when she got home last night. You're thinking about tracking your husband down.”

The eight-year-old took the ball and spoke for the first time. “Just like Mom's trying to track Devil-Daddy down.”

“You shouldn't call your father Devil-Daddy,” I objected.

“Why not?” Nate made the basket easily. “That's what Mom calls him. He walked out the night I was born. He doesn't give a damn about any of us. That's what Mom says.”

“I wish she'd just forget him,” Brian said. “I don't care how rich he's gotten, or how much he spends on Grandma.”

“It was that ruby ring he gave Grandma,” Nate offered. “That made Mom go ballistic, decide she hadda get our share.”

“That was the last straw, yeah,”

Brian agreed. "The point is, we don't need him. Mom's a great dentist—she's taken care of us fine. Pretty soon *I* can take care of *her*. Why worry about college? She's got plenty of money. Even if she hadn't, I'd manage. I'm a junior, and already coaches from all over the country are calling. Swimming or track—I can take my pick, get a free ride. Who needs Devil-Daddy? I hope he never comes back. I hope he dies. I hope he's dead already, and rotting fast."

"Brian!" I exclaimed, and missed my next shot. But both boys kept abusing Devil-Daddy until Madge's lavender Cadillac pulled into the driveway. Brian opened the car door for her.

"Grandma called," he said. "She wants to take Nate and me to the Chart House for dinner. I'd just as soon skip it, but she hinted around about a new Nintendo, so Nate wants to go."

"Then go. If I say no, he'll hate me." She slammed the car door and turned to me. "Devil-Daddy always *was* a mamma's boy, and he still funnels money to the old bag. So she can take the boys on outings, buy them big gifts. I buy the socks and pay the utility bills, but *she's* got cash for the flashy stuff."

"So Devil—so your ex-husband is still in touch with his mother?" I asked. "But she won't tell you where he is?"

"She claims she doesn't know, just gets letters through some third party. I think she's at least got a phone number—Jason wouldn't leave Mumsy without a way to call. I've begged plenty, saying it's her

duty to help her grandsons. She won't budge."

"That's awful," I said, and remembered my role. I sighed. "My mother-in-law never even wants to see poor Billy any more."

"What a witch." Madge put an arm around me. "Time for crab salad and sympathy. We'll skip the wine, go straight to scotch."

We had scotch first, wine second. I drank as little as possible—just enough to keep her drinking, and talking—but even so I asked for coffee afterwards, to get time to sober up. It was six o'clock when I drove away, Crazy Madge waving at me woozily from her doorway. I'd promised to go straight to Kids Collect, to put the screws on my nonexistent louse of a husband.

Hell, I thought. Why *not* go straight to Kids Collect? It was on my way downtown, Carla might be working late, and I wanted to check on some details before reporting to Miss Woodhouse.

The door with the green logo was still unlocked when I got there, but the reception area was empty. I paused by the main desk and heard Edna Mackey's voice coming from one of the back offices. She was talking on the phone.

"Your name," she was saying, "has been randomly selected by Annapolis Entertainment Associates. Just answer a few questions, and you get dinner for two at Safe Harbor. Yes, it's lovely. What other Annapolis restaurants do you enjoy? Do you go by yourself, or with an escort? How nice. Do you have a favorite bar? Do you bowl? On what night? Wednesday? Which lanes do

you prefer? What other leisure activities do you enjoy?"

After a few more minutes of questions, Edna thanked the woman and hung up. I wandered back to her office. "Will she really get the two free dinners?" I asked.

Edna looked up and blushed.

"Yes. She'd get suspicious if she didn't. It's an expensive technique, but she's dating a new client's ex-husband, and now we know where they go out. Now we can get people who work at these places to watch for him."

"So this guy still lives in Annapolis?" I said. "Isn't that risky with his ex-wife on his trail?"

"Yes," Edna said, "but lots of men do it. They have all kinds of reasons for not wanting to move—mistresses, family, business contacts. And they think they're clever enough to get away with it. But sooner or later they make mistakes, and we catch them." She smiled shyly. "Are you ready to sign up?"

"I am," I said. "Madge talked me into it. It's too bad you haven't found her ex-husband. But he probably left town, right?"

At the mention of Madge's name, Edna looked down, pushing her rhinestone ring around and around her finger in a ceaseless, miserable motion. "I'm sure he's long gone. And he knows computers—he can manipulate records, obscure all the clues we usually use. And eight years gives him a big head start. I've told Madge that. But she still gets so angry."

"Well, she's frustrated," I said. "You can understand that. You must've been frustrated, too, when

you didn't know where your husband was and couldn't get help with the bills."

"Yes," Edna said, "but I never took it out on anyone the way she takes it out on me. And she doesn't need help. Other women deserve—but I shouldn't talk this way. She's your friend."

"It's all right," I said, sorry to have upset her. "I hope we become friends, too. Should I sign up now?"

"Tomorrow," Edna said, standing. "Carla likes to sign new clients up herself. And I should lock up and go home."

I kept her company while she turned off the lights. In the now-dusky back parking lot, we parted, Edna walking left, me turning right. This is where Carla got attacked, I thought idly. Something made me look up. I saw it in time—the car pulling out from behind the dumpster, taking on speed, hurtling toward Edna.

"Look out!" I ran for her, tackled her, knocked her down between two parked cars at the last possible moment. I swear I felt the rush of air as the car sped by. Leaving Edna on the ground, I ran after it, too late—it screeched into the street, ran a red light, was probably halfway to Route 50 by now. Escort, I thought. Beige. Old. That was the best I could do.

One quick sigh of frustration and I ran back to Edna. She sat on the pavement rubbing her scraped elbow and looking dazed. "Are you okay?" I asked, crouching. "Did you hit your head?"

She thought it over. "It doesn't hurt. It *would* hurt if I'd hit it,

wouldn't it?" She leaned against me. "I think I'm fine. I think—oh God! First Carla, now this."

"I'll drive us to the police station," I said. "That looked like a deliberate attack. Did you see the license plate?"

"No." She took a breath and steadied. "And I don't want to go to the police. Carla says no police, no publicity."

Just in time I remembered to play dumb. "You mean things like this have happened before?" I forced my eyes wide. "You said something happened to Carla. Is there a problem?"

"No," she said, collecting herself. "Just some weird guy hanging around the parking lot, nothing to do with Kids Collect. We think he's after the podiatrist. Really, our operation is perfectly safe. Don't hesitate to sign up. And—oh, I didn't even thank you. You saved my life, and I didn't thank you."

"It was my pleasure." A dumb thing to say, but I felt shaky, too. "You're sure you're okay?"

She was sure about that, sure she didn't want to go to the police. I didn't push—they couldn't do much without a license plate, and it might be awkward. Lots of Annapolis cops know me by now. We reassured each other, compared bruises, hugged, parted.

Time, at last, to report to Miss Woodhouse. I couldn't have timed my arrival better. She was clearing the table—they eat fashionably late—while her mother scolded her for not finishing her broccoli. To prove I was a better eater than her wretched daughter, the Professor parked me at the table. I downed three help-

ings of broccoli, massive amounts of chicken with onion and olive stuffing, God knows how many rolls. It's not that I wanted to show Miss Woodhouse up—not really. It's just that on my salary I don't often eat that well. While I ate, I talked. I told them about what happened in the parking lot. I told them everything Crazy Madge had told me. I told them my opinions.

Miss Woodhouse gnawed on a celery stalk—now that she's sworn off pencils, she's reduced to gnawing on actual food. "So you don't think Madge's worries about college costs are genuine?"

"No way. You should see her house—huge, gorgeous. And I swear her furniture's custom made. There isn't a nook without an endtable that fits it just so, not a cranny without a bookcase nudging it ever so gently. And if she's in such a sweat about tuition, why take Wednesday afternoons off?"

"True," she agreed. "At the rates dentists charge, a few more appointments a week could send a bevy of Brians to college."

"And Brian wasn't bragging when he talked about athletic scholarships," I added. "The mantel's sagging under the weight of his trophies. That boy's on his way to the Olympics. Colleges would sell their endowments to the devil to get him."

"That," the Professor said, "reminds me of Devil-Daddy. You seem quite correct—as usual, *quite* correct—in concluding that a desire for reconciliation between father and sons also cannot be a sincere motive for Dr. Bixby's pursuit of her ex-husband. Her only plausible mo-

ive seems to be revenge. That is not always an unworthy motive. I do not yet despise her."

"Nor do I," Miss Woodhouse said. "She is harsh, but she has suffered—even obnoxious people suffer, although we do not like to admit it. I am intrigued by these revelations about Mr. Bixby's mother. I will learn more about her. I too have revelations to share. I chatted with acquaintances involved with computers, and learned of one Mr. Robin Locke, of Locke Information Systems. Robin Locke. Does that name resonate for you, Harriet?"

I didn't have my dictionary handy, I couldn't be sure of just what "resonate" meant, but I did my best. "No," I said.

"Little Harriet," the Professor said reproachfully. "Robin Locke—Robin of Locksley. How can that fail to resonate?"

I scrunched up my eyebrows, hard. Kevin Costner, I thought suddenly—it's got something to do with a Kevin Costner movie. "Oh, yeah," I said. "Robin of Lockesley. Robin Hood."

Miss Woodhouse nodded. "An outlaw who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Since Jason Bixby is evading child-support payments, he might see himself as an outlaw. And if he considers his wife sufficiently wealthy without those payments, he might see himself as stealing from the rich. The analogy fails at that point, for Robin Locke has no record of philanthropy. Still, he might be self-pitying enough to believe he is persecuted and impoverished, to see keeping his money as giving to the poor."

"In that case," I said, "he's a lot more despicable than Madge. She's a good mother. Brian opened her car door for her, and how many teenagers open doors for their mothers? He adores her—he must have his reasons. But how did Locke find out Kids Collect is after him? Are you *sure* Locke is really Bixby?"

"Not sure," she said. "Hopeful. Locke lives in a secluded mansion outside of town. He's built a multi-million dollar business, but his clients seldom see him. Most transactions are handled by his secretary, Chrissy Korin, also his mistress. She is not, by all accounts, bright. Why rely on such an intermediary, unless one has reason to stay out of sight? And about a week ago—in other words, about the time of the burglary at Kids Collect—Locke dropped out of sight altogether. I spoke to Ms. Korin today. She says Locke said he needed a vacation, took a hundred thousand dollars from his safe, and left. She has had several calls from him since but claims not to know where he is."

"He took a hundred thousand from his *safe*? That sounds fishy, Miss Woodhouse. Who'd keep that much in a safe?"

Miss Woodhouse shrugged. "According to Ms. Korin, Locke dislikes banks and prefers cash. He holds a credit card for personal shopping but has her handle that for him."

"That sounds like Jason Bixby," I said, remembering the support group meeting. "If he needed a shirt, he had Madge buy a bunch, decided which one he wanted, had her return the rest. I bet she used a credit card for that."

“Indeed,” Miss Woodhouse said. “That gives me new reasons for thinking Locke is Bixby, and for thinking your narratives sadly incomplete. Give me more details about everything you’ve observed—every word, every gesture. Leave nothing out.”

So I told her more about the meeting, more about shooting hoops with the boys, more about my lunch with Madge and my talk with Edna. I left nothing out—except every allusion to Miss Woodhouse’s own father’s desertion. How could I say anything about that with the Professor right there, glaring softly?

Miss Woodhouse sensed an omission. “Is that *everything*, Harriet?” she asked quietly. “Or is there more?”

She knew more was going on. She always knew, and so did her mother. God. How did these women get so smart? I looked at my shoes. “Not at this time,” I said feebly.

“I accept your answer,” she said, “for this time. Go home and sleep, and come back at eight in the morning, sharp.”

The Professor walked me to the door. “Thank you for honoring my silence,” she said. “It is our silence now, and it must never be broken. Iphigenia could not bear the truth.”

Bearing the truth wasn’t a walk in the park for me, either. Tumbling into bed, I dreamed a weird, broken dream about Carla jabbing Crazy Madge with her koo baton, and Charlie swallowing Tabasco-laced cookies, and Brian and Nate sinking baskets while Edna led the cheers, and Jason Bixby sitting on a golden cloud shooting arrows at

all of them while Mr. Woodhouse, his face shrouded, played his violin even as he rowed deep into the sea. Waking up exhausted, I drove to Woodhouse Investigations.

Miss Woodhouse looked rested and ready, and the Professor rocked steadily by the bay window, twisting still more clipped wire clothes hangers into her sculpture. I paused to admire it.

“That’s a great-looking basket, Professor,” I said.


“It is not a basket,” she said, and smiled.

Miss Woodhouse gestured me to her side. “I am about to call Jason Bixby’s mother,” she said. “Listen.”

She dialed. “Mrs. Bixby?” she said. “This is Iphigenia Woodhouse of Woodhouse Investigations. I have been engaged by a client I do not choose to name. He has a grievance against Locke Information Systems. He has repeatedly called Robin Locke but has been turned away, with the poor excuse that Mr. Locke cannot be reached. I have reason to believe *you* can reach Mr. Locke. I have reason, indeed, to believe he is your son, Jason Bixby.”

Miss Woodhouse paused, and high-pitched, bristly sounds came over the phone, more static than voice. Miss Woodhouse shrugged.

“Come now, Mrs. Bixby,” she said. “My client is a computer expert, too—he unraveled the tricks your son used to conceal his identity. If my client does not receive satisfaction, he will tell all he knows to Dr. Madge Bixby. Robin Locke—your son—will find himself facing back child-support payments in the six figures, and jail time as well. It need-



n't come to that. My client has no desire for revenge. He simply wants his money. Dr. Madge Bixby, as you know, wants more. She wants blood."

Now the static on the other end of the line sounded conciliatory, almost repentant. Miss Woodhouse nodded.

"Fine," she said. "My associate will bring you a computer disk containing the information your son will need to understand my client's grievance. Your son must respond within twenty-four hours—or Dr. Madge Bixby will receive a visit from my client."

She hung up and handed me a disk. "It contains annotations on the *Medea*," she said, "but that does not matter. The senior Mrs. Bixby does not own a computer, I checked. She has no way of reading the disk and will feel impelled to give it to her son today. When she does, track him to his lair, then report to me."

"Reporting would be a lot easier if I had a cell phone," I ventured. "Don't you think—"

"Cellular phones," she said sternly, "are self-indulgent symbols of a senselessly mobile society. You do not need one."

"But all the other detective agencies use them," I protested. I couldn't stop myself. "Honestly, Miss Woodhouse. Isn't it time we joined the twentieth century?"

"Why bother? It's ending soon anyway." She picked up the receiver on her heavy black desk phone and dialed. "I will inform Carla Tate of our plans. Be on your way."

So I drove to Mrs. Bixby's aristocratically cramped house in down-

town Annapolis, gave her the disk, parked down the block, and waited. Noon came and I wished I'd thought to pack a lunch, or that Miss Woodhouse had thought to tell me to. The Professor scolds her for not realizing how smart I am, but I think in fact Miss Woodhouse thinks I'm smarter than I ever will be, thinks I'm smart enough to pack a lunch in a situation like this. Then five o'clock came, and I wished I'd thought to pack a supper. I ate three pieces of stale gum I found behind the road maps in my glove compartment, wishing fiercely that Miss Woodhouse would stop overestimating my intelligence. Finally, at seven thirty, Mrs. Bixby came out of her house and got in her car.

It was a relief to follow her. She drove to the city dock, found a bench, batted just a few assertive seagulls away before a slouchy, medium-height man with curly blond hair walked up to her, slapped her hand in a high-five, and took the disk.

The curly blond wig didn't fool me. I recognized the face from the photographs Carla had given us, the slouch from Madge's descriptions. We've got you, Jason Robin Bixby Locke, I thought.

Not pausing to speak to his mother, he walked toward the Naval Academy. I followed in my car while he meandered through the historic district in a silly zigzag, never looking back to see if anyone was tailing him. He came to a narrow brick building and slipped clumsily inside. I counted to sixty, then went in. A dim entryway, a security door too flimsy to resist the advances of a Visa card, two tiers of mailboxes la-

beled with names stamped on plastic strips. I peered at the names, trying to think like Miss Woodhouse. Which name might be Jason Bixby's latest alias? Keith Kreuger, Mel Dally, Brad Oien, Bertie Newton, Joel Conley—wait. Bertie Newton, Apartment 3C. Jason Bixby considered himself a scientific genius. Albert Einstein, Sir Isaac Newton. That'd just about fit his ego.

I had to call Miss Woodhouse, but if I left to find a phone, we might lose him. I loitered uselessly, weighing disadvantage against disadvantage, until a noise upstairs settled it.

Even though I work for a private detective, I haven't heard all that many gunshots in real life. But I've watched plenty of cop shows. I know my sound effects.

Rats, I thought. Odds are, he's the only desperate fugitive in the building—that's gotta be from his apartment. I whipped out my koo baton and my Visa card, got past the security door, raced upstairs, and pounded on the door to 3C.

"Mr. Newton!" I yelled. "Mr. Locke! Mr. Bixby!" No response. And no time for formality, I decided. "Bertie!" I yelled. "Robin! Jason! Are you all right?"

Silence. I put my Visa card to work again and opened the door. Nothing in the living room except a blanket-covered cot, one wooden chair, a state-of-the-art computer on a rickety table. In the kitchen I saw what I'd fifty percent expected to see—Jason Robin Bertie Bixby Locke Newton, facedown on the floor, a dark stain spreading thickly through his curly blond wig.

"Oh no!" I cried. "Oh, Jason Rob-

in Bertie!" Even bastards deserve some sympathy when they get shot in the head. Crouching down, I felt for a pulse, knowing I probably wouldn't find one.

I also should have known I'd probably get knocked out in the next two seconds. I don't remember the pain of getting hit, just the pain of Charlie Mazelli slapping my face as I came to.

"Hey, Miss Russo!" he was yelling. "You're not dead—you're not even bleeding. Wake up already!"

"I'm awake." I sat up, saw the corpse inches from me, stood up in a hurry. "What are you doing here, Charlie?" I demanded.

He shrugged. "Miss Woodhouse told Carla you'd try to follow Bixby today. So I figured I'd better follow *you*. I figured you couldn't handle things on your own. I guess I was right."

"And I guess you weren't all that much help," I said, severely. "He got shot anyway. Is he dead?"

"Yup." He sounded downright cheerful. "See, I was parked across the street waiting for you to come out. When you didn't, I got nervous and came upstairs. I saw the open door, saw you, saw the stiff. So I called the cops on my cell phone."

"How considerate," I said. "You saw a lot, Mr. Mazelli. Did you also see anyone running away from the building?"

"Nope." He shook his head decisively. "Not a soul."

I had more questions, but the sound of sirens cut them off. In minutes the dingy apartment filled with cops—including, luckily, Lieutenant Barry Glass, Miss Wood-

house's still-devoted former fiancé. I snatched Charlie's cell phone and called Miss Woodhouse. The hell with her principles, I thought.

By the time she got to the apartment the paramedics were taking Jason Bixby away. She gave a quick, cool glance at the corpse, a longer and sadder one at Barry Glass, and turned to me.

"Are you all right, Harriet?" she asked. "Perhaps I should take you to the hospital. You might have a concussion."

"Not a chance," I said. "I'd just like to get out of here—unless Lieutenant Glass has more questions."

"No, that's fine," he said heartily. "Miss Russo's been real helpful—told me how Bertie Newton was really Robin Locke, who was really Jason Bixby. And any friend of Iphigenia's—well, I'll keep your names out of the papers like Miss Russo asked. I just gotta work on basics now." He looked at his notebook, pretending to mumble to himself. "Let's see. No sign of a weapon. Also no cash. Did find a maroon briefcase, probably a woman's, chockful of papers with Kids Collect logo, plus disks with Kids Collect labels. Prime suspect at this point—"

"Stop, Barry," Miss Woodhouse cut in gently. "You know I can't accept help from you. It isn't right. Ready, Harriet?"

"Almost," I said. "I just have to find my keys. I had them in my hand, and I guess when I got hit—oh, there they are."

I'd spotted them near the stove, next to what looked like a pink gumball. Stooping down, I scooped both keys and gumball up.

"I guess Jason had a sweet tooth," I said, "and I guess he wasn't much for sweeping. Look at this—oh. It's not a gumball."

Barry Glass took the pink thing and peered. "It's a bead, and now it's got your prints on it." He paused. "Not to sound critical, but I kinda wish you hadn't picked it up."

He let me off with an apology, and we went to Woodhouse Investigations, where the Professor hovered with icepacks and squab soup. The icepacks were lovely, and the soup didn't last long—it had been over twelve hours since I'd eaten.

"So," I said, sipping, "Jason Bixby—or Robin Locke—took a hundred thousand from his safe a week ago, but the cops didn't find cash in his apartment. Did the killer take it?"

"Presumably," Miss Woodhouse said. "Technically, however, it is not our concern. The maroon briefcase and the disks are almost certainly Carla Tate's. So Jason Bixby almost certainly committed the burglaries and the assault. Those are the incidents we were hired to investigate. Now that the probable perpetrator is dead, our investigation is presumably concluded."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. "But the murderer knocked me out. Maybe he thinks I witnessed something—maybe I'm in danger."

"Doubtful, little Harriet." The Professor resumed her busy snipping and weaving of clothes hanger fragments. "If the murderer considered you a threat, he or she would have shot you. Now, the presence of the bead suggests—but my daughter is right. Further speculation would be self-indulgent snooping."

The thought depressed us all. Most of our cases are tame; murder's a treat. Thank goodness the phone rang. Miss Woodhouse answered, and her end of the conversation sounded promising.

She hung up. "Carla Tate has hired us to investigate Jason Bixby's murder," she said. I let out a quiet whoop, and the Professor tossed a clothes hanger into the air.

Even Miss Woodhouse smiled.

"The police," she said, "regard Mr. Mazelli as a prime suspect. Given the absence of a weapon, they didn't charge him, but they warned him not to leave town. Ms. Tate wishes to see him cleared of suspicion—even though, she says, he refuses to discuss the situation with her."

"He could have done it," I offered. "He hates all deadbeat dads, and Jason Bixby attacked Carla. So Charlie follows me to the building, gets in by a back entrance, runs upstairs—"

"But," the Professor cut in, "how did he know which apartment was Jason Bixby's? There would be no conveniently labeled mailboxes inside a back entrance."

"True," Miss Woodhouse said. "I think the killer found Mr. Bixby on his or her own. That suggests the killer was skilled at tracking people down—and *that* points to Carla Tate or Edna Mackey."

"But where's the motive?" I asked. "Yes, he attacked Carla, and he was probably the one who tried to run down Edna. So they might want revenge. But their business depends on their reputation for finding deadbeats. If either of them found Bixby, why kill him? Why not turn

him in, send him to prison, collect their commission, and bask in the publicity?"

The Professor set down her coat hanger. "What fine arguments you construct! Iphigenia seldom does as well. Still, revenge is, as Shakespeare and Lord Byron have somewhat redundantly observed, sweet. Some crave sweetness more than nourishment. And Ms. Tate and Ms. Mackey *are* experts at uncovering false identities."

"Not the only experts," I pointed out. "Charlie's a tax accountant—he may be chummy with IRS auditors. If anyone can track someone down, the IRS can. So one day Charlie has a few beers with a few auditors, picks up a few facts, wastes Bertie. Or Madge—she's a dentist. Cops use dentists to identify dead people. Maybe dentists can identify living people, too. Say Jason has this huge incisor. So when Madge hangs out with other dentists, she steers the talk toward incisors, and one day some dentist says he's got a new patient named Bertie Newton with an incisor like you wouldn't believe. Boom! No more Bertie."

Miss Woodhouse allowed me a nod. "Conceivable. My own thoughts have focused on a different question. Jason Bixby had established a comfortable life as Robin Locke. He lived in a mansion, ran a successful business, enjoyed the company of a devoted girlfriend. Something made him leave all that, assume yet another identity, move into an apartment bereft of comforts, and commit a series of dangerous crimes. Why?"

That one stumped me all right. "Well, if he was afraid Kids Collect

was closing in on him," I tried, "he—"

"But it was *not* closing in on him," Miss Woodhouse said. "Not according to Ms. Tate and Ms. Mackey. Apparently Kids Collect posed no threat to Jason Bixby, yet apparently he felt threatened. Why? And he was searching for something. What?"

That didn't just stump me, it stopped me. I slunk home, too humbled to risk another theory, and turned on the eleven o'clock news. An ambitiously skinny reporter made the murder into a five minute feature. First on the screen was the senior Mrs. Bixby, who showed baby pictures and declared that although her darling son never made out a will he'd assured her that should his shrew of an ex-wife ever murder him—and he'd always suspected she would—he wanted dear Mumsy to get every cent he'd ever earned.

Next came Madge and her sons. Madge looked smug, eight-year-old Nate looked stunned, seventeen-year-old Brian looked sullen. Although her ex-husband had abandoned them, Madge declared, she and her sons mourned him more sincerely than his greedy old bag of a mother ever could. So Madge had retained an attorney to make sure every cent of Jason Bixby's assets, and Robin Locke's assets, came to his sons. Madge was sure that was what Jason, or Robin, or whoever, would want.

The last interview was with Robin Locke's girlfriend—very young, very blonde, very pretty, crying very hard.

"We were *so* happy," Chrissy Korin sobbed, "until about a year ago, when Robin got jumpy and grumpy. He said he was being bled dry. That didn't make sense—I mean, he wasn't cut. Last week he said he had to go find something. I don't know what."

"And you never saw him again?" the reporter asked.

Chrissy Korin shook her head. "No, I saw him last night. Robin would never miss a Wednesday. I mean, it's league night."

"And did he ever make out a will?" the reporter asked.

Another headshake. "No. But he'd want me to get his assets and stuff. I mean, I helped him build the business. And I did *everything* for him—cooked, shopped, cleaned, everything!"

She cast one last pitiful, pretty look at the camera and collapsed into tears. I switched off the set as the phone rang.

It was Madge. "Harriet!" she said. "Did you watch the news? Did you see the old bag, and the young slut?"

"I did," I said. "Madge, you have my sympathy—"

"Well, that louse doesn't have mine," she cut in. "But *I am* having a get-together in his honor tomorrow night—an under-the-hill party. I want you and your grandmother to come."

When she hung up, I called Miss Woodhouse. "Maybe you should come to the party, too," I said. "I can say you're my sister."

"How tactful to suggest the role of sister," she said dryly, "rather than mother. Perhaps. But there are other things I must do. I have a task for

you, too. Very subtly, find out where various people were yesterday. Check all the suspects—Charlie Mazelli, Carla Tate, Edna Mackey, Madge Bixby, her sons—”

“Her sons?” I exclaimed. “You consider *them* suspects? They’re just kids. And he was their father.”

“He was their Devil-Daddy,” she corrected. “And his death will make them rich kids. Check on their whereabouts.”

Scumlike as I felt, I checked.

Charlie had claimed he was following me all day, and I found nothing to disprove that, or confirm it. Carla had put in a full day at Kids Collect, then gone to her apartment—alone. Edna had worked at her department store job until five, then gone home—alone. Madge had fixed dinner for her sons, then returned to her office—alone—to work on records. Nate had gone downstairs to watch TV; Brian had gone upstairs to do homework. At eight thirteen P.M. on Thursday, when Jason Robin Bertie Bixby Locke Newton was shot, no one who might’ve wanted him dead was in the presence of another living soul.

“So we can’t rule anybody out on the basis of alibi,” I told the Professor as we drove to Madge’s party. “Did Miss Woodhouse have better luck with whatever she did today?”

“We did not discuss it,” she said, “but she seemed busy and content. She secured an interview with Robin Locke’s paramour, Chrissy Korin. She is with Miss Korin now. Iphigenia says if all goes as she expects she may join us at the party.”

“As my sister,” I asked, “or as my mother?”

The professor shrugged. “She did not specify. I confess, little Harriet, that I am not in Iphigenia’s confidence as much as usual. She senses I am keeping something from her.”

“About her father, you mean. Maybe you should just tell her the truth. After all this time it might not upset her so much.”

“After all this time,” the Professor countered, “it would be all the more painful for her to lose faith in the father she has adored all her life. No. We will simply wait. Once this case is concluded, the troubling associations it has aroused will subside, and things will return to normal.”

As if things at the Woodhouses’ had ever been normal. When we got to Madge’s house, I had to park two blocks away. There must have been fifty cars lining the streets, not to mention the caterer’s van and the florist’s van—and the ambulance.

“Lord,” I said, “maybe Madge still loved Jason after all. Maybe his death finally got to her, and she had a heart attack.”

But the paramedics were just guests at the party. Madge was refilling their champagne glasses when we arrived. “I hear you were first on the scene after my ex-husband was shot,” she was saying. “Thanks so much for not saving him.”

A paramedic shrugged modestly. “Aw, shucks, ma’am,” he said. “It wasn’t nothing. He was dead when we got there.”

She piled his plate with cheese puffs anyway, then gave me a hug. “Glad you came,” she said, tossing back the long red satin cape she

wore over her black leotard. "How does the place look?"

"Different." I looked around. Red streamers and big black balloons dangling from the ceiling, squat bowls of red carnations flanked by tall black candles, flames of orange foil cascading down the drapes, coy black posterboard imps peeking out from the fireplace, a smoke machine in the corner blending everything into a cosy haze. "It's got sort of a—an infernal feel to it."

"It's hell," she said cheerfully. "I thought we should be in the same atmosphere Jason's undoubtedly enjoying tonight. Professor, can I get you some devil's food cake?"

The whole thing gave me the creeps.

I detached myself from Madge, made my way through the chatting, laughing throngs of her friends, and found her sons. Nate was sipping glumly on a Coke; seventeen-year-old Brian was enjoying what was obviously not his first cup of the steaming, heavily-spiked red punch.

"Brian," I said, "Nate. I'm so sorry about your father. I hope your memories of the good times you had with him—"

"Nate never had any times with him," Brian pointed out. "And my times with him weren't good. Devil-Daddy's where he belongs, and we are with him in spirit. It's the closest we've come to a family reunion in eight years. Have some punch?"

Consoling this family was no easy trick. It was a relief when Charlie, Carla, and Edna joined us at the buffet table.

"Some party," Carla said, ladling out punch. "I guess we have to give

Madge points for honesty if not for good taste."

"It's disgraceful." Edna wasn't drinking, just twisting her fake-coral necklace into knots, untwisting, twisting again. "No matter how she felt, she shouldn't expose her sons to this."

Charlie held out his cup for more. "She's had a tough time, Edna. Lots of people have. Everyone deserves a break."

That's when Miss Woodhouse came striding through the smoke. I'd had two or three cups of punch myself and couldn't remember just what plan of action we'd agreed on, or if we had a plan of action at all. But I had to say something. "Mommy!" I called.

She glared. "Good evening, dear," she said icily.

Carla and Charlie did a decent job of pretending they hadn't met her before. I panicked again when Madge and the Professor approached. "Grandma!" I shouted. "Mommy made it after all!"

The Professor and her daughter greeted each other gravely.

"You were right again, Mother," Miss Woodhouse said. "Sweetness was indeed a factor—but so, as it turns out, was nourishment."

I had no idea what she meant. The Professor nodded sharply, understanding everything. Madge, obviously under the influence of punch, held up a fistful of paper strips.

"Do you know what this party needs?" she demanded. "Games! Let's start with charades! My housekeeper wrote out a bunch of clues this afternoon. Who wants to go first? Professor?"

The Professor hesitated, then took a paper strip. She glanced at it, crumpled it, let it fall to the floor. "It is a famous saying. Am I allowed to reveal that much?"

"It's fine," Madge said, too full of punch to get technical. "Just don't say anything more. Act it out!"

Solemnly, the Professor held up five fingers, then two.

"Seven words!" Madge cried joyfully, and turned to Miss Woodhouse. "So, Mrs. Russo. What do you do for a living?"

Miss Woodhouse's eyes were fixed on her mother, who gestured articulately. "She wants us to guess the second word first. It is a little word. *The, a, an, is*—yes. The finger on the nose. The second word is *is*. And I, Dr. Bixby, am a private detective."

Madge squinted at the Professor. "She's going for the third word. Another little one. *The, a*—it's *a*. A private detective? What sorts of cases do you handle? Insurance, missing heirs—"

"Insurance," Miss Woodhouse confirmed. "Missing heirs. And, occasionally, murder. Your ex-husband was murdered, was he not?"

"Oh, the Professor's going for the fourth word now," Carla called, caught in the spirit of the game. "And she's pointing to Charlie. Let's see. *Man. Guy. Stud. Fabulous*—"

Miss Woodhouse gazed at her mother. "*Tolerant*," she said. "*Inclined to be overly forgiving. Compassionate. Kind*."

The Professor's finger shot to her nose.

Miss Woodhouse nodded. "The fourth word is *kind*. Yes, Dr. Bixby.

I occasionally investigate murders. Harriet occasionally helps me. She helped when we discussed your ex-husband's murder. She said detectives are not the only experts at finding people. Tax accountants can find people. Dentists can find people. Other professionals can also be experts at finding people."

Brian leaned over the buffet table. "She's going for the fifth word," he said, watching the Professor. "Another small one—and my bet is it's a preposition. *In, on, of*—yup. *Of*."

"*Is a kind of*," Miss Woodhouse summed up, and looked at Brian. "You have my sympathy, young man. You had no father to play ball with you, no father to take you bowling—"

"No big loss," Brian said curtly. "Mom plays ball better than any dad I know. And Dad never took me bowling even when he was around. He never bowled with anyone but his dumb league."

"Yes, he loved league bowling," Miss Woodhouse agreed. "His girlfriend told me that tonight. Of course when he became Robin Locke he had to find a new league. He found a very congenial one, which meets at Bayside Lanes on Wednesdays. Even when he became Bertie Newton, he didn't desert this league. He went there the night before he was shot. Anyone who knew of his habit could watch outside, then follow him to his new apartment. This person could then be waiting for him when he returned home yesterday."

Edna twisted her necklace sharply, nearly gagging herself. "You bet-

ter control your grandmother, Harriet. Look at her. She's not just playing charades—she's going nuts. She's pulling her hair, she's sticking her tongue out, she's hopping—"

"Crazy," Charlie Mazelli called out. "Insane. Wild."

The Professor pointed to her nose.

"Is a kind of wild." Miss Woodhouse nodded. "We now have every word except the first and last. As for you, Ms. Mackey, I advise you to stop torturing that necklace. Harriet—my daughter—told me fiddling with jewelry is a habit of yours. It is an annoying habit, and a risky one. Someday something is bound to break. Harriet also told me you found your own husband, even before you worked for Kids Collect. How did you manage it?"

Edna started to reach for her necklace, made herself stop. "It wasn't that hard. I mean, I knew all his habits—"

"Including his shopping habits?" Miss Woodhouse asked.

"The Professor's going for the last word now," Carla said, fascinated. "Look—she's holding her hands out, palms up, and she keeps raising one, lowering the other, raising—"

"It's like she's weighing something," Charlie observed. "Balance. Scales. Justice. Yup, she touched her nose. *Is a kind of wild justice*. Now all we need is the first word."

"I believe I can supply it," Miss Woodhouse said. "You are in charge of billing at Doyle's, are you not, Ms. Mackey? You have access to credit records. It wouldn't take you long to zero in on someone with a distinctive shopping pattern. Is that

how you located your husband? Is it how you first realized that Robin Locke was Jason Bixby? You'd heard Madge's stories about how he hated to shop, how he'd make her bring home five shirts so he could choose the one he wanted, then return the rest. That pattern did not change when he became Robin Locke, except that Chrissy Korin did his shopping. She told me that tonight. She also told me Locke always had her shop at Doyle's."

"Jason loved Doyle's," Madge said, her suddenly pale face contrasting sharply with her red cape. "God, Edna. You tracked Jason down after all, but you never told me? Why not?"

The Professor leapt into our midst, her face twisted in an exaggerated mask of hatred, and pretended to stab Madge Bixby with an invisible knife, pretended to shoot her with an invisible gun, pretended to strangle her with an invisible rope.

"*Revenge*," Miss Woodhouse said simply. "*Revenge is a kind of wild justice.*" We have solved the charade."

"Hey, no fair," Brian protested. "That's not a famous saying. I never heard it before."

"It is from Francis Bacon's *Essays*," Miss Woodhouse said. "Perhaps you will encounter it in college. I learned it at my mother's knee. At *your* mother's knee, you learned other things—anger, hatred, a desire for retribution. Such emotions corrode the character: They made you too wrathful. They made Edna Mackey wrathful, too. Combined with poverty, they also

made her envious. It must have been hard, Ms. Mackey. Year after year you helped other women collect payments from delinquent husbands. But from your own husband you collected nothing but debt."

Edna's hand was on her necklace again. "Don't say that. I'm not wrathful or envious. I'm a nice person, a good mother."

"Yes, you wanted to provide for your daughter," Miss Woodhouse said. "But you also wanted revenge—revenge against the husband who left you, revenge against a world that denied you justice, revenge against a woman who treated you with contempt. So when you realized Robin Locke was Jason Bixby, you couldn't bear to inform Dr. Bixby. You thought you needed his money more than she did, and deserved it more. So you blackmailed him."

Numbly, Edna shook her head. "No," she said.

"Come now, Ms. Mackey," Miss Woodhouse said, losing patience. "Almost a year ago Robin Locke became, to quote his girlfriend, 'jumpy and grumpy' and began to complain of being 'bled dry.' But for a long time he took no action—and when he did strike back, he struck first at Kids Collect and Ms. Tate. Did you tell him you'd given her damning evidence—a sealed envelope, perhaps, to be opened in the event of your death?"

Carla had tears in her eyes. "Oh, Edna," she said, "why didn't you tell me? If I'd known you were that desperate—"

"I wasn't." Edna started to back away. "She has no proof."

Miss Woodhouse sighed. "No proof but a pink bead. Its presence at the murder scene suggests the murderer was a woman—but Ms. Tate's jewelry is subtle, and Dr. Bixby wears no jewelry except her watch. You wear costume jewelry and habitually twist it. And there's the call Chrissy Korin received, promising her two free dinners if she answered some survey questions. Miss Russo heard you make that call. That's how you learned about Bayside Lanes. That's how you found Bertie Newton."

Madge's face purpled. "I hired you to find him," she said, advancing toward Edna. "You betrayed me. You robbed my boys!"

She tried to lunge at Edna—but when you've had too much punch and you're wearing a floor-length cape, lunging is not a good plan. Madge's feet got caught in the cape, she stumbled, there was a scuffle and a red satin blur—and suddenly Edna had grabbed the cape by the hood and stood holding Madge in front of her, a gun pressed against Madge's head.

Edna looked at her with hatred. "I didn't enjoy shooting your ex-husband," she said. "Shooting *you* would be a pleasure."

Brian cried out and started to run for his mother, but the Professor grabbed him. "You cannot help her," she said. "You can only make matters worse. Ms. Mackey, I cannot believe you enjoy killing. You didn't plan to kill Mr. Bixby, did you?"

"No." Edna shook her head. "When he tried to run me down, I knew he was dangerous, I knew that I had to do something, but all I



wanted was one last payment so my daughter could finish college. I just took the gun for protection. If he'd just given me the money, I would have gone away and left him alone. And he did give it to me—but I was twisting my necklace, and it broke, and that startled me, and he ran at me. I had to shoot.”

“Then you can plead self-defense,” I said, not sure it would wash. Guntoting blackmailers don't make great defendants. “You know you can't get away with this, Edna. Where will you go?”

“I'll go to the money.” Edna gripped the cape more tightly and started backing toward the front door. “You think I didn't know it might come to this? The money's in a safe place. Once I get there, I'll be safe, too. And you'll drive me.”

“Leave Harriet out of this,” Charlie Mazelli said, moving toward the buffet table. “She saved your life in that parking lot—you owe her. If you want a driver, I'll go.”

Edna laughed bitterly. “A black belt as a hostage? No, thanks. Harriet's easier to control. I *do* owe her—that's why I didn't shoot her when she blundered into that apartment. That's why I'll release her once I'm safe. Harriet, get your car keys.”

“All right.” Slowly, I reached into my purse, closing my hand around the koo baton to which my keys are attached. Keeping the baton hidden in my hand, I held the keys up in the air as if to show they weren't a gun. The lines in Edna's face eased.

That's when I brought the keys down as fast as I could, striking the ladle in the punchbowl. The ladle flew into the air, the glass bowl shat-

tered, hot red punch shot up in a fountain and spread across the floor like lava.

Edna shrieked—but she still had her grip on the cape, Madge was still between me and the gun. Sorry, Madge, I thought, and slid my hand up to grasp my keys. I spun around, lunged forward, and jabbed Madge in the ribs with my koo baton. Cape or no cape, she doubled forward in pain, giving me a clear shot at Edna. Aiming for the pressure point on the back of Edna's hand, I smashed it with my keys. She shrieked, and the gun went flying.

Confused, hurting, Edna cursed, pushing Madge forward. She landed on me heavily, and we both fell. Edna ran for the gun.

“No more!” Charlie yelled and jumped over the buffet table. He got to Edna just as she was bending over to pick up the gun, lifted his leg in the air, brought it down on her back in a powerful ax kick. That did it. She lay on the floor, gasping.

Charlie picked up the gun.

“I'm sorry, Edna,” he said. “I saw you leave the apartment building, I knew you were the killer, but I wasn't going to tell anyone. I figured life had been too tough on you and you'd cracked. I figured you needed a break. But taking hostages, threatening people—it can't go on.”

It's a good thing Madge had put the paramedics on the guest list. Madge needed her ribs taped; several people had been scalded by erupting punch or cut by flying glass. And Miss Woodhouse had a black eye. “It was the ladle,” she said, shoving aside a paramedic, “travel-

ing at an impressive velocity. Next time calculate projectiles more accurately. But, on the whole, you did well."

Madge forgave me, too, despite her sore ribs. "So Edna was black-mailing Jason," she said as we cleaned up, "and packing a pistol. Dowdy little Edna! I can't believe it." She shook her head. "But what I *really* can't believe is my housekeeper coming up with that charades clue. Who knew she'd read Francis Bacon?"

The crumpled-up paper strip still lay on the floor. As soon as the Professor looked away, I grabbed it and uncrumpled it.

"'On the Street Where You Live,'" I read, and smiled.

Two weeks later, as the Professor and I were chopping the olives and onions for Miss Woodhouse's birthday chili, Carla Tate came by. She sat at the kitchen table, set with bright purple party hats plunked on elephant-emblazoned paper plates.

"I thought you'd like to hear about Edna," she said. "She's doing okay. Charlie and I have gone to see her several times—we found her a great lawyer. And her daughter visits every day."

"The young lady has been forced to withdraw from college, then?" the Professor asked. "For financial reasons?"

"No, she's just taking a leave, to be with her mother through the trial. She'll go back next fall. Kids Collect set up a scholarship fund—I talked to lots of women Edna had helped, and they all kicked in. Even Madge, if you can believe that."

"I can indeed," the Professor said, beginning to sauté the olives. "I never thought her evil. She has some compassionate impulses. But the injustice and cruelty she endured were too much for her. She knew she had to become strong for her sons, and she did, but she also became too harsh, too bitter."

Carla nodded. "I've seen it happen to lots of women. Not all, but lots. Then their kids grow up full of hatred, and—oh, these men, these men! They don't know how much harm they do."

We were all silent for a moment, thinking about Madge, about her sons, about Edna. Carla was thinking about someone else, too. Reaching into her purse, she drew out an envelope.


"That story you told at support group," she said, "about your husband taking his boat out on the Severn and never coming back—I could tell you weren't making it up. So I did some checking. I found out where he is."

I dropped the metal measuring cup I was holding, scattering chopped onions on the floor. "He's still alive?"

"He's still alive," Carla confirmed. "He's not far." She held out the envelope. "Do you want it?"

Slowly the Professor wiped her hands on her apron, took the envelope in both hands, gazed at it, fingered it tentatively. Then, carefully, she folded it and dropped it in the trash.

"It has been too long," she said. "It would do no good. And I must protect Iphigenia from a bitterness that might consume her if she knew



he deserted us. But thank you for your concern."

Carla stood up. "You may be right. Well, I'd better go."

The Professor saw her out. I scooped up the chopped onion I'd dropped and walked to the trashcan. There it was, neatly creased. I put the onion in the disposal, took the envelope, and looked up to see Miss Woodhouse standing near the stove.

"Mother's making chili for my birthday dinner again, I see," she said. "Could you persuade her to use less cumin this year?"

"I'll try," I said, and couldn't stand it. "Miss Woodhouse, I have to tell you something. Carla did some checking, and she found a man who left his wife and daughter and disappeared at sea long ago, though I'm sure he loved them, I'm sure he was just mixed up or something. His address is in this envelope. Your mother wouldn't take it. Miss Woodhouse, you ought to know—"

"I have always known." She took the envelope and gazed at it, hold-

ing it in both hands, just as her mother had. "Even when I was a little girl," she said, "from the moment the police came to our door that day, I knew. But Mother must not know that. She must continue to think she shielded me—as she did, Harriet, as she always did. Thank you, Harriet. But no."

Slowly, decisively, she tore the envelope into thin strips and dropped them in the trash. She sighed just once, squared her shoulders, and walked to the kitchen table.

"How festive it looks," she said. "So Mother finished her clothes-hanger sculpture. It makes a striking centerpiece."

"It's striking," I agreed, joining her at the table, "but I still don't know what it is. I thought it might be a basket, but it's got that tree-like thing in the middle. Maybe it's a lamp."

"No, no, Harriet. It is not a lamp." Gently she touched the firm, rounded base and traced the upward-reaching central spire. "Don't you see?" she said softly. "It is a boat."

Note to Our Readers: If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

The guest who had rented a room on the fifth floor of the posh Le Coq d'Or hotel on the Riviera lay murdered. "Mais oui, M'sieu l'Inspecteur," declared the chambermaid, "as I insert my key, out rush the guest from Vienna! Blood all over!"

Inspector Lefleur had trailed six suspected terrorists to this hotel but hadn't anticipated murder. They were posing as an artist, banker, contractor, doctor, engineer, and financier. He turned from the distraught maid to the hotel clerk. "Monsieur, what can you tell me about six guests currently using the last names of Matisse, Norquist, O'Hara, Parker, Quimby, and Randall? They include three men—Dominic, Emile, and Frederico—and three women—Annette, Beatrice, and Catrina."

"Ah," replied the clerk, "them I remember well. They come from different cities. Each I assigned to a different floor, one through six." He went on to say that:

(1) The six included Beatrice, the person from Paris, the one named Matisse, the doctor (who wasn't Frederico), the one named O'Hara, and the banker.

(2) The man from Lisbon had a room higher than Frederico (who was neither the person named Quimby nor the guest on the first floor).

(3) Dominic (whose last name wasn't Matisse) had a higher room than Emile.

(4) Catrina's room was on the floor just below the male artist and just above Norquist.

(5) Emile (who didn't register from Edinburgh) occupied a room higher than either O'Hara or the person from Madrid. Neither O'Hara nor the person from Madrid was the financier. The man from Edinburgh wasn't named O'Hara (who was not the engineer).

(6) The man from Rome had a higher room than the artist.

(7) Neither the person from Vienna (who wasn't on the first floor) nor Catrina (who wasn't the contractor) used Parker as a last name. Catrina's last name wasn't Quimby.

(8) The contractor wasn't on floors one or six.

"Enough!" cried Inspector Lefleur. "I now know the identities of both victim and killer."

Do you?

See page 141 for the solution to the March puzzle.

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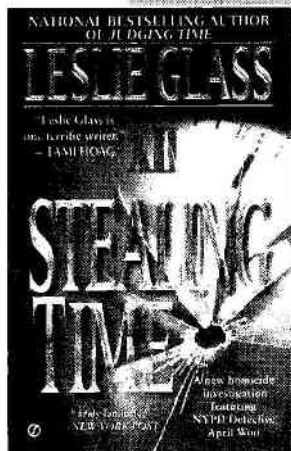
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THREE PIGS



Gary
Alexander

At the edge of the forest, the wolf peeked out at a cul-de-sac that hadn't been there a week ago. Three houses were already up. Only one was still under construction, but it was by far the most substantial. It was on the crest and sported a smashing territorial view. A crew of glaziers and bricklayers toiled under a blazing sun, hanging vinyl siding and double-pane windows.

Meanwhile, the owners of the lesser structures were kicking back. Outside a straw hut its occupant sprawled on a blanket, wearing dark glasses, ignoring the laptop computer balanced on an ample belly.

The second place was carelessly assembled of wood, scarcely more than

a shack. Another pig rocked on the rickety front porch sipping a tall cool one, talking fast on a cell phone. Both were plump juicy swine. Forbidden fruit, as it were. But recidivism was hard to avoid when your stomach was growling, rationalized the wolf. He crept through tall grass for a closer look. From behind a LOTS FOR SALE sign he studied his prey. A couple of slackers, to be sure. The wolf wasn't philosophically opposed to sloth. In their case it would doubtlessly increase tenderness.

The nearer pig's snout twitched. He sat up abruptly.

"Wolf!" he cried melodramatically, pointing. "Wolf!"

The creature scrambled inside the hut. So did his counterpart lazing on the porch of the shanty.

He gave the pigs time to cool their jets, then tiptoed to the straw hut and rapped.

"Wh-who's there?"

"UPS," said the wolf. "You have to sign."

"No way."

"Look, this package is heavy, and I'm behind schedule."

He waited. The only sound was his own respiration. He kicked the door, which bent but refused to break.

He'd have to admit later that he kind of lost it when the pig laughed.

"I'm gonna huff and puff and blow this dump down," he yelled.

He huffed and puffed, with no discernible effect. A subsequent coughing fit attracted the attention of the work crew. They threw rocks and construction debris at him.

"Shoo," one said.

"Get lost, Fido," said another.

Fido.

Dodging masonry chunks, the wolf skulked into the woods, slinking almost as low as his self-esteem.

Somebody had ratted him out. Since the wolf had similar offenses on his sheet, he was required to attend counseling. He knew if he refused he'd have to wear an anklet again. Or worse, have his parole revoked.

The counselor was a scrawny, bearded, New Agey, pipe-smoking hugger. If the wolf had ever harbored "man eater" tendencies, this yo-yo killed that notion posthaste. After some verbal sparring, the counselor concluded that they would make scant progress, let alone achieve a breakthrough, unless and until he "got in touch with his inner wolf."

"It's basically a matter of perception," the wolf countered. "They're thinking murder-one, I'm thinking dinner."

The counselor shook his head sadly. "Classic denial."

"Carnivores have feelings, too, you know."

The counselor tapped a chewed fingernail on his clipboard. "The incident report is disturbing. Irrational behavior bordering on manic. Do you often hyperventilate?"

Maybe a confession would put an end to this session. "Well, I have this recurring dream where I blow down houses in order to get at the occupant."

"A violent fantasy that you apparently manifested in this situation," the counselor said, sucking his teeth. "There are primordial overtones here."

"Well, it does run in my family," the wolf conceded. "Can you help?"

"Marvelous! The first step is acknowledging your compulsion."

"I feel like a load's been lifted from my shoulders," the wolf stroked.

He accepted a hug goodnatureedly. And why not? The wolf was signed off until next month. The counselor had turned a growling stomach into a complex psychological aberration. He'd file a progress report with the wolf's probation officer, recommending further treatment. Compliments of the taxpayers, of course.

Everybody was happy, right? A win-win situation?

Sure. If the wolf could shunt his mind from succulent porkers roasting on a spit, basting in their own juices, their skin crackling. Easier said than done, however, and the odd e-mail he received a few days later pretty much confirmed the difficulty.

It came from 3rdpig@porcinenet.com and accused him in an oblique way of harassment and stalking. Third pig lived in the big unfinished house. Evidently the wolf had reduced his two older brothers to nervous wrecks.

They're older, and *you* have all the dough? the wolf replied.

I'm in computers, the third pig replied to the wolf's reply.

I just stroll the cul-de-sac behaving myself, the wolf typed back. It's a free country, and my counselor recommended that I face my compulsions.

The pig wasn't sympathetic. He had a business to operate, a house under construction, a new software release ready to roll out, and an IPO in the works. He couldn't be running home every five minutes when one or the other of his brothers had an anxiety attack.

Many irons in the fire. I admire you, the wolf answered sycophantically.

This has to cease.

I have rights, too, responded the wolf, who had been read his rights on more than one occasion and knew this to be true at some level.

I can make it worth your while.

I'm listening. Figuratively.

We must meet.

My place or yours?

Privacy isn't an option for obvious reasons, the pig stated, going on to name a Starbucks, a day and time, not even considering that the wolf might have something else to do, which, of course, he didn't.

The wolf arrived on foot, the pig in a massive sports utility vehicle, candy apple red with privacy glass. Since the pig was buying, the wolf

unenthusiastically nibbled a blueberry muffin. He suffered through pleasantries that segued into fraternal complaints.

"My straw-house brother is an aspiring writer," the pig vented. "He's been waiting for years for the muse to visit. Wooden-house brother is a disbarred lawyer. Do you realize what you have to do before the bar association in this state takes action? His ear is grafted to the telephone. He wheels and deals. In what I don't ask. Essentially, they're remittance pigs, and I'm picking up the tab. I paid their contractors in advance. They built on the cheap and kicked back half the profit to my shiftless siblings."

The third pig was round and velvety soft, the wolf mused. Nerdishness became him. The wolf suppressed a swoon, hoping his rumbling stomach didn't betray him. He leaned forward and muttered, "I could take care of your problem for you."

The pig's eyes bulged, and he shook a neckless head. "They're family. You gotta be kidding!"

"You're right. I'm kidding," the wolf lied.

"I have a more attractive proposal in mind." The pig slid a business card across the table. He was CEO of Porcinenet, makers of application software.

"What sort of applications?"

"Our hot product is marketed to day traders who specialize in certain commodities."

"What commodities?"

"Primarily pork bellies and hog futures."

The wolf was flabbergasted. "Isn't that kind of, uh, like, you know, condoning cannibalism?"

The pig shrugged shoulders he didn't have. "I don't approve of the tobacco industry either, but hey, this is what I know. As I promised in my e-mail, I'll make it worth your while to be reasonable."

"I'm still listening."

"Sir, I am burning the candle at both ends. I'm putting in eighteen hour days, my brothers are dysfunctional, and the general contractor on my house is driving me crazy. We're going public very soon. I'll give you one hundred shares of Porcinenet to go away."

The wolf cleared his throat. "I was thinking more in terms of a compromise."

The pig sipped his double decaf vanilla latte and stared.

"One brother. You pick."

With trembling cloven hoof, the pig put down his cup and grinned nervously. "Man, you have some sense of humor."

"Yes, I do," answered the unsmiling wolf.

He agreed to the hundred shares. On the way out, the wolf noticed the bumper sticker on the pig's SUV: HAVE YOU HUGGED A VEGETARIAN TODAY?

His counselor would have a field day with this critter.

Since Porcinenet had not yet gone public and no stock existed, the wolf felt no sense of quid pro quo, no compunction to honor his commitment. He merely kept a lower profile, that of a voyeur.

From the edge of the woods, camouflaged by a vest of conifer boughs and a hairnet of twigs, he monitored pig activity for hours and days on end. The two losers maintained their usual inactive regimen. The pig with writer's block continued to do nothing in a chaise longue facing the forest. The shyster wolf scanned same as he chattered on the phone. They weren't buying their brother's buy-off.

The wolf knew for a fact that paranoia toughened the meat. He'd have to act quickly.

The third pig unwittingly provided the solution. He began showing up in the late afternoon, wobbling down out of his gigantic rig, waddling in and out of the house with the foreman, haranguing him from a list of grievances. His presence emboldened the brothers, who followed him around. After whining and sucking up to him for a while, they returned to their homes. He went inside after the workers left, probably jotting down more deficiencies, control freak that he obviously was. On the second night he stayed after dark.

On the next night he backed into the driveway and went in. The wolf decided to ambush the pig in his SUV, concealed by the smoked glass. He'd polish him off and eat his way down the cul-de-sac. He knew he'd never have a better chance to fulfill his destiny. He opened the front passenger door and climbed up the running board onto fine, supple leather. The aroma momentarily intoxicated him. Pigskin?

A combination of giddiness and unfamiliarity with internal combustion machines did the wolf in. As he crawled over the seat to lie in wait, he caught a paw on the parking brake lever, releasing it. Then stumbled against the gear shift, which jumped from PARK to NEUTRAL.

The SUV started to roll and gathered speed rapidly. The wood shack was filling the windshield. Not a bad thing, thought the wolf; an alternative to the huffing and puffing issue. But the vehicle slammed into a low bulkhead first. The airbags deployed, knocking him silly.

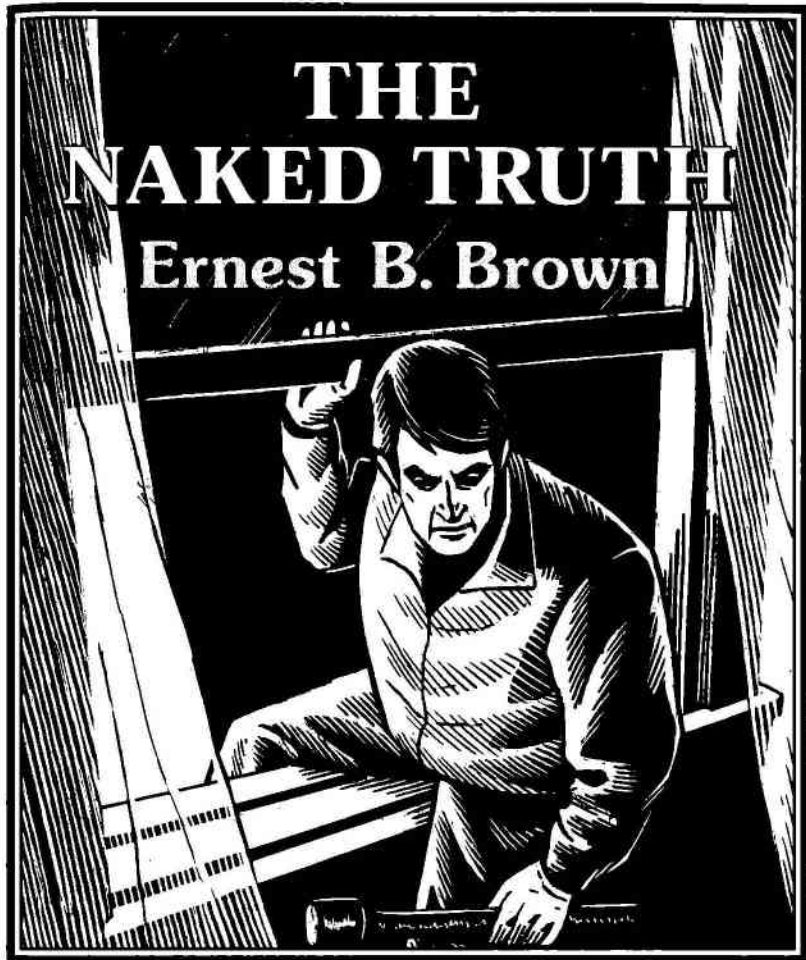
When the wolf came to, he was in police custody, being read his rights. He was convicted of grand theft auto. After doing ten months of an eighteen month term, he was given the option of early release providing he lived at a halfway house and underwent counseling.

He chose to serve the rest of his time. Upon his release he would be a free wolf. He saved the meager wages paid him for manufacturing license plates. He'd apply the money to a down payment on a cul-de-sac lot.

He dreamed his recurring dream every single night.

THE NAKED TRUTH

Ernest B. Brown



*Let it be so: thy truth then be thy
dow'r!*

KING LEAR

Shoeless, shirtless, and unshaven, a cigarette held between the first two fingers of one hand, the remote clutched in the other, Chester Hadley slouched on the sofa in front of the TV.

Standing out among the audience on the screen, brow knit in a show of

concern her eyes did not reflect, the popular shock-show celeb brought the mike up to her mouth and said, "But didn't you feel you were betraying your daughter's trust by sleeping with her fiancé while she was at work?"

Without taking his eyes off the TV, Hadley reached out with the hand that held the cigarette and scooped an open beer can off the coffee table, took a long pull on the

beer, set the can down next to an overflowing ashtray, and belched loudly.

The camera switched back to the three people seated side by side on stage. A young woman in a navy business suit, hair cut fashionably short, leaned forward and shouted across the man in the middle to the woman seated on the opposite end, "Yeah, it's really bad when your own mother turns out to be a slut!"

At the other end of the trio, in stiletto heels and a miniskirt, legs crossed to show an immodest expanse of thigh, a skintight tangerine scoop-neck top exposing enough freckled cleavage almost to bury the small gold medallion that hung from her neck, a woman with big blonde hair and a thick layer of makeup answered, "The thing you got to learn, honey, is you can't tempt 'em if they're satisfied with what they got."

Screaming something that was bleeped out, the young woman in the navy blue business suit sprang from her chair and grabbed a handful of her mother's hair. The young man in the middle leaped up and tried to pull her off as the microphone wielding celeb ran back up on stage. Joined by half a dozen studio hands, they attempted to separate the two women, who seemed intent on tearing out each other's hair.

At the height of the battle on TV, someone knocked on Chester Hadley's door. He shot an annoyed glance over his shoulder and returned his attention to the melee on the screen.

Another series of knocks, this time louder.

"All right already, I'm coming. You don't have to beat the goddamn door down."

His eyes still glued to the action, Hadley stood up reluctantly and sidled over to the door. He aimed the remote at the TV and turned up the sound as he reached sideways and fumbled for the knob. Only after he had yanked open the door did he turn his head to look at his visitor.

"What the hell are you doing here, I told you . . ."

Hadley's sentence ended in a raspy gargle as the stubby barrel of a stainless steel .357 Magnum was jammed into his mouth.

At nearly thirteen hundred feet per second, the bullet traveled faster than sound. Hadley never heard the shot.

Chester Hadley's last earthly sensation was a shattering blow at the base of his skull accompanied by an explosion of white light bursting inside his head.

May's soft breath was melting the last of winter's icy grip on Boston. March had dumped twelve inches of wet snow on the city in three separate storms, and April had rained and drizzled its way into the meteorological record book. But as Franny and I scrambled down the scaffolding at quitting time, the warm afternoon sunshine was reducing the long New England winter to a faded memory.

Franny and I were just two of the three thousand construction workers laboring on the Central Artery/Tunnel Project in downtown Boston. We were part of the crew con-

structing one of the elevated, temporary bypass roads for that section that runs between the Fort Point Channel and Chinatown.

Franny sucked in his massive gut and unbuckled his toolbelt, took it off, rebuckled it and slung it over his shoulder. "What do you say," he said, "we shoot over to the Golden Garden for some pork strips and a couple of cold ones?"

"Maybe tomorrow," I said. "I haven't been to my office for a week; I have to check out the messages and pick up the mail."

Franny and I and the rest of our crew bumped and jostled our way through the gang coming in for the second shift. Carpenters and laborers, ironworkers and cement finishers, electricians and operating engineers, playfully punching one another on the upper arm or slapping the top of each other's hardhat, shouted obscene greetings over the discordant chorus of diesel engines powering the compressors, generators, backhoes, and cranes that whined and clattered, thumped and clanged their way through the ten point eight billion dollar price tag of Boston's Big Dig.

"Yo, Billy, you ugly bastard, is that your face or did your pants fall down?"

"Hey, Sean, speaking of ugly, how's your mama?"

"How's it going, Pat, getting much?"

"Why don't you ask your wife when you get home, Tommy?"

We parted company at the staging area's chainlink gate. Franny headed west for Chinatown and the Golden Garden, and I headed north

for the mile and a half hike along the waterfront to my office.

It was hot enough in my office to make brick oven baked beans. The late spring sun beating down on the slate roof of the two-hundred-year-old granite wharf-building had raised the temperature in the loft area where my cubbyhole of an office is located to somewhere just short of boiling. My air conditioner had wheezed its last and flatlined last August, and I had not yet repaired or replaced it.

I threw open the one window in the office and hit the PLAY button on my answering machine, peeled off my damp T-shirt and hung it over the back of the desk chair, grabbed a Harpoon out of my mini-fridge, and went over to the open window to watch the horn-honking battle of homebound commuter traffic three stories below.

With the drone of telemarketing messages in one ear and the growl of traffic from the street below in the other I didn't hear her until she stepped into the office and rapped on the open door. She froze, knuckles poised in mid-air, and stared at me. Soft brown eyes, wide and hypnotic, gazed out from under long black lashes.

The eyes wandered from my face to my naked chest and then to the bottle of ale in my hand.

"Mr. Hammond?"

"Yes, may I help you?"

She shifted her gaze to the sign painted on my office door and then back to me again. "Bradford Henry Hammond, the private investigator?"

"Right again. What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry. I guess I expected someone older—" she smiled "—and fully clothed."

I dug a clean T-shirt out of my bottom desk drawer, and as I was pulling it over my head, she got right to the point.

"I would like to talk to you about my brother." She closed the office door and, without being asked, seated herself in the chair in front of my desk. "He's been arrested for a murder that he didn't commit."

I slid into my desk chair and swiveled around to face her. "Look, Ms., ah—I don't believe I caught your name." I was just reaching over to shut off the answering machine, which was still spouting telemarketing messages, when her voice came over the speaker.

"Ah—yes, hello, Mr. Hammond, this is Angelica Molinary. I have a—um—situation I would like to discuss with you. Please call me at 617-555-3476. Thank you."

She gestured toward the answering machine and smiled again. She had a smile that could light up a dark room, and I felt a glow of warmth that wasn't originating from the late afternoon sun on the slate roof, or from my mile and a half walk along the waterfront.

"Sorry," I said. "I've been away from the office for a couple of days; I was just catching up on my messages when you came in."

"No problem. Uncle Rick told me I might not get hold of you first time around. He said you sometimes do carpentry work on the side to stay solvent."

"Uncle Rick—that name doesn't seem to ring a bell, Ms. Molinary."

"I'm sorry. Uncle Rick is Richard, Richard Ellis."

Richard Ellis. The light finally dawned on Marblehead, but before I could say anything, she said, "You know, Lieutenant Ellis, Boston police department?"

"Lieutenant Ellis is your uncle?"

"Yes, my father married his sister."

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry again, I'm not making much sense today, am I? I mean my father married Lieutenant Ellis's sister. Was that a misplaced modifier?"

"Actually it was the use of a referentially ambiguous pronoun. But you say it was your uncle—Lieutenant Ellis—who suggested that you come see me?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have told you that I've spent most of the five years I've been in business collecting evidence of fraud for insurance companies, not investigating murders."

"He said you were involved in a couple of murder cases he handled."

"I was only indirectly involved in one and unofficially in the other."

"And he said you spent four years in Naval Intelligence."

"Naval Investigative Service, yes, but I wasn't investigating murders there either."

"What were you doing?"

"After better than two years of training, I passed most of my days hiding under rocks or in holes in the desert and my nights crawling around in places where I shouldn't have been."

"Sounds dreadful. Uncle Rick says you quit."

"I did."

"How come?"

"I developed an allergy to sand fleas."

"I was just curious, that's all, but you're right, it's none of my business. So how much an hour do you charge for your services, or is it by the day?"

"We'll talk about money later; I haven't said whether or not I'd take the case. Either way, I want to talk to your uncle first. I assume we're talking about the Chester Hadley murder here, and Steven Molinary is your brother?"

"Then you're familiar with it?"

"Only what I've read in the papers and seen on the evening news. I'm not sure there's anything I can do for you on this, Ms. Molinary, but let me talk to your uncle and get back to you."

"When?" She looked disappointed.

I looked at my watch. "It won't be this afternoon; probably tomorrow morning. Can I reach you at the number you left on the machine?"

She said I could, stood up reluctantly, and walked to the door. She was wearing a pair of faded jeans, and I couldn't help noticing how splendidly she filled them out. She turned her head and looked back as she went through the door and caught me looking. I think I blushed.

"Good morning, Uncle Rick." Lieutenant Ellis gave me one of his penetrating, slate-blue, cold-eyed stares. He shook his head, stood up

from behind his desk, and walked over to a table that held a grungy-looking coffeemaker and a mismatched assortment of coffee cups and mugs.

"I take it you've seen Angie."

"She stopped by my office yesterday afternoon."

He set a cracked mug with a broken handle on the desk in front of me and sat down again. "So are you going to look into this thing for her?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure what she expects me to do, or what she thinks I *can* do that the police haven't already done. At any rate, I thought I'd better talk to you first."

I picked up the cracked and battered mug. "Is it safe to drink out of this?"

"Absolutely. The last one to use it was a guy we had in for questioning on an animal abuse complaint, but I'm almost sure it's been washed since then."

I took a sip. The coffee smelled acrid, tasted bitter, and was hot enough to raise blisters. "What do you do," I asked, "make this once a week?"

"For a guy who came in here looking for help, you're not getting off to a very good start, Hammond. So far you've insulted my coffee, bitched about the china, and addressed me in a highly disrespectful manner."

"Hey, give me a little credit," I said. "At least I resisted the urge to call you Uncle Dick."

While he was giving me my second hard look of the morning, he reached into the top drawer of his desk, pulled out a manila folder, and tossed it over in front of me.

"This can't leave my office. You can sit here and read it but you can't take any notes, and even if God himself asks you, you'll swear you've never seen it. Understood?"

I nodded.

"No, I want to hear you say it, Hammond."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about, lieutenant. Swear I've never seen what?"

He picked up his coffee cup and leaned back in his chair; I opened the file and leaned forward in mine.

Although the file contained everything from a printout of the 911 call from one of Chester Hadley's neighbors reporting "possible shots fired," to a transcript of Steven Molinary's preliminary hearing, it told me little that I hadn't already read in the *Globe* or the *Herald*.

The police had brought Steven Molinary in for questioning before the Chester Hadley murder investigation was twenty-four hours old. When the Firearms Record Bureau had run the serial number on the gun found in a Dumpster in the alleyway behind Hadley's apartment building, it had come back as one of five firearms owned by Steven Molinary. He was still being held for questioning when ballistics matched the gun to the .357 slug that, after exiting the back of Chester Hadley's skull, had embedded itself in the apartment's sheetrock wall. Molinary was read his rights and arrested for murder one. By noontime the following day he had been arraigned, denied bail, and remanded to custody.

Steven Molinary had been living alone for two weeks before the mur-

der. His wife Renee had taken out a restraining order on him. Renee Molinary, attorney in tow, had gone into the Area A, District 1, police station on a Monday morning sporting a swollen lip and a bruised jaw. She claimed that a weekend-long argument with her husband had ended Sunday night with his getting drunk and hitting her with a closed fist. She said the argument had started Friday night when her husband accused her of seeing another man, an accusation she adamantly denied.

From the police station Mrs. Molinary's attorney had taken her over to the Probate Court at 3 Center Plaza to file for a restraining order. By Tuesday afternoon Steven Molinary had been served at his place of employment.

As provided under *The General Laws of Massachusetts*, Molinary's "License to Carry Firearms" was subsequently revoked. When the police went to the Molinarys' Beacon Hill condo to confiscate the firearms, they found a twelve-gauge pump action shotgun, a 30-30 lever action hunting rifle, and a .22 caliber semiautomatic target pistol. The other two guns registered to Molinary—an S&W Model 66 .357 Magnum revolver with a four inch barrel and a Colt Gold Cup National Match .45 caliber semiautomatic pistol—were not there. Renee Molinary, who did not share her husband's love of hunting and the shooting sports, said she had no idea where the missing guns might be, and Steven Molinary swore that all the guns were in his study when he left for work that morning. Two

weeks later the revolver had turned up in the Dumpster behind Hadley's apartment. The .45 caliber Colt was still missing.

The detectives handling the murder investigation did not find out about the restraining order and the missing handguns until the day after Molinary's arraignment. At ten A.M. that morning the super of Hadley's apartment building came into the station waving a copy of the *Herald*. The paper had run a front-page picture of Steven and Renee Molinary with the headline BOSTON STOCKBROKER ARRAIGNED IN HADLEY MURDER. Lacking a current photograph, they had used one taken seven months earlier at a fundraiser for Bill Weld's unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate. The photograph had captured a beaming and applauding Steven Molinary seated beside his somewhat sour looking spouse Renee. Her expression indicated that her husband's love of shooting sports was not the only enthusiasm they failed to share.

From the picture in the paper the super had identified Molinary's wife as the woman who had visited someone in his building two weeks before. He said he had been emptying trash into the Dumpster when she arrived and parked in the alleyway. "Yes," he'd said, "I'm positive it was the same woman because I went up to her as she was getting out of the car and told her she couldn't park in the alley.

"She gave me some lip," the super said, "but she finally moved the car to a parking space a block down and across the street. I saw her walk back and go into the building."

This development had brought Renee Molinary and her restraining order into the picture, and the detectives, who assumed that Chester Hadley was the "other man," were sure they had the motive for the murder.

Renee, who had been at a meeting of Citizens for the Preservation of Boston Antiquities at the time of the murder, had an alibi and twenty witnesses to back it up. Steven Molinary, who'd called in sick that day, had neither. At the preliminary hearing the district attorney filed formal charges against him.

I shuffled back to the beginning of the file. "So Molinary goes to see Hadley, pops him when he opens the door, then throws the murder weapon, a gun he knows can be traced back to him, into a Dumpster behind Hadley's building? Does that ring true to you, lieutenant?"

"Remember," Ellis said, "we're not talking about a career criminal here. The D.A. will paint a picture of a guy fleeing the scene of a murder he's just committed in a jealous rage and in the panic of the moment heaving the gun into the first Dumpster he sees. It'll stand up in court."

I thumbed through the file again. "It says here he's being defended by Nathaniel Cain of Hawkens, Haley & Morawitz. I thought they specialized in business law."

"They do, but Nathaniel Cain and Steven Molinary go back a long way together. They met at Harvard as undergraduates. For postgrad, Nat moved up Mass. Ave. to the law school, and Steven went across the river to the business school. They still keep in touch; handball at the

Harvard Club and all that, you know. Nat is taking on the case pro bono. I understand he's on his way up at Hawkens, Haley & Morawitz; he probably thinks that will look good on his resume."

"And I assume," I said, "that departmental policy forbids your being involved in the case because you're related to the suspect."

"You assume correctly. Any other questions?"

I closed the folder and slid it back across the desk to him. "Just one. Did you send Angelica to see me because you knew I wouldn't take her to the cleaners by dragging out what you were sure would be a fruitless investigation of an open-and-shut case? Or because you thought the case was just a little too pat and you wanted someone on the outside to take a look at it?"

His face was expressionless, and he didn't even blink when he said, "That's two questions."

I stopped at Carlotta's Kitchen for a bite of something to neutralize the acidic aftertaste of Ellis's coffee and to use the public pay phone. Angelica picked up on the first ring.

"Good morning, Angelica, this is Hank Hammond."

"Oh good, I've been waiting for your call, and please, it's Angie. My father is the only one who still calls me Angelica."

"Angie it is. I've just left your Uncle Rick's office, and if you still want me to—ah," I glanced at the handful of customers sitting at the counter and leaned in a little closer to the phone, "to look into that matter for you, I'd be glad to take the job."

"Great. When can you start?"

"I already have. I've been on the clock since eight A.M."

"But shouldn't we sit down first and discuss what it is I want you to do, and don't you need a retainer or something before you start?"

"I thought perhaps tonight I could drop off one of my contracts for you to sign and pick up a check; we can discuss what you expect me to do then. And based on whatever I come up with today, I can tell you what I might be able to accomplish."

"That sounds fine to me. How much will you need for a retainer?"

"How does a hundred dollars sound?"

"Is that enough? Uncle Rick said the retainer would probably be enough to cover a week's worth of your time."

"I don't think it will take that long. The police have pretty much dug up all the facts. For the most part I'll just be backtracking ground they've already covered."

"You don't sound too optimistic."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound futile, but I don't want to give you false hopes either."

"What time do you want to come over?"

"Sevenish okay?"

"Sounds fine to me."

She gave me a Riverside Park address. "See you about seven."

It may've been the sunny spring morning, or maybe it was just my overactive hormones, but I thought she sounded eager to see me.

The law firm of Hawkens, Haley & Morawitz was located on State Street. State Street starts at Long

Wharf on the waterfront and runs west up the northern border of Boston's financial district. It ends abruptly at the Old State House. This rare example of eighteenth century Georgian architecture, which saw the Boston Massacre erupt on its doorstep and heard the Declaration of Independence read from its balcony, now serves as a Revolutionary War museum and a subway entrance. Dwarfed against the towering backdrop of a glassy-faced highrise, the old brick State House stands like an organic metaphor of the American dream.

The facades of the buildings along State Street are an eclectic mix of modern, postmodern, and what architect Robert Campbell refers to as the old "burly Boston Granite style." Hawken, Haley & Morawitz occupied the fifth floor in one of the burliest.

The reception area was wall-to-wall Oriental carpet, mellowed walnut paneling, and antique furniture. It reeked old Bostonian. I had thought I looked quite respectable this morning. I'd polished my workboots and put on my best chinos, a freshly laundered denim shirt with a burgundy tie, and my dark blue blazer from The Men's Wearhouse; I wasn't even wearing my gun, but in this setting I stood out like a park bench ragbagger in the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton.

The hushed elegance of the reception area was presided over by a handsome woman just this side of forty who looked a lot like Della Street in the old black and white reruns of *Perry Mason*. If she noticed that my appearance didn't quite fit

the mold of the usual Hawken, Haley & Morawitz clientele, she gave no indication of it.

"Good morning, sir, may I help you?"

"I'd like to see Nathaniel Cain."

"Is he expecting you, sir?"

"No, he isn't," I said and handed her a business card, "but if you give him this and tell him that it has to do with Steven Molinary, I'm hoping he'll see me."

She asked me to "kindly take a seat," rose from behind her desk, and glided off down a carpeted corridor. I'd barely started thumbing through the latest issue of *Forbes* when she returned. "Mr. Hammond, if you'd care to follow me, Mr. Cain will see you now."

The receptionist may have reminded me of Barbara Hale, but the man who stood to meet me bore no resemblance to Raymond Burr. A charcoal gray pinstriped suit, which he probably had paid more for than I'd paid for my car, was perfectly tailored to his better-than-six-foot athletic build. He had a full head of longish, blond, neatly coiffed hair and sharp blue eyes in a face that featured a prominent jaw and a politician's smile. His face had that evenly bronzed color you can only get in a tanning salon. Nathaniel Cain gave every appearance of having money and a membership in a good health club.

He reached across the desk and gave me a dry, firm handshake, motioned me into a leather client's chair, and sat down. "And just what does a private investigator have to do with Steven Molinary's case, Mr. Hammond?"

"His sister Angelica has hired me to look into it."

"Angie hired a private detective?"

"That she did."

"To do what?" He looked annoyed.

"What does she expect to accomplish by engaging the services of a private detective?"

"She just wants someone to take a fresh look at the case against her brother; she says she's certain he didn't commit the murder."

"The police have done a pretty thorough job of digging out the facts here, Mr. Hammond. Does she think there's something the investigation didn't bring to light?"

True to a fault to his trade; everything he'd said to me so far had been framed as a question. I took a stab at turning that around.

"As you well know," I said, "sometimes it's not the facts that make or break a case, it's the interpretation. So tell me, counselor, how are you interpreting the facts here? Do you think your client shot Hadley?"

"To begin with, I don't believe that anything I may or may not think is really any of your concern, but beyond that, what I think in this case is irrelevant. My duty as Steven's attorney is to do everything within the law I can to defend him against the prosecution's charge."

"And how do you feel about your duty to Steven as his friend?"

He scowled. "I'm not sure I know what you mean by that."

"Weren't you old college classmates?"

"Yes we were, but what—"

"And don't the two of you still play handball together at the athletic club?"

"It's squash, not handball, but yes, we belong to the same athletic club, and I occasionally see Steven and Renee socially. I've known the family since Steven and I were in college. But what does any of that have to do with my obligation to Steven as his attorney? Just what is it you're trying to say here, Hammond?"

He was getting testy. He obviously didn't like being on the other end of the questions.

"It's only that if I were in Steven Molinary's shoes," I said, "and my attorney was an old college buddy, I'd expect him to be a little more enthusiastic about the possibility of my being innocent."

Realizing that he'd been nettled into a defensive posture, he attempted to regain control. He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together across his chest, gave me a patronizing look and his politician's smile, and said, "Possibly, but if you were in Steven's shoes, Mr. Hammond, don't you think it would be wise also to expect a certain degree of pragmatism from your attorney?"

"I guess that would depend on the circumstances. How much pragmatism are we talking about here?"

"The prosecution has a pretty strong case. Steven appears to have had opportunity and motive, and the murder weapon was his gun. He could be looking at life imprisonment."

"Do I smell plea bargain, counselor?"

"Yes, you do, that's why I was a little upset to hear that someone might be blundering around in the case. I'm in the midst of negotiations with the D.A. now."

"Blundering around? I'd prefer to think of my investigation as a discreet inquiry into the facts. It's not like I'm planning to run ads in the papers or tour the talk shows."

"Just make damn sure you don't do anything to muddy the waters while I'm trying to negotiate with the prosecutor, Hammond."

He leaned forward and put both palms on his desk. "Now, if there is nothing else—"

"Actually there is," I said. "Would you have any objection to my talking with your client?"

He looked as though he wanted to object but was unable to come up with a good reason to do so. He finally said, "I fail to see what that would accomplish."

"Perhaps nothing," I said, "but what harm can it do?"

"None, I suppose. When do you want to see him?"

"If you'd put in a call to Nashua Street and set it up, I'd like to talk to him this afternoon."

He did not look happy about it.

"You know, counselor, we're on the same team here."

His expression was as close as it could come to a sneer and still be a smile.

I went back out on State Street, joined the noontime flurry of office workers scurrying to get lunch, and wondered why Nathaniel Cain was in such a hurry to have his client plead guilty to second degree murder. I got my wagon out of the parking garage, worked my way over to the North End, and wondered why he seemed so apprehensive about my having been hired to investigate

the case. At the Ship's Locker on Atlantic Avenue I stopped for a char-broiled bacon-burger and a tall Harpoon on tap and wondered whether Philip Marlowe would have spent this much time wondering.

"Did Nat Cain send you to see me?"
"No, I spoke to your attorney before I came, but it was your sister who hired me. She doesn't like your lawyer's prognosis; she wants a second opinion."

Steven Molinary had a fragile looking face and his sister's soft brown eyes. He looked tired and a little confused. He also had her lustrous black hair, but it was starting to recede at the temples and go thin on top. And although he looked trim and fit, he oozed vulnerability.

I sat opposite him at a steel table in the interview room at the Suffolk County jailhouse on Nashua Street and questioned him for almost an hour. But the conversation added little to what little I already knew.

Yes, he'd thought his wife had been cheating on him for more than a year, but no, he hadn't any idea with whom. Yes, he had followed her to Chester Hadley's apartment, but no, he hadn't gotten out of his car. He said that he hadn't known Chester Hadley, never even heard the name until the police started questioning him about the murder. And he said he knew of no one who would want to frame him for murder, could think of no one who would profit from it. Yes, he had locked the two handguns in his study before he left the house the morning they

had served him with the restraining order, and no, he did not shoot Chester Hadley.

After they took Steven back to his cell, I stood by the visitor's door and waited for the guard to come let me out. Time seemed suspended in the fluorescent light and the silence of the windowless room. The cement block walls were an institutional green, and the faint odor of industrial-strength floor cleaner hung in the air.

The only thing new I'd picked up from the interview was a strong feeling that Steven hadn't killed Hadley. He might have gotten drunk and battered his wife, but he didn't read like somebody who could commit premeditated murder.

As I wheeled the wagon into the visitor's lot at Riverside Park, the setting sun was hovering over the building tops of East Cambridge on the other side of the Charles River and turning the surface of the water to salmon-colored gold. I pushed the button under Angelica's mailbox in the vestibule and got an immediate buzz-through into the elevator lobby. The elevator whooshed me up and sighed to a stop at her floor.

She was waiting for me in the hallway, wearing sandals, jeans, a loose-fitting T-shirt, and that soft-eyed smile that had raised hell with my thermostat yesterday. It was having the same effect on me tonight. The warm glow, which started somewhere between the bottom of my rib cage and my belt buckle, crept up into my chest and made it difficult to breathe normally. She said, "Hi, come on in," and turned to

the open apartment door. I sucked in a huge mouthful of air and followed her in.

The living room was small and sparsely furnished. Unpainted bookcases ran the length of the wall on one side, and a countertop island with two tall stools separated the room from a compact kitchen setup on the other. A loveseat, two matching armchairs, and a glass-topped coffee table took up most of the space in between. Through a wide window that nearly filled the front wall of the room, I could see the sun setting on the other side of the river.

I walked over to the window and watched the top rim of the sun slip down behind the buildings and turn the bottom of the clouds from copper to crimson. The low, looping arches of the Longfellow Bridge were silhouetted against the reflected glow on the water that had turned from salmon-colored gold to blood red. -

She came to stand beside me. "How do you like my million-dollar view?" When I turned to answer, our shoulders touched; I took a half step backwards.

She smiled and walked into the kitchen and asked me if I'd eaten yet. I said I had not. She opened the fridge and pulled out a plate piled high with sandwiches neatly cut into quarters, set it on the counter, leaned into the fridge again and came out with a Harpoon in one hand and a bottle of white wine in the other. She bumped the door shut with her hip and set the bottles down next to the sandwiches.

"That is what you were drinking at your office yesterday, isn't it?" I

nodded. "I thought so," she said. "Come sit down and eat."

I sat down at the counter and dug in while Angie uncapped the ale and poured herself a glass of wine. The sandwiches were chicken salad with chunks of celery and chives on whole-wheat bread. I wolfed down half of them and drained my Harpoon dry while she nibbled on one sandwich and barely sipped the top off her wine.

I told her she made a mean chicken salad. She said thanks and asked what I'd accomplished today.

"After I talked to your uncle, I went over to State Street to let Cain know you'd hired me to look into the case."

"Oh? And what did you think of Nat?"

"I'm not certain what I think of him, but he sure is pretty."

"That he is. I've known Nat since his college days with Steven. He's always looked like a magazine ad for men's cologne. I'll bet he wasn't happy to find out about you."

"No, he didn't seem pleased to have me blundering around in the case' as he put it. Did you know he has entered into plea negotiations with the district attorney's office?"

"Yes, Steven told me last week. That's when I decided to hire a private detective. I had to find someone who would at least try to prove Steven is innocent."

"Well, he sure doesn't look or sound like a guy who could walk up to someone's front door and blow him away."

"You've *seen* him? You've seen Steven?"

"I went over to the Suffolk Coun-

ty jail this afternoon. I wanted to talk to him about how well he knew Hadley. I also wanted to ask him why he thought Renee was seeing someone else and who he thought it was."

"I don't think he has any idea who it was," she said. "He came to me about a year ago and told me he was afraid his marriage was heading for the rocks, that he thought Renee was seeing someone on the side. But then a couple of months ago he said he thought she'd stopped, that everything was going to be okay."

"Yeah," I said, "but then two weeks before the murder he followed her to Hadley's apartment building. When she came home, he accused her of seeing another man, started a domestic that got him kicked out of the house, and then Hadley gets whacked and Steven's gun turns up at the murder scene."

"It doesn't look good, does it?"

"No," I said, "it doesn't. Can you think of anyone who had a grudge against him, anyone who'd want to frame him for murder, or anyone who might profit from it?"

"No. For the most part, Steven is a quiet and reserved person, not at all confrontational. His circle of friends might be small, but he has no enemies that I know of."

She took a small sip of wine and asked me what my next move would be. I told her I was going to try to see Renee the next day.

"Good luck getting anything out of her."

"What do you mean?"

"Renee comes from old Boston money," she said, "and she never lets you forget it. She's highly opin-

ionated and can be quite condescending.”

“I would think she’d be happy to talk to someone who was trying to clear her husband,” I said.

“That reminds me, did you bring something with you for me to sign?”

I pulled out the folded contract and a pen and put them on the counter in front of her. She took them over to the coffee table, sat down on the loveseat, and, looking back at me, patted the cushion next to her. I went over and sat down.

She scanned the contract, signed it, and started writing out a check. I could feel the heat from her body on my hip and my thigh, and I had to concentrate on the checkbook to keep my mind on business. She handed me the check and my copy of the contract, and I mumbled something about having to leave.

We both tried to stand up at the same time in the narrow space between the coffee table and the loveseat, and we somehow got our feet entangled. I grabbed her by the waist to keep her from falling, and she wound up with both arms around my neck. She looked up into my face, and something behind her eyes began to smolder. We stood like that for a long moment before I pushed her gently away and said, “No, we can’t do this.”

Her eyes asked why not.

“It would be highly unprofessional behavior on my part.”

Her voice sounded husky when she said, “Does it say that in the contract?”

“It’s just that if I can come up with anything to clear Steven, I don’t want the issue clouded by

someone questioning my motivation or my professionalism.”

My face felt flushed, and I could hear my heart pounding in my ears when I said, “Maybe later when this is finished.”

She pulled my head down to her; a heady mix of the scent of soap and lilac and chardonnay almost overwhelmed my senses. She brushed her lips against the side of my neck and whispered, “Later, then.”

I got out of there somehow without tripping over my feet, took the elevator down, made it to the wagon without getting lost, and managed to drive home without running over anybody. I lay awake a long time.

“**Y**ou have either misunderstood the tenor of my answers to your questions, Mr. Hammond, or chosen to ignore it, so I’ll be blunt. I have no intention of discussing this or any other matter relating to my family with a private investigator.”

Renee Molinary, the embodiment of elegance dressed in Ann Taylor’s finest, the personification of aristocracy ensconced in Beacon Hill’s splendence, made it quite clear who was in charge. She also made it quite clear she wasn’t about to answer any questions asked by a low-life private detective wearing workboots and chinos. She didn’t seem the least bit impressed by my burgundy tie or the fact that my boots were freshly polished.

“I’m not here to dig up something to embarrass you or your family, Mrs. Molinary. I’m merely back-

tracking the ground that the police have already covered and attempting to find something that might clear your husband of murder."

"Steven has an excellent attorney, Mr. Hammond, and neither he nor I need or want your help."

"How about your husband? When I saw him yesterday, he looked as though *he* could use some help."

"You've been to see my husband?"

"Yes, I have. I wanted to talk to him face-to-face about how long he'd known Chester Hadley. Steven says he didn't even know Hadley. Says he never heard the name until the police started questioning him about the murder, which made me wonder. How well did you know Chester Hadley, Mrs. Molinary?"

The look I got was cold enough to reverse global warming. She stood up without a word, walked over to a delicate cherry table set up as a desk with a matching Queen Anne chair, and took something from one of the drawers. She strode majestically back and handed it to me. It was a business card that gave a Devonshire Street address and two telephone numbers for the law offices of Rachel Schilling.

"The next time you wish to communicate with me, Mr. Hammond, please contact my attorney."

I wanted to ask her why she wasn't using Nathaniel Cain, but she had headed for the door. "I'm afraid that's all the time I have for you this morning. I have a rather busy schedule, so if you'll allow me show you out—"

I think it was one of the Civil War generals who said, "There are times when a dignified withdrawal

better serves the cause than an ignoble defeat," or, more succinctly, "What the hell, you can't win 'em all."

As I was making what I hoped was a dignified withdrawal from the Molinarys' brownstone, I noticed a white Volvo station wagon parked in the narrow space beside the building. A vanity plate on the front bumper read JAKES-4. For as long as I can remember, the Jakes family has held the five Massachusetts vanity plates JAKES-1 through 5. But for this blueblooded Boston family, it's not merely a matter of vanity. It's a notification, to parking valets and meter maids alike, that a car bearing one of these plates gets special treatment. Renee had apparently kept the family plate after marrying Steven, and I was willing to bet it wasn't because MOLINARY wouldn't fit on a six digit plate.

Not having a clue as to where to go next, I went back to the office and started a file on the case. I made up a daily log and entered a report on each of the interviews I'd done so far. I printed out two copies of everything, one for my files and one for Angie's final report, then sat back and read through it all.

Chester Hadley was the one piece that somehow didn't seem to fit the picture. I picked up the phone, punched in the number for the Area A, District 1, station house, and gave the cop who answered the phone Lieutenant Ellis's extension.

"Lieutenant Ellis's office."

"Is that you, Uncle Rick?"

"Where are you?"

"My office."

He hung up without saying goodbye. The phone rang less than five minutes later, and I could tell by the traffic noise in the background that he'd gone out to a public phone.

"What's up, Hammond?"

"Not a lot."

"I heard from Angie that you took on the case. Any progress yet?"

"I don't know. I've talked to Steven, his wife, and his lawyer, but the only thing that stands out so far is that Hadley doesn't seem to fit the picture the D.A. painted."

"What do you mean?"

"Chester Hadley was a loser, a gambler with a police record for petty larceny who was living in a shabby apartment in the Fenway. He was working nights as a desk clerk at a no-tell-motel on Route 1 in Saugus, and spending his days at Suffolk Downs. Somehow I can't picture him as someone Renee Molineary would be slipping out on her husband to see."

"It's happened before, Hammond. She wouldn't be the first countess to get caught in the stable."

"Maybe so. Tell me, lieutenant, what are the chances of my getting into Hadley's apartment to take a look around?"

"Slim to none, the apartment's under police seal. I'd have to do paperwork to go in again and then have it resealed, and I can't do that. I was officially pulled off the case when ballistics tied the murder weapon to my sister's stepson. And there's no way the detectives who finally worked on the case are going to let some private eye go in and snoop around. The front door is sealed, and the window to the fire

escape in the back is locked. So forget about it. Are you getting the message here, Hammond?"

"Yes, I think so, lieutenant."

"Good, stay in touch."

He hung up again without saying goodbye.

I locked the office and drove to the Ship's Locker to kill time until nightfall. I nursed two Harpoons and three cups of coffee through a rerun of *The Rockford Files*, sixty minutes each of Oprah Winfrey and Rosie O'Donnell, and *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. When it finally got dark, I signed my tab, used the facilities, and headed out to the Fenway.

It wasn't hard to get into the building. The lock on the front door of the vestibule didn't work and looked as though it hadn't for years. Half the mailboxes in the vestibule had been broken into and were gaping open on their hinges, and the place smelled like the restrooms in the Summer Street bus station. There was no lock on the inner door. I went in and walked up to the second floor without seeing a soul.

Canned laughter from a sitcom drifted through the door across the hall from Hadley's apartment. I knew it was Hadley's apartment because there was a police seal on the door. In the detecting business, keen observation is a must. The only light in the dingy hallway came from a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling and an illuminated exit sign on the wall above a large window at the far end of the hall. The window wasn't locked. I lifted it and stepped out on the fire escape.

As advertised, the rear window of

Hadley's apartment was locked. My penknife slid up easily between the meeting-rails on the sash of the old double-hung window and popped open the lock. I stepped over the sill into blackness.

I felt around in the dark for the window shade and pulled it down before I switched on my flashlight. I was in a bedroom barely big enough for a chest of drawers and the bed. I moved out into the apartment to pull down the rest of the shades. There was only one other window. It was in a foul smelling bathroom and looked out on the alley. I pulled that shade and turned on the lights.

It didn't take me long to realize that even if I knew what I was looking for, there weren't that many places to look. It also didn't take me long to realize that the police had already looked in them all. The medicine cabinet in the bathroom was wide open, and they had left the cover for the toilet tank on the floor next to the bowl. The mattress in the bedroom was leaning against the wall, and someone had stacked all the drawers from the chest on the bedsprings. The shabby carpet in the living room was folded back on itself, exposing the bare floor beneath, and they had tossed all the cushions into a corner and left the sofa tipped on its back.

I sat down in the living room on a rickety side chair by a small table that held a PC and a printer, gazed around at the shambles, and wondered what I had thought I would find here that would make risking my license worthwhile. I turned to the computer—mostly because I

couldn't come up with a plan for what to do next—booted it up, and did a little finger-walking through Hadley's files. Not that I thought I was going to find anything that the police hadn't already seen.

And there wasn't that much to see. It didn't take long to browse through Hadley's meager files. From the short list of personal e-mail addresses and the long roster of porno sites he had listed, it didn't take a detective to see in which dirty little corner of cyberspace Chester Hadley had spent most of his time.

I closed his Internet file and reopened one titled MEGABUCKS, which is one of the Massachusetts state lottery games. It was nothing but three pages of six-number entries listed vertically. Several of the entries, two or three on each page, were followed by a second six-number entry. These double entries looked as if they might be numbers he'd actually played, the second entry being the winning numbers drawn that week. But what was odd about the list, the thing that had bothered me the first time I'd looked at it, was that some of the numbers were in roman and some were in italics. It couldn't be what it first appeared, just sloppy key-boarding, because getting into and out of italics required going up to the toolbar and clicking on the *I* button. He had to have done it intentionally.

I scrolled through the list again. The last entry was one of the double ones: *12-1-23-25-5-18* and *10-1-11-5-19-4*. Something about the second sequence seemed familiar,

something I felt I should recognize. I sat and stared at the screen while the little finger of inductive reasoning in the back of my mind tried to push the pieces together, but it just wouldn't come.

I was scrolling through the list again when I realized that the numbers in italics didn't go any higher than twenty-six and the ones in roman went no higher than nine. Which was strange because Megabucks is played by selecting six numbers from one to forty-two.

So you're supposed to be a smart guy, Hammond, I said to myself. If he could have picked numbers from one to forty-two, how come there is none on the list higher than twenty-six? And then it jumped out and hit me. *Twenty-six*, Sherlock, *twenty-six*. The ones in italics were letters.

I scrolled back down to that familiar looking second number in the last entry. With the help of a little counting on my fingers, I substituted letters for the numbers. It came out JAKES-4. When I tried the same thing with the first numbers of the last entry, I got LAWYER.

I printed a copy of the list, shut down the computer, killed the lights, and crawled back out the window.

I called Angie on my cell phone from the wagon.

"Hi, where are you?"

"Parked in the Fens, still working. Do you have Uncle Rick's home phone number?"

"Yes I do," she said and gave me the number. "It sounds like you might be making progress."

"Some progress," I said. "I'm just not sure in which direction."

"Can you stop by for a drink when you're done?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Nat Cain called, wants to come over to discuss the adverse effect your investigation could have on his negotiations with the D.A.'s office, but I can't see how that could take long. How soon can you get here?"

"I shouldn't be more than an hour. He probably wants to talk you into pulling me off the case."

"There's no chance of that, Hammond. See you in an hour."

I signed off smiling at the way she always used my last name.

"How did you get my home number?"

"Angie gave it to me."

"I'm beginning to wonder if I made a mistake sending her to you, Hammond. What do you want?"

"I need you to run a plate for me."

"Tonight?"

"That would be good, lieutenant."

"You are a pain in the ass." He was quiet for a half a minute, then said, "Give me the number."

"It's a vanity plate. L-a-w-y-e-r."

"L-a-w-y-e-r, you mean like in lawyer?"

"That's it, lieutenant."

"Where are you?"

I gave him my cell phone number, and he hung up again without saying goodbye.

It seemed like a couple of hours before he called back, but it was probably closer to ten minutes.

"That plate's for a '98 Porsche registered to Nathaniel Cain. What have you got?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I don't think we should discuss it over the phone."

He agreed to meet me at Carlotta's at eight o'clock the next morning. I had to hurry, but this time I broke the connection without saying goodbye.

It took me a while, sitting alone in the dark, to put the whole thing together, and then I remembered that Cain was on the way to Angie's. I cranked up the wagon, popped the clutch, and headed for Storror Drive.

Angie buzzed me in and was standing in the open doorway of her apartment waiting for me when I stepped out of the elevator. Through the open door behind her, I could see Nat Cain sitting in the living room with his briefcase on the coffee table.

I walked into the room and sat down in the chair opposite Cain. Angie closed the door behind me and sat down on one of the stools at the counter.

"You were right," Angie said to me, "he wants me to have you drop the investigation."

Cain looked annoyed.

"That's not exactly what I said, Angie." He looked back at me. "I said I just thought it would be better if you stopped messing around in this thing while I'm negotiating with the district attorney. It's going to do nothing but confuse the issue if he hears that someone is poking around in the case while I'm attempting to get him to agree to a plea bargain with Steven."

"I do wish you'd stop referring to my discreet investigatorial technique as 'blundering' or 'messing

around,' counselor, you're liable to give my client here doubts about my professional ability."

"I don't think I'd call your questioning of Renee this morning discreet, Mr. Hammond."

"And how did you hear about that so soon, Cain? I thought Ms. Schilling was Renee's attorney."

"As I told you yesterday, I've been on friendly terms with Renee and Steven for years."

"Yes, I know what you told me. But what I'm wondering now, counselor, is just *how* friendly you are with Renee?"

He didn't answer; he just raised his handsome chin a couple of inches and glared at me. I pulled out the copy of Hadley's list and laid it on top of his briefcase. "What do you make of that, counselor?"

He picked up the list and flipped through the sheets. "It looks like a list of lottery numbers."

"Yes, that's probably what the police thought, too, just a list of lottery numbers. But it isn't. The italicized numbers stand for letters; it's a list of automobile registration numbers that Chester Hadley had stored away on his hard drive."

Cain stared down at the list. His jaw dropped, and the look of arrogant disdain melted from his face as he realized the significance of what he held in his hand.

"Take a look at the last entry, Cain."

He was quick. He didn't even have to count on his fingers.

"Where did you get this?"

"I think I'll pull the old journalist's cop-out and say that for now I'll decline divulging my sources."

"Even assuming you came by this legitimately," he said, "and if it were admissible, it would mean nothing; it would only be circumstantial evidence."

"Yes, counselor, it's only circumstantial, but so is the state's case against Steven. I think this will be enough to get the investigation reopened."

Angie's face brightened. "What did you find? Do you have something that will clear Steven?" She hopped off the stool and looked over Cain's shoulder. "What is it?"

"It's a list of registration numbers Hadley had," I said. "He worked as a night clerk in a sleazy motel out on Route 1. Whenever someone came in alone and registered as a single occupant, he'd make a note of the plate number. That's what the first column of numbers on the list is. Then he'd keep an eye on the room, and if anyone else showed up and went in, he'd go out and take down that plate number. That's what the second number is wherever a set of two numbers appears on the list. He had someone somewhere who could run the plate numbers for him, and whenever he came up with a likely looking pair, he'd do a bit of blackmail."

Angie looked puzzled. "And?"

"And," I said, "when you substitute letters for the italicized numbers in the last pair of entries, you get *LAWYER* and *JAKES-4*."

"*JAKES-4*," she said, "isn't that Renee's plate?"

"Yes, it is."

"And whose plate is *LAWYER*?" she asked.

I pointed at Cain with my thumb

cocked, brought it down, and said, "Bang."

Angie frowned. "I don't understand. Who was Hadley blackmailing, Nat or Renee?"

"Either or both, we don't know yet, but my guess is he contacted Renee first. That's why she went to his apartment the night Steven followed her. Afterwards either she told Cain, or Hadley contacted him and tried to put the squeeze on him, too. And old Nat here knew that his shot at a full partnership would go down the chute if word ever got back to Hawkens, Haley & Morawitz that he was messing around with Mrs. Molinary."

Angie looked down at Cain in disbelief and took a step away from his chair. "Are you saying Nat murdered Hadley just to keep everyone from finding out that he and Renee were having an affair?"

"That was one of the reasons. But it was a twofer, wasn't it, Cain? The murder not only permanently silenced Hadley, but committing it with Steven's gun got your wealthy little honey's husband out of the way."

Cain leaned forward in his chair and tapped Hadley's list with a stiff forefinger. "Even if this proved that Steven didn't kill Hadley, which it does not, it doesn't prove that I did. Anybody could have killed him for any number of reasons having nothing whatsoever to do with this."

"No, that's where you got a little too cute, Cain. Even if we assume that some unknown person or persons broke into the Molinarys' study and stole Steven's guns, what do you think the odds are that one of

those guns would turn up at the scene of the Hadley murder?"

"There are thousands of instances of random violence in this city every year, Hammond. Steven's stolen gun's being used in one of them could easily be a coincidence."

"I don't think so, not when you look at the facts. A married woman goes to see a scumbag who works as a night clerk in a stop-and-flop motel. Her husband follows her, and when she comes home, he accuses her of seeing another man and starts a brawl that earns him a court order to vacate the premises. Two weeks later the scumbag gets smoked with a gun owned by the husband. Now the probability of that's being a coincidence, Cain, is somewhere between not likely and impossible. And in the words of the immortal Mr. Holmes, 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth.'

"The problem is, Cain, using Steven's gun made for a very short list of probable suspects. It had to be Steven or Renee, and Renee had an alibi. But you and Renee turning up side by side on Hadley's little roster of license plates adds your name to the short list. And in my book, counselor, it gives you a motive that moves you to the top of the list."

Cain's face hardened. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a .45 Colt automatic.

"Dumb move, Cain, it's too late, the police already have Hadley's list."

"I don't think so," he said. "If they did, I would be hearing all this from them, not you."

"Either way, this isn't going to do you any good. What are you going to do, shoot your way out of here?"

"No, you and I are going to take a little drive up to the Quincy quarries, Hammond."

"And what happens to Angie?"

"If Angelica were to come to an untimely end and some two-bit private eye she had hired suddenly disappeared, who do you think the police would be looking for, Hammond?"

I hated to admit it, but he had a good point.

Cain's eyes locked on mine, and neither his eyes nor the muzzle of the gun wavered as he reached for the list on the table without looking down at it. He dropped it into his open briefcase. Psychologists refer to what Cain did next as an act of implicit, or procedural memory—a fancy way of saying habit. He rolled his gun hand over, palm down, and put both hands on the raised lid of the briefcase to close it. He realized he'd made a mistake about a half a second too late.

I grabbed my end of the coffee table and flipped it up, briefcase and all, in his face. The open briefcase knocked the gun out of his hand, and the table's glass top shattered into a thousand jagged pieces that showered down on his shoulders and into his lap. I dived across the wreckage of the table into him; the chair went over backwards, and we crashed together on the floor. I tried to pin his flailing arms as he clawed at my face, but it was like trying to grab a handful of coil springs.

We rolled over together, thrash-

ing in the broken glass, and both scrambled to our feet. My right hand was bleeding, and both of my knees felt wet. Cain banged a fist into the side of my jaw that snapped my head back and made the room spin. He charged in and drove me back against the bookcase; a shelf collapsed and books tumbled down around our feet.

Then the room seemed to go silent as something buried deep in my psyche clicked on. Everything took on the look of a film in slow motion, and the old training, all the ways they'd taught me to kill, kicked in.

I pulled my head back and rammed it forward in his face; my forehead slammed into his nose. He staggered back clutching his broken nose, stumbled on the books, and fell backwards on the floor. I followed him down with my knee in his gut and had cocked my elbow for the final blow before I realized that someone was screaming.

I looked up. Angie was standing over me with a look of sheer horror on her face shouting, "Stop, stop it. You're going to kill him!"

I got off of Cain and took a step towards her. She stepped back and warded me off with her hand. I reached out to her. "Angie—"

But she recoiled from my bloody hand and said, "You were going to kill him."

"Angie, he killed Hadley and tried to frame your brother for it. He was trying to kill me; he was going to kill you."

I don't think she heard me. She just stood staring at me in shocked disbelief and said again, "You were going to kill him."

The look on her face was that of a child who, having crawled to the edge of the abyss and peered over, finds herself staring into the eyes of the demon.

I picked the Colt up from the floor, laid it on the counter by the phone, and for the second time that evening, called Lieutenant Ellis at his home.

With her check for my services in my pocket and her plea that I stop trying to call her still ringing in my ears, I was walking out of Angie's building with a very heavy heart. Two weeks had passed since Nathaniel Cain had tripped on Angie's coffee table and broken his nose. Yes, tripped on the table and broke his nose; that's the story Lieutenant Ellis gave the paramedics and the detectives from Area A, District 1, when they arrived.

After hustling me out of the apartment, Ellis had called an ambulance because, besides a broken nose, Cain had a couple of broken ribs. Ellis was afraid that if Cain tried to stand up he might puncture a lung. He had called in the detectives because a gun Cain didn't have a license to carry had tumbled out of his briefcase when he fell. And to everyone's surprise, the gun turned out to be Steven Molinary's missing .45.

An odd looking list of numbers had also fallen from Cain's briefcase and was lying in plain view on the floor. Ellis had suggested to the detectives that it appeared to be a coded list of automobile registration numbers. With that as a starting point, they soon figured out that the last pair of numbers matched

plates on cars owned by Nathaniel Cain and Renee Molinary. It didn't take long after that for the detectives to put it all together.

Of course, this brought Renee back into the picture. But with the aid of her attorney and her good family name, she managed to convince the police that she was in no way involved in the murder of Chester Hadley. She admitted to having an affair with Cain, and to meeting him at the motel on Route 1. And yes, Hadley had called her and told her to come to his apartment to discuss an arrangement for keeping his mouth shut about it. But she said that the night she went to his apartment he wasn't there. She had an alibi for the time of the murder, of course, and she claimed to have no knowledge of any communication Hadley might have had with Cain, or Cain with Hadley. So that ended that.

Steven had been released, Cain had been incarcerated, and I had spent two weeks trying to get in touch with Angie. She had finally answered the message I'd left on her machine asking if I could come by with my written report and her bill. She called back and said that I could.

Angie didn't even look at the report before she wrote out the check; she barely glanced at the bill. She made it painfully clear that although she appreciated all I'd done to clear her brother she did not wish to see me again.

In response to my carefully re-

hearsed speech on the beast that lies buried in everyone, she just shook her head and shuddered. She said that she would never be able to think of me again without seeing the look on my face as I knelt over Cain with my elbow poised above his bleeding face. I guess I couldn't blame her. It would be a long time before I could forget it, too.

By the time I left Angie's building, the morning's light drizzle had turned to a steady rain that darkened the day and robbed it of its color. Driven by a west wind off the river, the cold mist that swept across the parking lot stung my cheeks and made my eyes water.

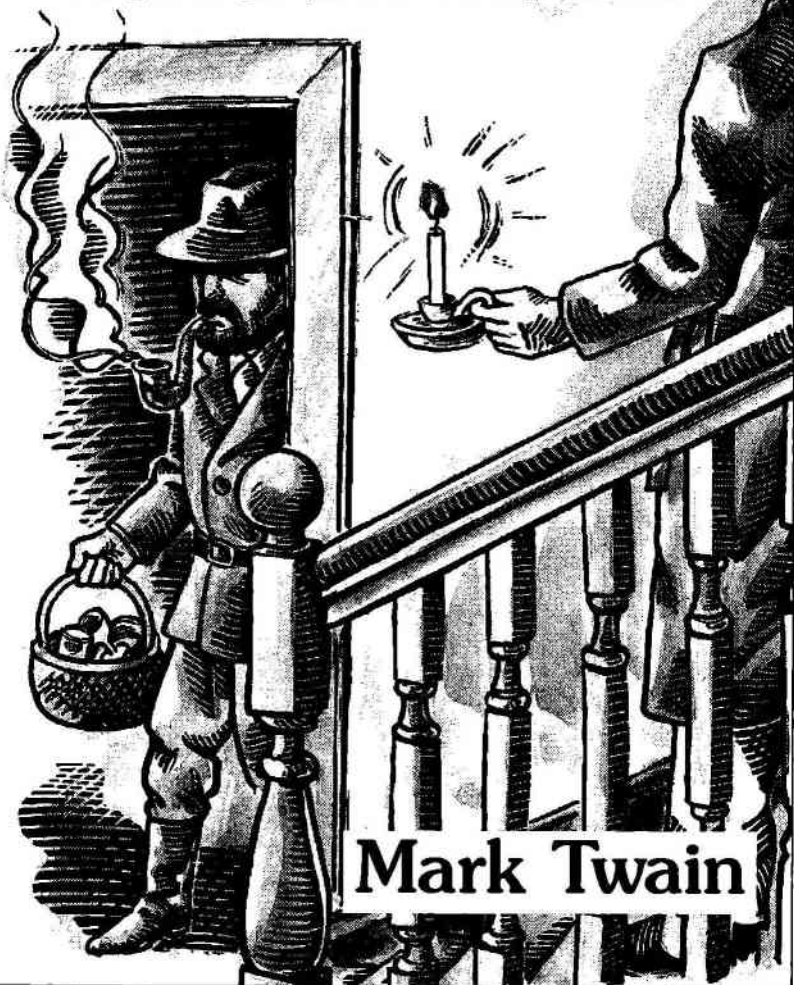
I guess you'd have to call it irony. I went digging for the truth for Angie and her brother, and what I found was an ugly little truth about myself—a truth I thought I'd buried in my mind five years ago. I hadn't quit that admiral's covert little group in the NIS because what they taught me to do so well had bothered me. I'd quit when I realized that it had not.

High out over the river, a lone gull, black against the gray sky, screeched and wheeled sharply into a gust and hung there screaming on the wind. I ducked my head, tucked my chin into my shoulder, and ran for the wagon.

I wished I'd mailed the bill and hadn't gone to see her. I wished I didn't feel the way I did about her. In my mind I saw again the horror on her face that night and shivered. I wished I'd worn a jacket.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE McWILLIAMSES AND THE BURGLAR ALARM



Mark Twain

The conversation drifted smoothly and pleasantly along from weather to crops, from crops to literature, from literature to scandal, from scandal to religion; then took a random jump and landed on the subject of burglar alarms. And now for the first time Mr. McWilliams showed feeling. Whenever I perceive this sign on this man's dial, I comprehend it, and lapse into silence, and give him opportunity to unload his heart. Said he, with but ill-controlled emotion:

I do not go one single cent on burglar alarms, Mr. Twain—not a single cent—and I will tell you why. When we were finishing our house, we found we had a little cash left over on account of the plumber not knowing it. I was for enlightening the heathen with it, for I was always unaccountably down on the heathen somehow, but Mrs. McWilliams said no, let's have a burglar alarm. I agreed to this compromise. I will explain that whenever I want a thing and Mrs. McWilliams wants another thing and we decide upon the thing that Mrs. McWilliams wants—as we always do—she calls that a compromise. Very well: the man came up from New York and put in the alarm and charged three hundred and twenty-five dollars for it and said we could sleep without uneasiness now. So we did for awhile—say a month. Then one night we smelled smoke, and I was advised to get up and see what the matter was. I lit a candle and started toward the stairs and met a burglar coming out of a room with a basket of tinware, which he had mistaken for solid silver in the dark. He was smoking a pipe. I said, "My friend, we do not allow smoking in this room." He said he was a stranger and could not be expected to know the rules of the house, said he had been in many houses just as good as this one and it had never been objected to before. He added that as far as his experience went, such rules had never been considered to apply to burglars anyway.

I said, "Smoke along then if it is the custom, though I think that the conceding of a privilege to a burglar which is denied to a bishop is a conspicuous sign of the looseness of the times. But waiving all that, what business have you to be entering this house in this furtive and clandestine way without ringing the burglar alarm?"

He looked confused and ashamed and said, with embarrassment, "I beg a thousand pardons. I did not know you had a burglar alarm, else I would have rung it. I beg you will not mention it where my parents may hear of it, for they are old and feeble and such a seemingly wanton breach of the hallowed conventionalities of our Christian civilization might all too rudely sunder the frail bridge which hangs darkling between the pale and evanescent present and the solemn great deeps of the eternities. May I trouble you for a match?"

I said, "Your sentiments do you honor, but if you will allow me to say it, metaphor is not your best hold. Spare your thigh; this kind light only

on the box, and seldom there, in fact, if my experience may be trusted. But to return to business: how did you get in here?"

"Through a second-story window."

It was even so. I redeemed the tinware at pawnbroker's rates less cost of advertising, bade the burglar goodnight, closed the window after him, and retired to headquarters to report. Next morning we sent for the burglar-alarm man, and he came up and explained that the reason the alarm did not "go off" was that no part of the house but the first floor was attached to the alarm. This was simply idiotic; one might as well have no armor on at all in battle as to have it only on his legs. The expert now put the whole second story on the alarm, charged three hundred dollars for it, and went his way. By and by one night I found a burglar in the third story, about to start down a ladder with a lot of miscellaneous property. My first impulse was to crack his head with a billiard cue, but my second was to refrain from this attention because he was between me and the cue rack. The second impulse was plainly the soundest, so I refrained and proceeded to compromise. I redeemed the property at former rates after deducting ten percent for use of ladder, it being my ladder, and next day we sent down for the expert once more and had the third story attached to the alarm for three hundred dollars.

By this time the "annunciator" had grown to formidable dimensions. It had forty-seven tags on it, marked with the names of the various rooms and chimneys, and it occupied the space of an ordinary wardrobe. The gong was the size of a washbowl and was placed above the head of our bed. There was a wire from the house to the coachman's quarters in the stable, and a noble gong alongside his pillow.

We should have been comfortable now but for one defect. Every morning at five the cook opened the kitchen door, in the way of business, and rip went that gong! The first time this happened I thought the last day was come sure. I didn't think it *in* bed—no, but out of it—for the first effect of that frightful gong is to hurl you across the house and slam you against the wall and then curl you up and squirm you like a spider on a stove lid till somebody shuts the kitchen door. In solid fact, there is no clamor that is even remotely comparable to the dire clamor which that gong makes. Well, this catastrophe happened every morning regularly at five o'clock and lost us three hours sleep, for, mind you, when that thing wakes you, it doesn't merely wake you in spots; it wakes you all over, conscience and all, and you are good for eighteen hours of wide-awakeness subsequently—eighteen hours of the very most inconceivable wide-awakeness that you ever experienced in your life. A stranger died on our hands one time, and we vacated and left him in our room overnight. Did that stranger wait for the general judgment? *No*, sir; he got up at five the next morning in the most prompt and unostentatious way. I knew he would; I knew it mighty well. He collected his life insur-

ance and lived happy ever after, for there was plenty of proof as to the perfect squareness of his death.

Well, we were gradually fading toward a better land on account of the daily loss of sleep so we finally had the expert up again and he ran a wire to the outside of the door and placed a switch there, whereby Thomas, the butler, always made one little mistake—he switched the alarm off at night when he went to bed and switched it on again at daybreak in the morning, just in time for the cook to open the kitchen door and enable that gong to slam us across the house, sometimes breaking a window with one or the other of us. At the end of a week we recognized that this switch business was a delusion and a snare. We also discovered that a band of burglars had been lodging in the house the whole time, not exactly to steal, for there wasn't much left now, but to hide from the police, for they were hot pressed and they shrewdly judged that the detectives would never think of a tribe of burglars taking sanctuary in a house notoriously protected by the most imposing and elaborate burglar alarm in America.

Sent down for the expert again, and this time he struck a most dazzling idea—he fixed the thing so that opening the kitchen door would take off the alarm. It was a noble idea, and he charged accordingly. But you already foresee the result. I switched on the alarm every night at bedtime, no longer trusting on Thomas's frail memory, and as soon as the lights were out, the burglars walked in at the kitchen door, thus taking the alarm off without waiting for the cook to do it in the morning. You see how aggravatingly we were situated. For months we couldn't have any company. Not a spare bed in the house; all occupied by burglars.

Finally I got up a cure of my own. The expert answered the call and ran another ground wire to the stable and established a switch there so that the coachman could put on and take off the alarm. That worked first-rate, and a season of peace ensued during which we got to inviting company once more and enjoying life.

But by and by the irrepressible alarm invented a new kink. One winter's night we were flung out of bed by the sudden music of that awful gong, and when we hobbled to the annunciator, turned up the gas, and saw the word NURSERY exposed, Mrs. McWilliams fainted dead away, and I came precious near doing the same thing myself. I seized my shotgun and stood timing the coachman whilst that appalling buzzing went on. I knew that his gong had flung him out, too, and that he would be along with his gun as soon as he could jump into his clothes. When I judged that the time was ripe, I crept to the room next the nursery, glanced through the window, and saw the dim outline of the coachman in the yard below, standing at present-arms and waiting for a chance. Then I hopped into the nursery and fired, and in the same instant the coachman fired at the red flash of my gun. Both of us were successful;

I crippled a nurse, and he shot off all my back hair. We turned up the gas and telephoned for a surgeon. There was not a sign of a burglar, and no window had been raised. One glass was absent, but that was where the coachman's charge had come through. Here was a fine mystery—a burglar alarm "going off" at midnight of its own accord, and not a burglar in the neighborhood!

The expert answered the usual call and explained that it was a "false alarm." Said it was easily fixed. So he overhauled the nursery window, charged a remunerative figure for it, and departed.

What we suffered from false alarms for the next three years no stylographic pen can describe. During the next three months I always flew with my gun to the room indicated, and the coachman always sallied forth with his battery to support me. But there was never anything to shoot at—windows all tight and secure. We always sent down for the expert next day, and he fixed those particular windows so they would keep quiet a week or so, and always remembered to send us a bill about like this:

Wire	\$2.15
Nipple75
Two hours' labor	1.50
Wax47
Tape34
Screws15
Recharging battery98
Three hours' labor	2.25
String02
Lard66*
Pond's Extract	1.25
Springs at 50	2.00
Railroad fares	7.25
	<u>\$19.77</u>

At length a perfectly natural thing came about—after we had answered three or four hundred false alarms, to wit, we stopped answering them. Yes, I simply rose up calmly when slammed across the house by the alarm, calmly inspected the annunciator, took note of the room indicated, and then calmly disconnected that room from the alarm and went back to bed as if nothing had happened. Moreover, I left that room off permanently and did not send for the expert. Well, it goes without saying that in the course of time *all* the rooms were taken off, and the entire machine was out of service.

It was at this unprotected time that the heaviest calamity of all happened. The burglars walked in one night and carried off the burglar alarm! yes, sir, every hide and hair of it: ripped it out, tooth and nail; springs, bells, gongs, battery, and all; they took a hundred and fifty miles

of copper wire; they just cleaned her out, bag and baggage, and never left us a vestige of her to swear at—swear by, I mean.

We had a time of it to get her back, but we accomplished it finally, for money. The alarm firm said that what we needed now was to have her put in right—with their new patent springs in the windows to make false alarms impossible, and their new patent clock attached to take off and put on the alarm morning and night without human assistance. That seemed a good scheme. They promised to have the whole thing finished in ten days. They began work, and we left for the summer. They worked a couple of days; then *they* left for the summer. After which the burglars moved in and began *their* summer vacation. When we returned in the fall, the house was as empty as a beer closet in premises where painters have been at work. We refurnished, and then sent down to hurry up the expert. He came up and finished the job, and said, "Now this clock is set to put on the alarm every night at ten and take it off every morning at five forty-five. All you've got to do is to wind her up every week and then leave her alone—she will take care of the alarm herself."

After that we had a most tranquil season during three months. The bill was prodigious, of course, and I had said I would not pay it until the new machinery had proved itself to be flawless. The time stipulated was three months. So I paid the bill, and the very next day the alarm went to buzzing like ten thousand bee swarms at ten o'clock in the morning. I turned the hands around twelve hours according to instructions and this took off the alarm, but there was another hitch at night, and I had to set her ahead twelve hours once more to get her to put the alarm on again. That sort of nonsense went on a week or two; then the expert came up and put in a new clock. He came up every three months during the next three years and put in a new clock. But it was always a failure. His clocks all had the same perverse defect: they would put the alarm on in the daytime, and they would *not* put it on at night, and if you forced it on yourself, they *would* take it off again the minute your back was turned.

Now, there is the history of that burglar alarm—everything just as it happened, nothing extenuated, and naught set down in malice. Yes, sir—and when I had slept nine years with burglars, and maintained an expensive burglar alarm the whole time for their protection, not mine, and at my sole cost, for not a d—d cent could I ever get *them* to contribute, I just said to Mrs. McWilliams that I had had enough of that kind of pie, so with her full consent I took the whole thing out and traded it off for a dog, and shot the dog. I don't know what *you* think about it, Mr. Twain, but I think those things are made solely in the interest of the burglars. Yes, sir, a burglar alarm combines in its person all that is objectionable about a fire, a riot, and a harem, and at the same time has none of the compensating advantages, of one sort or another, that customarily belong with that combination. Goodbye: I get off here. □

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



There probably isn't a mystery lover alive who requires this reviewer's opinion before picking up the latest Tony Hillerman—but hey! I love him, too. The latest partnership between the retired and legendary Joe Leaphorn and the intense and younger Jim Chee is **Hunting Badger** (HarperCollins, \$26), which Hillerman tells us in the foreword was inspired by an actual 1998 manhunt in Leaphorn and Chee's back yards. The novel opens with a well-timed, well-planned assault on a tribal casino. One officer is dead, one left seriously injured, and the casino's take for the night has disappeared into the desert. It's no surprise that this latest novel boasts a neat conundrum with a clue in a Paiute legend. In addition there are strong performances by our two favorite Navajo tribal policemen, the women in their lives, their cop cronies, several FBI walk-ons, and a score or more of colorful locals who live and work in the territory familiar to Hillerman fans, the area the author refers to as "empty country." Thankfully, the author's empty country has proved crowded with stories, and no one tells them better than Tony Hillerman.

Looking for a fresh ticket to Great Britain... and you wouldn't object to traveling back in time a bit? I suggest you pick up Sally Wright's **Pride and Predator** (Ballantine, \$5.99). There's lots to enjoy along this trip. Ben Reese is smart and obliging, with the means and manners of an academic—the ideal tour guide for Wright's rural Scotland, lovingly encompassed in grand descriptions of sea and moor, castles, cottages and quaint villages. The story begins when a solitary young minister opens his picnic hamper on a seaside knoll, reaches in for a sandwich, and is killed almost instantaneously. A tragic accident... or perhaps not. Wright's novel boasts a List of Characters and even a map! What more could an Anglo-bibliophile want?

R. D. Zimmerman, an Edgar nominee and Lambda Literary Award winner, continues his Todd Mills series with **Innuendo** (Delacorte, \$21.95). Todd is a Minneapolis TV reporter publicly known to be gay.

When he's assigned to follow the story of a young murdered gay male, his research unearths a secret that threatens to shatter the trust he's built with his lover, a homicide cop. At the same time, Todd is selected to interview a popular movie idol who's in town making a movie that will star him in a gay role. It hasn't been that long since the actor was "outed" in a tabloid by a man alleging to have been a longtime lover. The tabloid lost a huge lawsuit brought by the actor, but the rumors persist, even after his marriage to a beautiful actress and the birth of their son. Todd may be the only reporter who can learn the truth, yet truth is definitely a two-edged sword, one that can prove deadly. Zimmerman ties these two watershed events in Todd's life together in an emotional suspense story with a heart-pounding surprise ending.

Edgar winner Steve Hamilton's latest novel in paperback, **A Cold Day in Paradise** (St. Martin's, \$5.99), centers around Detroit ex-cop Alex McKnight, who caught a bullet on duty and was mustered out on disability pay more than a decade before he begins to relate this story. McKnight now lives alone in the small community of Paradise along the shores of Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and this starkly beautiful and dangerous winter backdrop is a strong element in the novel. It must share credit, however, with a string of memorable eccentrics, a twisted noir tale, and McKnight's irresistible narration. In addition to the usual denizens of a P.I. novel—the shifty lawyer, the eccentric millionaire, the beautiful, seductive dame—Hamilton brings his own surprises to the party. If you like strong private eye tales, don't miss this one.

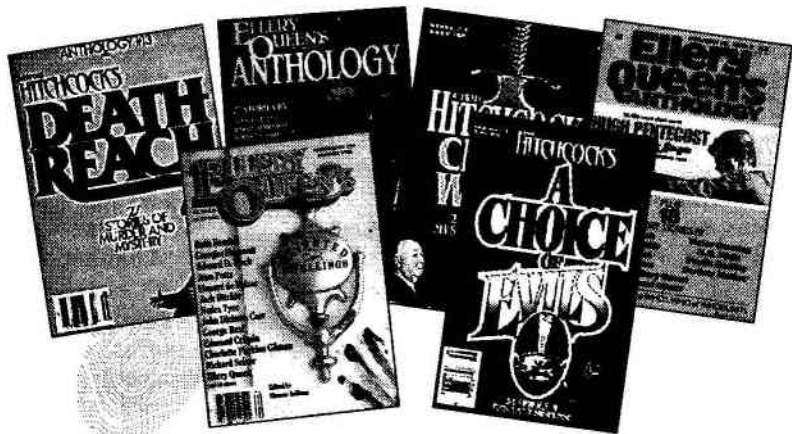
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8:00	Ike and Flora Entabbi	San Diego	250,000	liar
9:00	Moe and Gigi Abruzzi	Queens	450,000	truthful
10:00	Karl and Alexia Donatello	Utica	300,000	liar
11:00	Hal and Elena Balucci	Phila.	500,000	truthful
12:00	Joe and Candice Fanchetti	Reno	400,000	truthful

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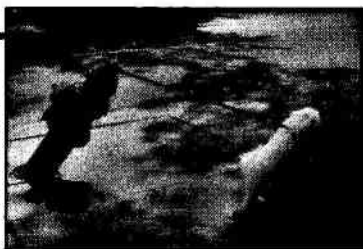
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THE STORY THAT WON

The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Greg Matejek of Belle Mead, New Jersey. Honorable mentions go to Kevin N. Haw of Fullerton, California; Jeremy Yoder of Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Brian Spencer of Aptos, California; Richard L. Williamson of Hayward, Califor-



nia; Elizabeth McEntee of Manassas, Virginia; Ila Winslow of Portland, Oregon; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; B. Jackson of El Cajon, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Patrick Godin of Port Royal, Virginia; and M. Lily Welsh of Oakton, Virginia.

Craig Ferman Pictures

GO, POOCHIE, GO by Greg Matejek

"Hey, Ronnie, whatcha doin' hangin' out here?"

"Yo, Al, get a load of that mutt tied to the hydrant. Some guy left him there while he went into the bank. The dog's been yankin' on the rope trying to get loose. He's been pullin' so hard he's pullin' the plug right outa the sidewalk. Watch 'im."

Al joins Ronnie on the stoop, watching the small poodle. The more the dog pulls on the leash, the farther the hydrant tilts over. Their cheering for the dog attracts other passersby, who join in.

"Go, poochie, go," the crowd chants, urging the dog on. The louder the crowd chants, the harder the dog pulls. Just as the dog succeeds in pulling over the hydrant, an alarm goes off at the bank. Everyone's attention turns to the entrance as a man carrying a gun runs out.

An hour later, Detective Short shakes his head in disbelief as Al and Ronnie conclude their statement.

"So just as the pooch pulls over the hydrant, bells go off and this guy comes runnin' out of the bank. He runs smack into the water, then wham, he's flat on his back. People are screaming and running around like maniacs picking up the loot scattered on the sidewalk. Al and I just sit there laughing our tails off, and in the middle of it all lies 'Jesse James,' out cold with the little mutt standing over 'im, licking his face."

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SKIN CARE UPDATE

The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

by Melinda Walthington



It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like

groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters. Although men are not immune to spider veins, they are overwhelmingly a female problem. Unlike large, bulging varicose veins that can cause pain and even lead to serious health problems, spider veins are primarily a cosmetic problem.

Not even proper diet and exercise are guaranteed to prevent unsightly spider veins. They tend to be hereditary, and worsen as we age. Aside from changing the way you dress, using concealing makeup or resorting to expensive treatments, there has been little you could do to get rid of spider veins—until now!

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Going...



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