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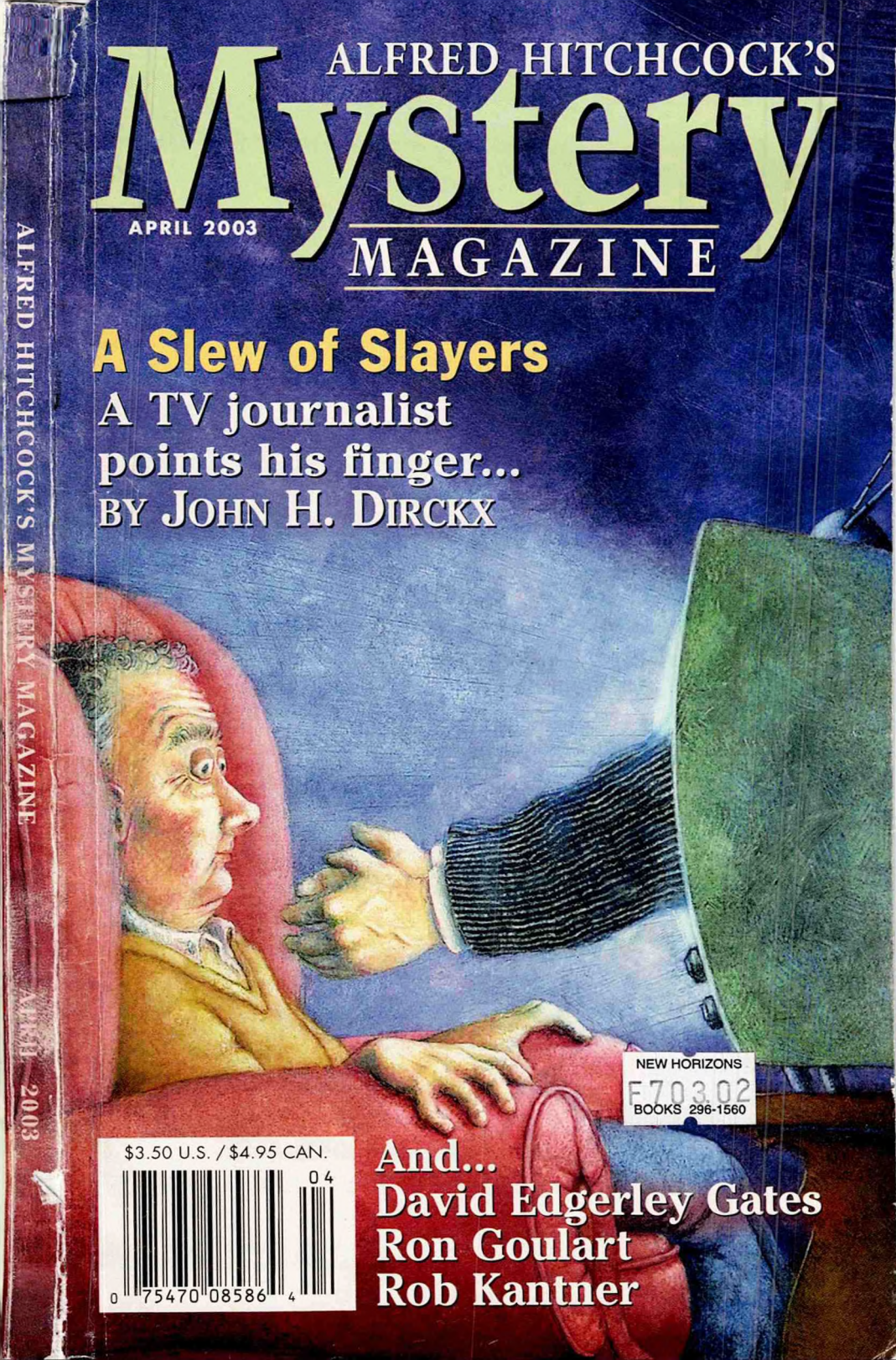
Mystery
MAGAZINE
APRIL 2003

A Slew of Slayers
A TV journalist points his finger...
BY JOHN H. DIRCKX



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EDITOR'S NOTES

Linda Landrigan

A cryptic puzzle yields clues, not to an answer in a grid but to a crime, in Peter Godfrey's "The Angel of Death," an atmospheric tale of a murder on the docks that is our Mystery Classic this month.

We found this puzzle mystery in a new collection of the author's stories called *The Newtonian Egg and Other Cases of Rolf le Roux* published by Crippen & Landru as part of their Lost Classics Series. Peter Godfrey (1917–1992) was a journalist and writer and was outspoken against apartheid in South Africa before emigrating to England in the early sixties. His character Rolf "Oom" le Roux is a lawyer and advisor to his nephew, Lieutenant Joubert of Johannesburg. "The Angel of Death" was originally published in South Africa in the 1950's, but the exact date of publication is not known.

There's also a little wordplay in John H. Dirckx's story "A Slew of Slayers" about the death of a nursing home patient who'd been publicly accused of being a mass murderer. What sets this series apart is the author's attention to police procedure. A medical doctor in addition to being a prolific short story writer, Dr. Dirckx tells us, "I am a careful student of police procedure, constitutional law, and forensic science. The kind of reader I'm writing for deserves that."

He is also a fan of R. Austin Freeman's scientific detective, Dr. Thorndyke, and has written several of his own Thorndyke pastiches, including his first story for AHMM, "A Bully's Downfall" (July 1978).

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DEATH IN AN OLIVE GROVE

Marianne Wilski Strong

Euripides entered plays again this year in the spring festival to Dionysus. Some of the audience were shocked at the playwright's criticism of Athens today: greed-ridden, pride-ridden; killing fellow Greek men, enslaving women and children.

I was not shocked. In the years of war since Pericles' death, I have had my heart chilled by the greed and violence of men: violence, watered by cynicism and disorder, producing ever more violence.

As I look back now, I see that it was in the years before the war that the violence and fear took root. It was such violence and fear that killed poor greedy Alcaeus, a household accountant to the wealthy Thucides.

I don't believe Alcaeus ever saw the violence approaching him that moonlit night as he knelt digging in Thucides' olive grove in the valley of the Cephissus River, north of Athens. I don't believe he saw the stout cudgel that came crashing down on his skull or even felt his limp body being dragged away. He never knew who killed him or why.

But when Aspasia asked me to investigate, so many years ago, I had to imagine how Alcaeus died. I thought then that in the moment that the cudgel hit him, he might have understood the danger of that olive grove in which he dug and might have lost consciousness in a blinding white sense of the presence of the gods.

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

As I sit writing by the flickering light of my brazier in these hard, fearful days of war with Sparta, I can still imagine Alcaeus' last moments.

Alcaeus stood at the edge of the olive grove. The moon hung low in the sky, shedding enough light through the trees to guide his way and stretching the shadows of the trees enough to give him cover. He thanked the moon goddess, then mumbled a little prayer to Hermes. After all, Hermes was the god of thieves, wasn't he? But Alcaeus doubted he would need the help of the gods tonight. He knew where to look for what he wanted. He'd often watched the activity in this grove of olive trees and barley when he worked for Thucides, and he'd suspected for some time what was going on. But opportunity had presented itself only two days ago when he'd talked with Menes, who still occasionally taught Thucides' children philosophy and poetry. According to Menes, Thucides would be attending a symposium this evening. Alcaeus smiled. The timing was perfect. With the barley already harvested and threshed and the olive blossoms just beginning to turn to fruit, the grove would be deserted and quiet. And as long as someone else was providing the wine, Thucides would drink like a Spartan—too much wine and none of it watered down. By the time he staggered home, the deed would be done.

Alcaeus shifted his tunic, wiggled his feet deeper into his sandals, adjusted the shovel over his shoulder, and stepped away from the shadow of the plane tree under which he stood. He headed straight for a row of olive trees near the river.

His toe hit some rocks and he stumbled, cursing. He should have remembered this line of broken rock that ran alongside the olive grove, a line of rock stingy Thucides had been too cheap to have removed.

He bit his tongue, angry now at having cursed aloud. He stepped into the shade of a gnarled, thick-trunked olive tree, dropped to his knees, crept under the low branches, and looked around.

In the coolness of the early summer night, nothing disturbed the peace of the silver-green olive grove. Nothing, Alcaeus thought, except himself, and that was just fine.

He stood up, stepped out into the moonlight, and breathed in the sweet fragrance of the white olive blossoms that mingled with the musty smell of the threshed stalks of barley lying beneath the trees. He imagined the soft touch of the expensive *hetaera* and the rich taste of the expensive wine he would soon be able to afford. He was enjoying himself.

But just as he approached the row of olive trees he wanted, he thought he'd heard something, maybe the sound of a few rocks disturbed by a foot. He turned, crouched, and looked around. Nothing.

He waited, peering through the rows of trees. Nothing. He heard crickets, an occasional hoot of an owl, a slight whistling of the wind through the thick olive tree leaves, but little else.

He decided that he was indeed alone and turned again toward the olive trees where he intended to dig.

Between the second and third olive trees in the fourth row from the river, he stopped and lowered his shovel. The threshed barley stalks lay in a thin layer, arranged here by human hands. This was the spot.

He picked up his shovel, rolled his shoulders to ready them for the dig, then dropped to his knees from the blow that struck the back of his head.

Bands of red, purple, and white flashed in his head. Alcaeus groaned in pain and fear. Zeus had surely struck him, hurling a thunderbolt at his head.

Alcaeus had no more time to think. A second blow fell on his head and he slumped forward. From the blackness that had overtaken him, he awoke momentarily. He felt something cold and wet on his face. He breathed, choked, tried to raise his head, and breathed and choked again. Pain shot through his lungs. He let the wet smothering darkness take him.

It was the next day that Aspasia summoned me to the home she shared with Pericles. As usual, she had instructed a servant to bring me upstairs to her quarters, unafraid of gossip about receiving a man. I went up, knowing that Pericles trusted me, even though he probably knew that I was in love with Aspasia. How could he not know? Half the Athenian men were in love with her. The other half feared and hated her independence and brilliance that challenged their time-bound view of women.

I caught my breath when I saw Aspasia. She wore a chiton dyed the delicate purple of murex shells. Round her throat glistened a simple gold necklace, bright against a dark curl of hair resting on her shoulder.

I forced myself to recall Socrates' advice to keep one's head clear and one's loyalty to friends intact always. I would do nothing to hurt Pericles, as much because Aspasia would not give me opportunity than from my own decency.

I accepted the wine and water Aspasia poured for me, bit into the goat cheese sweetened with honey, and listened carefully as she told me of the murder of Alcaeus and the laborers' discovery of his body lying in Thucides' olive grove, his head in the river, his trunk on land with some dirt thrown on it, as if someone had tried to bury him and had given up the task.

"Pericles needs your help, Kleides," she said.

I nodded, then looked at her quizzically. "But if I am to investigate rationally, I must know whatever there is to know. You will tell me what interest Pericles has in the case?"

"Of course. We both trust you." A little smile played about her lovely full lips and I wondered if she had several references in mind. "We fear that our nephew might be involved."

I nodded again, not surprised at all. Alcibiades was handsome and bright, but a wild youth, possessing none of his uncle's grace and even temper and even less of his uncle's pride in Athenian democracy. He was also prone to much drinking and womanizing. "Have you reason, outside of his reputation, to suspect him?" I asked.

Aspasia sighed and nodded. "He came home late last night, drunk and babbling of olive groves and women. He is most indiscreet. His appetites rule him."

Aspasia, as her enemies asserted, did not disapprove of sex or drink, but she did heartily disapprove of indiscretion and excess.

"And if indeed Alcibiades was involved?"

"Need you ask, Kleides," she said, disappointment just touching her features.

"No, no," I hastened to say. "It was stupid of me." Pericles would, regretfully but nobly, refuse to protect even a nephew who had murdered, no matter what the degree of drunken stupor.

Aspasia shook her head and waved a hand gracefully. "Unnecessary, yes, but stupid? You, Kleides? Never."

I basked in the compliment, wondering how to get her to admire my body, rather toned from workouts at the gymnasium, as much as she admired my mind.

I was still reasonably young in those days, though it took more and more effort to keep my body as close to an Olympian ideal as possible. Now, it is not possible. Old age oozes from my body like amber from pine trees.

I left with Pericles' authority and an ample supply of drachmae, to be used only if necessary, to bribe those whose lips were reluctant to move. I had to find out first what Alcaeus had been doing in that olive grove in the Cephissus River Valley at night, then talk to any suspects, leaving Alcibiades for last. He was, after all, of a noble family, but more importantly, he would likely be the most clever of any suspects and the more I knew before I confronted him the better.

I started at the agora. Anything and everything is available in our marketplace for the right price: bread, fish, olive oil, perfume bottles, tanned hides, slaves, musicians, girls, statues, Corinthian vases (inferior in my judgment to our Athenian red-figured vases).

I stopped at a potter's and looked at a vase with a picture of a *hetaera* and her lover in an interesting position.

I tore myself away without spending even a half obol and went to the barbershop of Tysander for a somewhat badly needed haircut and some very badly needed gossip. Tysander provided the names of some of Alcaeus' friends and their likely whereabouts and gave me the exact location of Thucides' olive grove.

I returned home to put on a rather worn tunic, having discovered some years ago that the poor will talk more freely if I seem to be one of them,

an impression not too deceptive since I am well enough off but hardly wealthy. I reserve my clean tunic for questioning people of wealth and authority and for visiting my mistress, Selkine, who bears a resemblance to Aspasia. I prefer the original to the imitation, an attitude most unjust to Selkine, but then Selkine knows this and charges me accordingly. I pay what she asks. It eases my conscience.

Having changed, I sought out Menes, the tutor of Thucides' children. He lived in a small house, just above the level of a hovel, but I could see that he had managed to acquire some of the greatest riches of our city: he had several papyrus manuscripts on a table, and likely more stored in the wooden chest in the corner of the single room in which he lived.

When I knocked and stuck my head in his doorway, he looked up inquiringly and rather angrily from what appeared to be a manuscript of Hesiod.

I explained that I had been asked by the authorities to discover who had murdered Alcaeus, if I could.

He had heard of his friend's death and nodded his willingness to help, but to his credit he offered no lugubrious sentiments.

I wasted no time snaking my way into what I wanted to know. I asked directly if he knew why Alcaeus had been in Thucides' olive grove.

"Yes," he said simply, looking me straight in the eye.

"Because?" I encouraged.

"You understand," he said, "that Alcaeus was my friend. He was intelligent enough, and he could be generous when he chose to be. But he was . . ." Menes paused, searching for the right word. "He was unsatisfied and that made him careless."

An odd choice of words, I thought to myself. "Careless of what?"

"Danger."

"He was in danger?"

"Grave danger. Two needs make one careless of danger, the need for love and the need for money. With Alcaeus, it was the latter."

"Are you saying that he was after money when he went into the olive grove?" I asked.

"Yes. He had this idea that Thucides had buried something of value there. Alcaeus thought to find it. And so he ignored the danger."

"Danger from whom?" I asked.

"From . . ." Menes paused again. "From the nature of things."

Hades take all damn philosophers and poets, I thought, always pondering the imponderable. Then I remembered Homer, Pindar, and the greatest of them all—after Homer, of course—Sappho. I took back my curse and focused on Menes. "Danger from whom, Menes," I asked. "Give me facts, not philosophy."

I could almost hear him sneer "sophist," but he kept his contempt in check. "I cannot give a name to the danger. I can tell you only that I warned Alcaeus that the olive grove held danger. I had sensed it."

"How?" I asked.

He shook his shaggy head. "I worked for Thucides for many years. I could sense it."

"How?" I repeated, my sophist's mind looking for some rational basis for Menes' assertion.

"I cannot say exactly."

I sighed. "I see that I must go up to the Cephissus Valley to see for myself what Alcaeus was after."

Menes looked sharply at me. "Believe me. There is danger there."

I shrugged. "If the value is great enough, it may be worth the danger," I said, watching Menes closely. But Menes, pulling his manuscript closely to himself, showed no interest.

"Do you think Thucides killed Alcaeus?" I asked.

He looked down at his manuscript. "You must decide that."

I knew that I would get no more out of this bookish philosopher. He was already running his finger over some lines of Hesiod. I saw that it was *Works and Days:*

> . . . for men did not refrain
> from violence against each other,
> nor would they give due honor to
> the gods, nor make proper sacrifice
> at sacred places of the gods.

It was a passage about the violence and profanity of the second generation of humans, the corrupt silver generation. They had come to a bad end at Zeus' command.

I headed for Thucides' city residence, stopping first at my own place to change my tunic. Menes would no doubt disapprove of my luxurious linen tunic, but after all, Pythagorus used to wear a gold coronet and a white robe, and my good tunic was about my only extravagance outside of Selkine and an occasional bottle of Chian wine.

Thucides' house was a thousand levels above Menes' hovel. His olive groves were apparently very productive. While I waited for a servant to fetch Thucides, I stroked the white marble basin that held cool water, settled my backside more comfortably on the pillow over the plaited leather of my chair, and wondered if I could con Thucides into serving me some Chian wine.

I couldn't, even after I'd strongly implied that the Prytany, our government executive committee, was interested in my investigating the murder of Alcaeus. The Prytany had zero interest, of course, but I figured mentioning Pericles to this non-democratic aristocrat would do little good, and mentioning Aspasia to him seemed like offering flowers to Polyphemus, the Cyclops.

Thucides was about as barbaric as Polyphemus. He looked me over rudely, as if he were considering, as the Cyclops did Odysseus' men,

whether or not I would be tasty enough for a few meals. Like the Cyclops, Thucides had only one eye. He'd lost the left one and in its place had a mass of reddish tissue, lumpy and thick. The mass of tissue made a round disk in his round fleshy face.

His voice was gravelly. "How in the name of Zeus am I to know what that smelly cistern of an accountant was doing in my olive grove? I got rid of the son of a centaur a good while ago."

"Did you suspect him of fleecing you of money?" I asked.

"I suspected him of everything. Whoever bashed his head in did me a favor, and I hope the basher does the same to anybody else crawling around my olive grove." Thucides' stare made the statement unmistakably a warning. "Anything else you want to know?" he asked.

"I suppose you were here in Athens the night Alcaeus was murdered?"

Thucides gave me a look with his one eye that if it had been a bronze spear could have made a hole in my chest three inches across. "Yes, I was," he said, "and that's all I'm going to tell you. Get your ass off that pillow and out of this house or I'll break your face in five places."

My linen tunic hadn't done a bit of good. I did as he said. But I turned back at the door and tossed out a question. "Who put your eye out?" I left out the word "ugly," which Odysseus had used to the Cyclops. After all, I had no way of knowing if the eye had been ugly or not.

Thucides looked startled, as if no one had dared mention the eye before. "A swine Persian," he said.

So, I thought as I left the house, Thucides had fought in the Persian Wars. That gave me an idea. I'd have to go over to the agora again and stop at the Bouleterion. I had a friend who worked in the house of official documents. I knew that there existed no documents on a man's war records, property holdings, or degree of wealth, but Philites had worked at the Bouleterion for so long, filing away scrolls and recording assembly decisions, that his head was a repository of genealogy, jury decisions, tax assessments, and fines.

But first, I decided to take a walk out to the olive grove. I didn't believe in Menes' or anybody's ability to sense evil. You saw it or you didn't. But I wanted to see where Alcaeus had died. I might learn something; I might not.

I headed north, glancing at the sun. I figured I had enough daylight to walk the distance and back, with an hour or so for snooping about.

Flanked between two mountains, Thucides' olive grove ran gracefully down a valley to the Cephissus River. Under a deep blue sky, the river's shallow waters gleamed through the slender leaves of the olive trees. It was a spot for the gods. The olive trees, full and healthy, would bring in a very tidy sum of money by winter's harvest.

I could see that the number and fullness of the trees would allow an intruder, particularly at night, to sidle easily in and out of the rows, as he followed another intruder with the intent of bashing in his head.

I started into the grove searching for signs of recent digging that had been filled in. I kept my eyes intently on the ground. I shouldn't have. Had I not, I might have heard a rustle or a snap of a twig that would have warned me.

I moved forward methodically, weaving from one side of the grove to the other. At the left end of one of the rows, I stopped to breathe in the fragrant aroma of the young white olive blossoms, then I stepped outside of the grove to look at the waters of the Cephissus again. My left foot landed on something hard that dug into the worn leather sole of my sandal. I shifted my weight to my right foot and promptly stubbed my toe against another rock.

I reached down to soothe my throbbing toe, damning Thucides for not clearing his grove better. My eyes picked up the line of rocks and followed it, with gaps here and there, down the slope of the grove.

Thucides would have had no reason to remove the rocks, for they lay close to where the flanking mountains began a long slope upwards. Here the thinner soil would not have produced healthy olive trees.

I was about to turn back into the grove when I took another look at the rocks. They seemed unduly evenly spaced, even accounting for the gaps, as if they had been placed there for some purpose by human hands. I felt suddenly chilled and wondered if there might be something to Menes' sense of evil after all. There was something about the grove, indeed. But I couldn't make the vague feeling take rational form. I drew my faculties back into line and reentered the grove.

About four rows up from the river, I stopped. Seeing the barley stalks disturbed by something dragged from this point to the river, I stooped to examine what appeared to be dried blood on a thin layer of barley stalks. I pushed the stalks apart to reveal freshly turned soil in a patch about six footlengths long and four wide. I ran my hand through the soil, looking for I didn't know what. I found nothing and had shifted to the left for another look when the blow came.

I saw an explosion of stars, then toppled forward onto the dirt. The stars continued to twinkle and glow, the right side of my head and my right ear throbbed, and some corner of my mind kept saying, "He missed; get up, you idiot, before he hits again."

I managed to get up on all fours and swing my head to the left again. A soft purple-black curtain began to descend over my eyes. I waited for another blow. It didn't come. I managed to shift again and lift my head. I saw a one-eyed monster move into the line of what vision I had left. The purple curtain came down again.

When I came to, Thucides had gone. I struggled to sit up and lean against a tree. Tenderly, I touched the right side of my head. It didn't hurt too badly. Apparently my ear had kindly taken the force of the blow. It felt rather larger than I remembered it being.

With the help of the olive tree, I got up, waited until the olive grove

stopped swaying, then made my way back to the path outside the grove, staggering a little now and then.

By the time I reached the outskirts of Athens, later than I hoped because I was forced to stop periodically to let my head clear, I was having a hard time hearing the swallows fluttering about. I decided to head for the family house I had inherited where my half brother lived.

Lamicus and his wife Cleodice took me in. Cleodice fussed and gave orders to her children to get water and some cloth for bandages, and Lamicus muttered about my always looking for trouble, but rushed to get me a glass of wine, our Greek cure-all for most bodily aches.

Their son, little Lamides, wanted to know what kind of trouble Uncle Kleides had gotten into this time and came over to peer at my ear.

"Ouuuu," he pronounced, "that's really ugly. Does it hurt?"

I assured him it did and before Cleodice shooed him away promised I'd let him touch the ear tomorrow.

Lamicus helped me to a bed, Cleodice covered me with soft linen, and I promptly fell asleep.

The next morning, while eating some of Cleodice's poppy seed bread with honey, I told Lamicus about the case, minus Pericles' fears of Alcibiades' involvement. Lamicus, as usual, frowned his disapproval of my interest in crime. Lamicus had been born in Syracuse from a Syracusan mother and so was a *metic*, not a full citizen of Athens. Pericles had welcomed any foreigners who proved themselves useful. My half brother was a capable trading and shipping merchant. Like most *metics*, Lamicus kept himself prosperous and out of trouble. But as usual, his curiosity overcame his moral and fraternal objections. This time he provided me with more than just another mind on which to test ideas.

"You saw Thucides as you came to, eh?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

I assured him that I hadn't been groggy enough to imagine or mistake that one-eyed round face.

Lamicus frowned. "He's more likely to curse and land a fist on anybody fooling about in his olive grove than to strike and sneak away. He's very direct."

"I know," I said, remembering his reaction to my questions, "but it was him I saw."

"How did he know you were up there?" Lamicus asked.

I thought a minute. "I asked at Tysander's barbershop where the grove was. I suppose somebody might have told Thucides I was asking, though, of course, it might have been coincidence that he came up when I was there."

Lamicus looked at me skeptically. He knew I wasn't much of a believer in coincidence. "Tysander's shop, you say?"

I nodded.

"Then there's another possibility, as you would know if you got your hair trimmed as often as you should."

Lamicus kept himself well-turned out and disapproved of my often forgetting proper grooming, feeling this neglect was the result of bad company, namely Socrates.

"Cleon, the merchant who ships Thucides' olive oil to Egypt and elsewhere," Lamicus continued, "frequents Tysander's place. He might have heard about your interest from Tysander."

"And told Thucides? Why would he?"

Lamicus frowned. "Well, Cleon's not too fond of Thucides, that's true. He complains that Thucides doesn't pay him enough for the shipping, even though Thucides, despite the loss of a good harvest crop two years ago, has more money than anyone knows."

"Oh," I said, remembering my suspicion about Thucides' wealth when he said he had fought in the Persian Wars. "How much money?"

Lamicus shrugged. "How do I know? Anyway, that might just be Cleon talking. But consider that . . ." He stopped. The bedroom door had opened. Lamicus turned and pushed little Lamides' head back out the door, a task made easier by my promise to Lamides that he could come and see "the ugly ear" as soon as his father and I had finished our talk.

"So? Consider what?" I encouraged Lamicus.

"Well, Cleon would have reason to be quite upset with anyone who might be involved in any damage to that grove. Shipping Thucides' olive oil is very lucrative for Cleon, despite his complaints about Thucides. That olive oil is top quality and in high demand."

"I see," I said. But what interested me wasn't Lamicus' suspicions of Cleon; it was Cleon's suspicions about Thucides' being wealthier than anyone knew.

I spent the next hour assuring Cleodice that I felt much better and assuring little Lamides that the ear still hurt, then made my escape from my loving relatives. I wanted to get over to the Bouleterion to talk to Philites as soon as possible.

I headed for Athens, thankful that I could hear the birds. Going deaf, even if only in one ear, isn't an asset for a sophist earning a living by making speeches in the courts.

I entered the city through the Sacred Gate at the Ceramicus district, past the great city drain, and made my way up the dromos and to the agora. I deliberately avoided the street of the blacksmiths and the forgers, not wanting to subject my ear to the ringing of hammers, choosing instead to subject my nose to the sharp smell of the leather tanners' vats of astringent tannin. Just past the tanners, I stopped short, surprised to see Thucides outside a carpenter shop. His presence struck me as brazen, given his putative attempt at murdering me.

I looked about to make sure there were a few burly Scythian police in sight for possible help, my physical prowess not being quite as well

tuned as my mental prowess, then approached Thucides, ready to make a run toward the Scythians if necessary.

I stopped about three feet from Thucides. "Shopping for a new bludgeon?" I asked brightly.

Thucides turned his head and stared with his one eye for a moment. "So you're all right, I take it," he said.

"Disappointed?" I asked.

Thucides swung his big shoulders to face me and I took a step back, wondering if I should have been a bit more diplomatic.

"What are you talking about?" Thucides asked.

"Well," I said, "I was hoping you could tell me. I came to in your olive grove and . . ." I stopped, swallowed my unreasoning anger, and opted for a question phrased to solicit information rather than a fist in my face. "I saw someone move into my line of vision before I passed out. I thought it was you. Were you aware of anyone else in your grove yesterday afternoon? Besides me, of course."

"I was in my grove. You did see me," Thucides answered immediately. "I came up from the path by the river and saw you on all fours. I came over to kick you, but you passed out. So I went for help to get your carcass out of my grove. By the time I returned with a servant, you'd gone. I don't know who knocked your head about, but consider yourself lucky. Once I got you out of my grove, I intended to break your block of a nose into five pieces."

I put aside the insult to my straight prominent nose which I consider one of my better features and spoke directly. "Thucides, one man has already been murdered in your grove. It is in your interest to help clear up the matter. Did you see anyone else in the grove?"

"No. Unfortunately, I must have scared off whoever tried to bash you." He jabbed a finger into my chest. "And I didn't kill Alcaeus, but I'll kill the next man who comes into that grove. Remember that, you stinking sophist."

He stalked off. The carpenter's wide-open eyes bounced from Thucides' retreating back to me. He blinked a few times and withdrew into his stall.

Thucides' unguarded threats might have meant either that he was innocent or just putting on a good act. They convinced me for certain that he was innocent of murder but very guilty of hiding something in that grove. I headed for the Bouleterion.

Just ahead, I spotted Alcibiades strutting about, the gold and purple edging of his cloak draped gracefully over one arm. As usual, Pericles' handsome nephew was surrounded by admiring young friends, their raucous laughter giving testimony to Alcibiades' wit operating in its top form. He made an obscene gesture toward the herms behind me just at the entrance to the agora.

I found the gesture offensive, despite my own disbelief in the gods.

At the time of my investigation of Alcaeus' murder, I did not recognize the gesture as a sign of the cynicism to overcome Athens, the cynicism for which I fear Athens' pride and my own sophistic skepticism bear some guilt. But the gesture disturbed my thoughts, tantalizing me with some half-remembered sight at the olive grove and probing like some blind man's staff, tapping the earth before him in search of some familiar rock to guide his way.

Half distracted from my mission, I slowly made my way to the Bouleterion and asked for Philites. While I waited for him to come from the corner where he usually sat in the light of his oil brazier checking scrolls for filing, I leaned against a column and looked at the statue of the mother of the gods. The statue, the olive grove, the gesture of Alcibiades chased each other in my mind like the waters of a whirlpool. Then I remembered tripping over the rocks in the olive grove, and the waters of the whirlpool slowed a little.

Philites came and interrupted my thoughts. My old friend looked even more stooped than when I had last seen him, his hair and face grayer, and I wondered if his job was becoming too much for him. But I saw that his eyes were still a light, bright blue, like the sky on an early spring morning.

After we'd exchanged a few comments on the latest plays of Sophocles, I got down to business. I told Philites about the case, telling him with complete confidence in his discretion of Pericles' interest in it, and asked about Thucides' wealth.

Philites smiled his knowing smile. "He pays enough tax from his olive exports to sponsor pyrrhic war dancers for a state festival or two." His eyes twinkled. "It is enough to satisfy his tax obligation considering the loss at sea of his last good harvest."

"But?" I said.

"But we have our suspicions about the amount of wealth he declares for the magistrates to determine his taxes. He doesn't like spending an obol on food and wine if he can help it, but he maintains a handsome villa, and he spends a good deal of money on expensive *hetaerae.*" Philites chuckled. "He has to. Most *hetaerae* of that order wouldn't otherwise look longingly into that one eye."

"So he likely has a source of wealth other than the olive grove. I thought as much. He fought against Persia."

Philites nodded. "You suspect he has a fair amount of Persian loot: gold coins, armor. Loot he never turned over to the state."

"I do, Philites."

Philites shook his head. "We know that some citizens try hiding valuable items to avoid taxes. Where has Thucides hidden his?"

"I think he buried it in his olive grove. Alcaeus knew too. And died for the knowing and the wanting."

"By Thucides' hand?"

"Perhaps." I sighed and shook my head. "But I do not think that Thucides is a killer. Besides, if Thucides killed Alcaeus, why would he leave his body in the grove at the river, with only a token attempt at burial? Why make the attempt at all? Thucides wouldn't care about proper burial rituals. He'd drag the body to the river and toss it in. He wouldn't leave it only halfway in the river for laborers to find. He wouldn't want anyone, like me, wondering what Alcaeus was after in the grove. And why would he have left me alive?"

Philites chuckled again. "A remarkable grove, indeed, offering olive oil of the finest quality, Persian gold, and long life, except for poor Alcaeus."

"Long life?" I asked.

Philites nodded, then chuckled again. "A gift from the Earth goddess. I don't know why she left you alive for another day. After all, you're not a believer. You see, that grove was a sanctuary where Mother Earth was worshipped many, many seasons ago in the days of the great heroes."

"How do you know that, Philites?"

"Legends. My father told me about it. He and his old poet friends used to talk about the ancient places."

"I see." The whirlpool slowed more and the waters cleared. "The sanctuary had the usual boundaries to mark its sacred territory?"

"Of course. Anyone who came within the rock boundaries suffering illness or intending to commit crime would be punished by the goddess or her priest." Philites sighed. "But there are no priests now to protect the grove. Much of our land is commercial now, not sacred. Oaths are not so sacred anymore. Profit, not prayer. There is a growing cynicism among our youth. Perhaps it is the price of our success, our Athenian empire."

Philites was right. We Athenians had begun to take oaths more lightly. Even Pericles did so. When he wanted to build the Parthenon, he had to get round the oath Athens took not to rebuild on the Acropolis any temples the Persians had burned during the war. We swore to let the burned temples stand as testimony to the perfidy of the Persians. But Pericles argued that the peace we later negotiated with Persia negated the oath, and we in the Assembly all expediently agreed with him.

I thanked Philites for his help and left, pretty sure now why and how Alcaeus had died. With a heavy heart, I walked to Tysander's barbershop to set my trap.

At Tysander's, I let it be known that I intended to go up to Thucides' grove again that night. I learned, besides, that Alcibiades had been spending his nights with a married woman in the groves down on the Laureion Peninsula, no doubt sleeping off drunken stupors on the steps of the temple to Poseidon.

Then I went to Aspasia to ask for help and to let her know that Alcibiades was innocent, at least of murder. She granted me two Scythi-

an guards to follow me at a distance and agreed to send the messages I wanted sent. She told me to be careful and kissed me on both cheeks. I was thankful that I had the time to go see Selkine before I had to leave for the grove.

The grove was dark that night. Though our north star Kolchab and the other stars gleamed brightly, the moonlight shone only dimly through thin clouds. Owls hooted and now and then I could hear the rustle of field mice and, in the brush outside the grove, the crackling of thicket branches brushing against the sides of a foraging wild boar.

I skirted the grove, keeping close to the shelter of the valley's trees and bushes, waited until I was sure the Scythians had taken up the position I had given them, with orders to follow whoever followed me, then stepped out into the more open space of the lines of olive trees. I made my way slowly toward the place where Alcaeus had died, and like him I shifted the weight of the shovel on my shoulder now and then. I listened carefully, trying to hear among the rustlings of the animals the more stealthy and careful step of a man.

I had to make a conscious effort to breathe. I am a sophist after all: I would have preferred to trap my suspect by mental tricks instead of physical confrontation. But for Aspasia and Pericles I would risk my life—as long as I had the two burly Scythians with me.

I took a deep breath. I had arrived at the spot. I hoped that the attack would come soon before my nerves started sending out streaks of lightning.

I positioned my shovel and pushed it into the earth with my foot. Then it happened. A sense of danger. Not a reaction to some sensual stimulus, just a sudden urge, from where I could not know, to turn to protect myself.

I swung round and stared into the face of Menes. He stood perhaps ten footlengths from me, a bludgeon held in two hands, waist high.

I jumped back, then watched as his face twisted grotesquely, his eyes white and round. His jaw skewed to the right and his lips began to quiver. He dropped the bludgeon and reached with his left arm for the right arm, which now hung down straight at his side. He tilted to the right and slid down to the ground, as if some creature had yanked a string tied to his right leg.

The Scythians advanced toward him.

I held up a hand to ward them off and went to kneel at Menes' side. "Menes," I said. "Do not try to talk. I will get help."

"It is sacred," he managed to croak out.

I nodded. "I know. You wanted to stop the theft. But murder is a crime against the Earth and the gods, a crime against all you believe in." I had to know how he reconciled his crime with his desire to respect the grove.

He moved his head slightly. "Drowned," he mumbled. Then, he reached for my arm with his left hand. His right eye rolled in its socket, but his left peered at me with a kind of pleading.

I understood. "I see, Menes," I said. "You had to protect the goddess's sanctuary from crime. So you hit Alcaeus to knock him unconscious and then dragged him to the river to let the river god drown him or not, as the god chose. Then you put earth on him for a burial."

He uttered strange sounds, like speech, but not speech. I thought he was trying to apologize for his attempt to kill me. He let go of my arm and slowly laid his hand on the earth, caressing it as if it were a lover. His left eye dimmed a little, then sharpened again. He wanted something more.

I took a guess. "Don't worry, Menes. I will see to it that a proper propitiation is made for you here to satisfy the goddess. Aspasia will do it for you."

His eyes dimmed and his body went slack. He died in my arms. Young Hippocrates would have some explanation for this physical death, but I knew its emotional cause. In the clash between our old sacred values and the new values of power and profit, Menes had found himself crushed. He had struck out, not at Thucides who had fought our oppressors for his gold, but at Alcaeus who had simply thought to take what he wanted for himself. Then he had had to strike at me to protect himself. The effort had killed him.

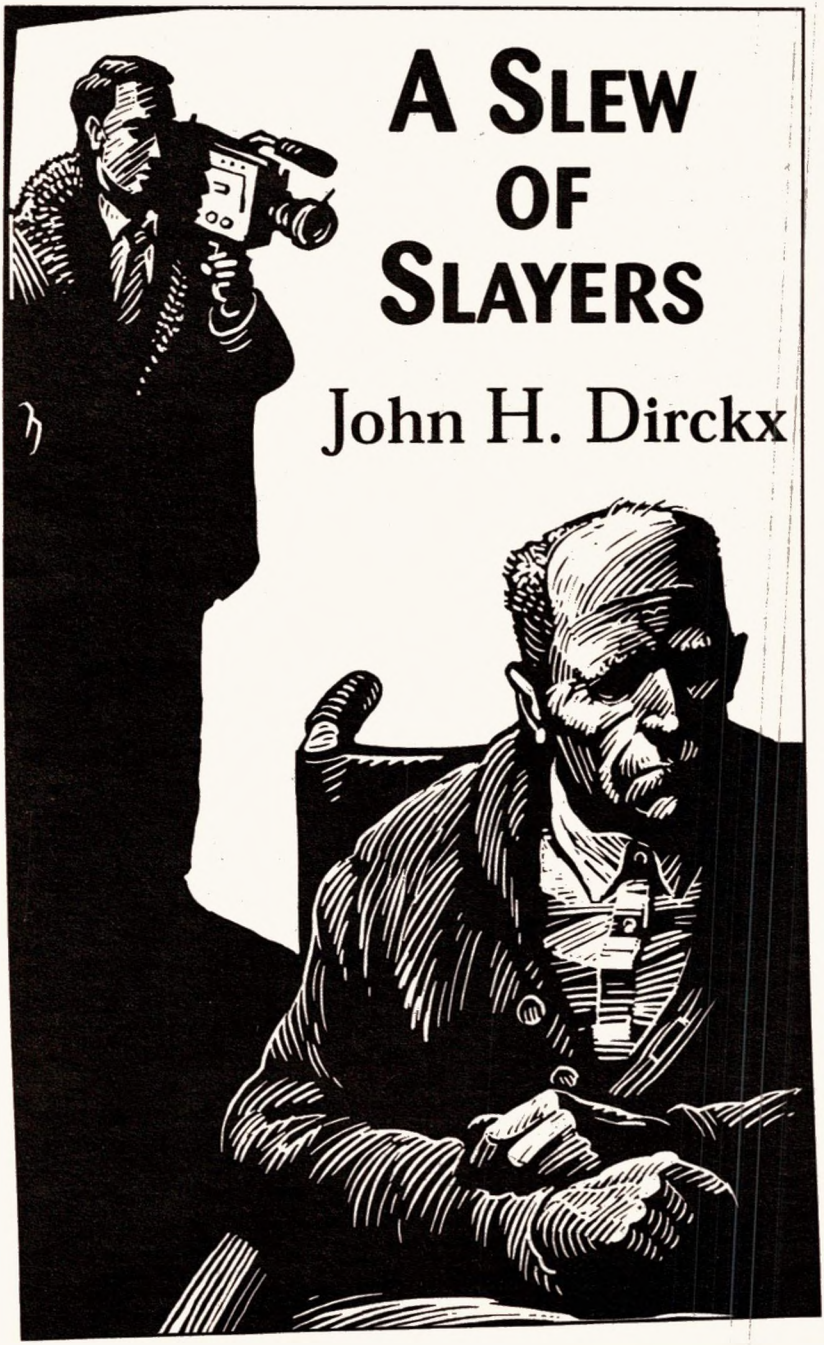
I went to Aspasia the next day to arrange a quiet burial for Menes and a ritual sacrifice at the olive grove, agreed to by Thucides who had obeyed Aspasia's message to stay out of his grove that night. I never knew what amount of Persian gold Aspasia and Pericles agreed to overlook to get Thucides' cooperation or what they demanded from him, but the following year Thucides sponsored a major festival.

I saw Alcibiades the next day, tossing a half eaten piece of cabbage at a herm. He was a waste of looks and brains. He would die contemptuous of all: our beloved Athens, our democracy, even his own death. Menes, at least, had died for a cause, no matter how wrongminded. Alcaeus, I like to think, was redeemed at the end from greed and narrowness by his capacity for surprise. If, as I imagine, he thought some god had come to strike him, he'd had, at least, a vision.

Today, so many years later, we Athenians have so little vision left. In Euripides' plays, Agamemnon is incompetent, Menelaus is sex-driven, and Athena is petulant.

And little Lamicus has been killed in our never-ending war with Sparta.

I have few years left to live and for that I am glad.



A SLEW OF SLAYERS

John H. Dirckx

Illustration by Tim Foley

A sign on the wall of the recovery room reminded the staff, "Hearing is the last of the five senses to go and the first to return." In spite of that, Debbie Armonico had acquired the habit of shouting at patients—all of them, not just the elderly ones who might be hard of hearing and couldn't wear their hearing aids into the operating room.

The lean, dark elderly man who had just come through an exploratory laparotomy stirred just slightly, swallowed, and hiccuped.

"You're all right, sir," intoned Mrs. Armonico in a piercing whine. "Can you hear me?" (People waiting for an elevator twenty yards away could hear her.)

The patient groaned an affirmative answer.

"Your throat's going to be sore for a while. Can you tell me your name?"

He managed to reply just as Molly Castle appeared on the other side of the gurney to take his blood pressure. His thin voice was a croak and his speech was slurred, as if he had put away a half-gallon of wine, but there was no mistaking the name: he said it twice. "Florian Lazarescu."

Mrs. Armonico and Molly Castle exchanged glances. Florian Lazarescu wasn't the name on the patient's wristband. It was, however, a name that, like Jack the Ripper, called up images of bloodshed and horror in everyone's mind. With one difference: Florian Lazarescu was still alive—somewhere.

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn made almost a complete circuit of the four story red brick building before finding the visitors' parking lot tucked away in an inner court. The building occupied virtually a whole block in an older residential neighborhood on the east side. With its tuckpointed exterior and replacement steel-sash windows, it could have been anything from a business college to a small factory, but the sign over the main entrance identified it as Lindenhaven Manor Retirement Complex.

The interior decor was neutral in style. Stout handrails ran along both sides of the corridors, and a tinny loudspeaker in the ceiling dispensed a Strauss waltz. A poster on an easel in the lobby announced a program at eight thirty that evening in the south lounge: JUDY JERROLD AND HER ACCORDION STYLINGS. GUESTS WELCOME. REFRESHMENTS.

"She's on the way down," observed someone behind him in a gravelly contralto. He turned to see a tall, angular woman of advanced age bearing down on him with the aid of a walker.

"I'm sorry?" he said, unsure whether her remark had been addressed to him.

"They figure most of us in here are either deaf or dotty," she said. "So the entertainers they bring in are either on the way up or on the way down." She was wearing an enormous yellow bow in hair that had an electric-purple sheen. Her perfume reminded Auburn of something his mother used to rub on his chest when he had the

flu. "Judy Jerrold's on the way down. Her real name is Geraldine Kloprath and she went to school with my kid brother."

Auburn foresaw an interminable string of reminiscences, interlarded with cynical commentary. To his surprise the woman continued along the corridor after delivering herself of these remarks, without paying him further notice.

He found his way past an unattended reception desk to the office of Dr. Winstead, the medical director, with whom he had an appointment for nine o'clock. Winstead shared an anteroom and a secretary with the business manager, whose office this morning was dark behind its frosted-glass door.

The medical director was tall and fiftyish, with the puffy eyelids of a chronic insomniac. A few long strands of hair lay across his bald dome like a cartoonist's suggestion of hair, and his fingernails were bitten to the quick.

"Have a seat, Officer," he said, and launched into a jeremiad without further preamble. "Every time Mrs. Cross, the business manager, goes on vacation, something like this happens." He almost added, "to me."

"We'll do our best to keep a low profile," Auburn assured him. "But we can't control the press."

"The press! The newspapers are bad enough, but what about this crackpot Fuselly on Channel Four? He's the one who started the whole thing."

The office was paneled in dark wood. Beneath a window looking out on a side street stood a dusty antique examining table with leather upholstery. Auburn suspected Winstead was better at fudging Medicare claims than diagnosing bronchitis.

"I didn't see the program myself," he said.

"Well, for that matter, neither did I. But I can guarantee you that ninety percent of our residents did. They've usually got nothing better to do in the evenings than gawk at the tube. And you can imagine what kind of a bombshell it set off here when they heard that one of their fellow residents was a mass murderer."

"Suspected mass murderer," Auburn corrected quietly. "That identification hasn't been confirmed."

"Well, the investigator from the coroner's office hauled two big boxes of papers and personal effects out of here yesterday. And photocopies of Wallach's medical records. I was here with him until after nine o'clock last night."

"I know. I talked to Mr. Stamaty this morning. The county's job is to identify the remains and establish a cause of death in any case where that cause may not be natural. When there's a possibility of homicide, the Department of Public Safety becomes involved in the investigation."

"Homicide!" Winstead grimaced and squirmed behind his mahogany desk. "For heaven's sake, Officer, Anton Wallach died in his bed!"

"Yes, sir, apparently so. But according to the forensic pathologist and the lab, his death was

due to cyanide, administered by mouth."

"Cyanide?" He jerked upright in his seat as if someone had just given him a stiff dose of it himself, and not by mouth. "There has to be some mistake."

"I don't think so. If there were any doubt about it, they'd still be checking."

"Have you any idea what that's going to do to the reputation of this place?"

"I wouldn't think it would do you much harm if it turns out to be suicide."

"True, true," nodded Winstead, avidly welcoming this alternative. "Well, how can I help you?"

"Do you keep any kind of visitors' register?"

"Oh, good heavens, no. This place is a three-ring circus from the middle of the afternoon until about ten o'clock at night."

"Would you know if any of the residents were particularly close to Wallach?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you there either," said Winstead with palpable regret. "I hardly knew the man. He was in one of our independent living units. I get to know the residents on the nursing home side better."

"Was he taking any medicine?"

"Actually, he was on something for his blood pressure. But he kept it in his room and took it on his own. Our nurses didn't give him anything. The man from the coroner's office has a copy of all his medical records. And he took his pills with him too."

"I'd like to see Wallach's room and look through his things. I assume nothing in there has been touched since yesterday?"

"No, sir. The man from the coroner's office was pretty emphatic about that. Otherwise we'd be getting ready to move in another resident today. We've got a waiting list as long as my arm."

As they walked to the elevator, Auburn reverted to the subject of the television program that had aired three days earlier. "When was it that Fuselly came to interview Wallach?"

"Oh, maybe a month or so ago. He took us in completely. Said he was here to scoop the other stations because he'd heard we were going to win some kind of an award. Wanted to shoot some pictures of the facility and tape a couple of unrehearsed interviews with residents. But there wasn't any award, and the only resident he was interested in was Wallach."

They stepped into the elevator and rose with solemn slowness to the third floor. "Had you heard any rumors about Wallach's past?" asked Auburn.

"No, certainly not. As I said, I barely knew him by sight. According to our records he was a naturalized citizen, born in Romania, and he had no living family whatsoever." When the elevator door opened, he led Auburn off to the left.

A faint smell of disinfectant floated in the air. A handrail ran along one side of the corridor; along the other side, from behind the row of doors, each with its little curtained window, came the

rumble and squawk of television sets with the volume turned up.

Number 326 was silent. Winstead unlocked the door and turned on the light to reveal a cramped, stuffy "studio suite" with generic furniture and an air of tranquil melancholy. The sitting room window gave a view of the boarded-up church across the street.

After assuring Winstead that he needed no help and releasing him for more important duties, Auburn closed the door and put on a pair of rubber gloves. Proceeding swiftly and methodically, he inspected and evaluated every article in the suite, one at a time. On arriving at Lindenhaven he had had only the scantiest information about Anton Wallach, most of it relayed from the coroner's office. Gradually he was fleshing out a mental portrait of the dead man.

Wallach didn't smoke, at least not here, and his reading was limited to the daily paper. The clothes in the bedroom closet, somber in hue and severe in cut, were those of a tall man who, to judge by the buckle marks on his belts, had lost considerable weight recently. The wear on the remote control in the sitting room showed that he had been an avid television viewer. Almost certainly he had watched the program in which Scott Fuselly, the investigative reporter, accused him of being Florian Lazarescu, legendary Red Axe of Romania.

While he worked he reflected on Winstead's apparent naivete in letting a rascal like Fuselly get past the front door. As a local news photographer, Fuselly had made a name for himself with hidden-camera interviews in which prominent persons said the wrong things about the wrong people (including themselves) at the wrong times. Now he had a weekly program featuring exposés of auto repair scams, brokerage agencies that charged double commissions, con artists that suckered the elderly, day care centers with defective plumbing, and anything else he thought might make his audience seethe with indignation.

Sometimes the program consisted largely of interviews, edited to make each guest look like a crook and a fool. When Fuselly couldn't find a sucker to browbeat or embarrass before the camera, he fulminated and frothed in the editorial mode. Here his favorite targets were public institutions, such as city and county law enforcement agencies, courts, jails, hospitals, schools, and religious and charitable organizations. His diatribes betrayed a woeful ignorance of police procedure and constitutional law; of local, national, and world history; and even of the values and traditions of polite society. But since they weren't subject to rebuttal by disinterested, much less interested, parties, he had a devoted following among the credulous majority.

Auburn, who seldom watched the program, deeply regretted having missed this week's edition of it. It occurred to him that if Stamaty

at the coroner's office had missed it too, he wouldn't be here now conducting this investigation.

Wallach had been found dead in his bed yesterday morning by a member of the housekeeping staff. Since he was over seventy and had recently undergone surgery for cancer, death was presumed to be natural, and the management at Lindenhaven had made a purely routine report to the coroner's office. But Stamaty, recognizing the name from Scott Fuselly's program a couple of days earlier, had immediately suspected foul play, which was exactly what he was paid to do.

Once the body was at the coroner's morgue, things happened quickly. The forensic pathologist who performed the autopsy detected the scent of cyanide in the tissues, and laboratory tests proved the presence of cyanide salts in the blood and the digestive tract, chiefly the stomach.

Auburn finished his examination of the bathroom, from which Stamaty had already collected all the medicine bottles, and proceeded to the kitchenette. The storage space here was so scanty that he surmised Wallach had probably taken most of his meals in the big dining room on the main level.

Starting with the wastebasket, he found the expected malodorous jumble of food scraps, coffee grounds, empty containers, and crumpled wrapping materials. Among the latter was a heavy-duty envelope bearing the logo of FastFriend Express Courier Service. It was addressed to Anton Wallach at Lindenhaven, and according to the routing slip it had come from a person or organization called AMIC (in block capitals) at an address in the south suburb of Heron Township. Auburn put these materials carefully aside and proceeded to inspect the food supply.

In a refrigerator about the size of a mailbox he found soft drinks, a nearly full carton of milk one day short of its expiration date, margarine, and a squat jar of some kind of jelly or preserves. "Dulceata de caise," the label read. Auburn assumed the language was Romanian, since a smaller label on the back of the jar said "Product of Romania. Imported by Europa Ethnic Specialities, New York City."

The jar had been opened and about a teaspoonful of its contents was missing. A cautious sniff at the opaque, tawny, viscous substance inside suggested peach preserves, with overtones of something vastly more sinister. Sitting down at the kitchen table, Auburn arranged his finds, dated and initialed them with an indelible marker, and enclosed and sealed them in brown paper bags. The gloves he was wearing were disposable, but he didn't dispose of them there.

He was on his way back to Winstead's office with his specimens tucked under his arm when a remark from someone behind him in the corridor brought him up short. *"Buenos días, Señor Auburn. ¿Cómo está?"*

Auburn turned to see his old high school Spanish teacher, Mr. Quick, approaching with the zeal and delight of one who has just sighted a long-lost brother.

"Muy bien, Señor Quick," replied Auburn almost automatically, to the further delight of Mr. Quick.

"I saw you getting out of your car a while ago from my window," Quick said. He was wearing a navy blue blazer and a dark maroon tie. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and good humor beneath bushy white eyebrows. "You're here about Anton Wallach, aren't you? I've been following your career in the paper for years."

Mr. Quick hadn't been one of Auburn's favorite teachers. Rigid and pedantic, he was something of an intellectual snob, tending to favor the A students, which Auburn hadn't been—at least not in Spanish. In addition, having done graduate work in Spain decades earlier, he insisted on a pure Castilian pronunciation, much to the *disgusto* of the Puerto Ricans in the class.

"I'm surprised you remember me after all these years," Auburn said. "I didn't exactly set the world on fire in Spanish."

"¡Caramba!" said Quick, giving Auburn's arm a cordial squeeze. "I remember you as a person, not a grade in a book. You did all right. As I recall, you were in a couple of plays, too." Mr. Quick had been moderator of the Dramatics Club.

"I was a stagehand for *Charley's Aunt,"* Auburn admitted. "And I played a policeman in *Arsenic and Old Lace."*

"And look at you now—a policeman in good earnest. Making any progress with this Wallach business?"

Auburn didn't know to what extent the results of the autopsy on Wallach had been spread by rumor and the news media throughout the community and, in particular, at Lindenhaven Manor. He decided on a policy of amiable taciturnity.

Quick reacted by becoming more communicative himself. "I can tell you this much," he said. "The idea that Anton Wallach was Florian Lazarescu is utter nonsense. Did you see that television program Monday night?"

"No, sir, I missed that."

"Well, so did I. I haven't even got a television set in my room. But I've heard about it. Great heaven, have I heard about it! And, take it from me, it's pure malarkey."

"Were you a friend of Wallach's?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Not a friend. But I probably knew him as well as anybody here. You may remember that I taught French as well as Spanish at John Mellon High School. Latin, too, before your time. Anton Wallach could barely make himself understood in English, but he spoke French fluently. And he could quote Latin poetry by the yard."

"I understood he was Romanian."

"I don't think there's any doubt about that. But, like most educated Europeans, he knew more languages than his own. He spoke Russian and German, too, but I couldn't judge how well."

"You said 'educated.' My information is that he was retired from a job as a bookbinder."

"I believe that's correct. But he only took up that kind of work in this country because his English was so bad. In Romania he seems to have been a lawyer, or at least a law clerk of some kind. I don't understand their legal system, of course. He wasn't exactly a pleasant companion—decades of immersion in Marxism had seen to that—but he was certainly a man of wide culture and intellectual resource."

Auburn started along the corridor again. "Actually the question of his background and true identity is the responsibility of the coroner's office," he remarked.

"But the question of who killed him," said Quick, with a shrewd wink, "is the responsibility of Sergeant Auburn. And what you've got to ask yourself is, *Cui bono?* Who benefits by his death? All right, I know your lips are sealed. But I just thought it my duty to put you straight about Anton's intellectual background. This mass murderer, Lazarescu, was a tailor's apprentice before becoming a soldier. He was probably barely literate in his native Romanian, and would surely have had no knowledge of French at all, let alone of Latin literature."

"You seem well informed."

"Once a teacher, always a student. I won't keep you any longer. *¡Hasta la vista, y buena suerte!*"

Dr. Winstead was still fidgeting behind his big mahogany desk. "Well, did you find any cyanide up there, Officer?" he asked.

"I was wondering if you have any documents or papers of Wallach's on file anywhere here?"

"Not exactly papers of Wallach's. We have the contract in which he signed over his pension and Social Security to Lindenhaven when he moved in. Also an intake document he completed. It lists no next of kin, not even a friend to be contacted in case of need."

"No information about a lawyer or a will?"

"No, sir. I showed the form to the man from the coroner's office. He took a whole raft of things out of Wallach's room, you know. Including his wallet and his bankbook, which I thought a little strange."

"That's standard protocol. It'll be handed over eventually to Wallach's heirs, if any can be found. Stamaty couldn't find any citizenship papers, records, private letters, or photographs, and neither could I. It seems odd that Wallach wouldn't have had any of those things in his room. It's as if he didn't have any past."

"Or as if he had tried to erase his past."

"Or as if somebody else tried to erase it." Auburn handed back the key to Wallach's suite.

"Is it okay for us to put that suite back in service now? I'd like to get somebody's John Henry on paper before this cyanide business hits the streets."

"Maybe by the weekend. For the time being, it's off limits to everybody—housekeeping, prospective tenants, and the idly curious."

The smell of cooking was getting stronger on the main level, and the

same elderly woman was patrolling the lobby behind her walker. "Well, who killed him?" she demanded. "Or did he do himself in?"

Obviously while he'd been upstairs she'd not only learned who he was but why he was there. Auburn smiled pleasantly but kept walking without replying.

"When's your birthday?" she wanted to know.

"My birthday?" Auburn stopped walking but kept smiling. "October first." Fully aware of what was coming, he gave his father's birth date instead of his own.

"I *knew* it. A Libra. You avoid confrontations and often sacrifice personal convenience to preserve the status quo."

"I'll bet you know Anton Wallach's horoscope too."

"Oh, puh-*leez!* That poor soul couldn't spit English. And blind in one eye. I told him if only he had a drug problem, he could get a job as a cab driver in this town just like that." She snapped bony fingers to make a sound like a damp firecracker.

"If you told him that, you must have known him pretty well."

"Well enough to know that he wasn't any mass murderer. Did you see him on TV?"

"No, I was working late that night."

"Too bad. That show was a hoot. I was supposed to be in it too, but that Fuselly didn't even use my interview—after I spent two hours at the beauty parlor that morning. Because, see, the program wasn't really about this place at all. It was about people who carried out mass executions, like Göring and Eichmann and Lazarescu.

"'A Slew of Slayers,' he called it. Don't you just love those? Collective nouns? I used to have a whole book of them. You know, a pride of lions, a gaggle of geese, a leap of leopards, a quarrel of politicians, a gravity of archbishops . . ."

"But you don't believe Wallach was really Lazarescu?"

"Oh, puh-*leez!* Anton was about as lively as a potted fern in the post office window. He didn't have enough moxie to be a black-belt chicken plucker, let alone a torturer and mass murderer. By the way, I think he was headed for the Other Side."

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't be," she countered, pretending to misunderstand him. "You could end up there yourself. The Alzheimer unit. They put you there when you spill your orange juice one too many times, or turn up in the lounge without your shoes and stockings."

Auburn had just locked his specimens in the trunk of his car when Scott Fuselly appeared at his elbow. "Got a couple minutes, Officer?"

Auburn found all encounters with journalists moderately distasteful, like shaking hands with an embalmer. This particular journalist radiated the supercilious, impatient arrogance of the man who knows everything except what an insignificant insect he is in the broad scheme of things, and who has mastered every skill except recognizing and respecting

other people's inherent worth and dignity.

"Not really," said Auburn. "I'm working."

"Well, bully! So am I. What have you got so far on the Lazarescu case?"

"I'm not investigating anybody named Lazarescu."

"Don't play games. If you caught my show Monday night, you saw Wallach's reaction when I asked him if his name wasn't really Florian Lazarescu. Hardly the cool, calm, and collected attitude of an innocent man."

"I didn't catch your show. Where did you get the idea that Wallach was Lazarescu?"

"That's privileged information."

"So is the progress of my investigation." Auburn unlocked the door of his car and opened it. "The department will issue a statement—"

"Sure, full of double-talk and cover-up. The public has a right to know what its Department of Public Safety is doing at all times—"

"Correction. The public has no such right, Fuselly, under either the Constitution or the common law. That's a myth created by you media people to help guarantee a market for your trash."

"Hey, watch the old tongue, Sergeant! We broadcast facts, not trash."

"Now who's playing games?" Auburn slid behind the wheel of his car. "You know as well as I do that your so-called documentaries and exposés are pure entertainment, carefully slanted for maximum audience appeal."

Fuselly barged into the space between Auburn's car and the one next to it. "We're getting off the subject. All I want to know is whether Lazarescu committed suicide to keep from being tried or deported, or whether some benefactor of society exterminated him."

Auburn shut the door and started the car. Fuselly slapped and pounded the windshield and yelled words he couldn't use on the air.

The address in Heron Township from which the FastFriend package had emanated turned out to be an apartment complex consisting of twenty-four units. Auburn checked all the names on the mailboxes in the lobby without finding anybody named Amic.

On arriving at headquarters, he took the jam jar and the empty FastFriend parcel to the laboratory on the top floor and turned them over to a technician, carefully complying with chain-of-custody rules. Then he went to his office and called the FastFriend Express Courier Service.

As he had expected, he got nowhere on the phone. It was about eleven on a bright October morning. He decided to walk the five or six blocks to the downtown office and garage of FastFriend.

The office manager had gone to lunch. After a look at Auburn's credentials, the dispatcher on duty punched in the serial number on the routing slip from Wallach's kitchen wastebasket and pulled up the relevant information on a computer screen.

The package had been picked up Tuesday morning around

eleven at the apartment building and delivered to the reception desk at Lindenhaven at three thirty P.M. the same day. The sender had requested the pickup by phone and had charged the delivery, by number, to an open account. With a little persuasion, the dispatcher looked up the holder of the account number, a local auction and antique business that didn't happen to be named Amic.

"How can I get hold of the driver who made the pickup on Tuesday?" Auburn asked.

Both pickup and delivery had been made by the same driver, John Tarchita. With phenomenal luck, Auburn found him just sitting down to his brown-bag lunch in the garage while his van was being loaded for the afternoon run.

Tarchita was tall and broad, with the striking good looks of a movie star and a bearing that made his uniform blazer look like a brigadier general's battle jacket. Auburn found his face familiar, but couldn't place him.

"Do you remember this pickup?" Auburn asked him, showing him the routing slip.

"Sure do. The radio dispatcher sent me after it because I was working in that area Tuesday morning."

"Did you talk to the person who sent the package?"

"No, sir. The message I got said the parcel would be in the outer lobby of the apartment building, by the mailboxes. And that's where I found it, on the floor. The routing slip was made out all right, so I just tossed the parcel in the van and brought it in."

"Brought it here?"

"Sure. It had to go through Distribution, since the delivery point was in a different quadrant. But that afternoon I was east, so it went back in my van, and I dropped it off at the nursing home."

"Do you remember what was in the package? Papers—?"

"Hey, I handle sixty or eighty parcels a day." He closed his eyes in an effort to picture the one he'd delivered to Lindenhaven. "Not papers, no. It wasn't flat. I think it had something solid in it, maybe round, like a ball."

"Baseball? Tennis ball?"

Tarchita's eyes were still closed. "That size, but heavier. Like glass or metal. Maybe a paperweight."

"Jar of jelly?"

"Could be." The eyes came open. "Sure, could be."

Auburn thanked Tarchita and put the routing slip back into his briefcase. He stopped to eat at an overcrowded and overpriced cafe in a district of posh retail establishments. When he was halfway through lunch, it came to him that Tarchita was a professional model who often appeared in newspaper ads and TV commercials for local department stores, including Zwelfinger's across the street.

When he got back to headquarters he could have kept on walking across the street to the county courthouse to see Stamaty in the coroner's office, but he'd done enough legwork for one day, and besides, this was his bowling

night, so he phoned instead. According to Stamaty, the Social Security Administration had records showing that Wallach, a naturalized citizen, had been retired for six years and had been employed by a local printing firm as a bookbinder for nine years before that. On the other hand, the immigration authorities had no records on anyone named Anton Wallach entering the United States from Romania.

Deciding it was time he did some background research on the elusive Lazarescu, Auburn turned on his computer and cranked up his favorite search engine. He learned that Florian Lazarescu had held an important post in the *Securitate,* or secret police, under Nicolae Ceauşescu, the Communist dictator of Romania. In the declining days of Soviet power, Lazarescu had repeatedly carried out machine-gun massacres of peaceful demonstrators in Bucharest and elsewhere, besides torturing political prisoners and engaging in similar barbarous activities, which had earned him the *nom de guerre* of the Red Axe.

After Ceauşescu and his wife Elena were convicted of mass murder and other crimes by a special military tribunal and executed on Christmas Day 1989, Lazarescu vanished into thin air. In succeeding months, accounts of his atrocities circulated throughout the world, along with rumors that he had escaped the fate of his masters and was living under an assumed name in South America, Sweden, or Russia.

Auburn called Channel Four and had Fuselly paged. In ten minutes he got an answering phone call.

"Okay, Sergeant," burbled Fuselly, "what have you got for me?"

"It's what you've got that counts. I need the name of your informant."

"Hey, talking to you is like playing Ping-Pong with a marshmallow instead of a ball. The name of my informant, if I had one, wouldn't even be relevant to your investigation. Lazarescu was killed after my show aired. Any one of half a million viewers could have done him in."

"Your informant could still be the killer. He might have waited to act until after your broadcast, when the list of suspects was a lot longer."

"You said 'killer.' Can I take it you're definitely calling this a homicide?"

"You can take it that Wallach's death was caused by cyanide."

"That's stale. I knew that yesterday. How about filling me in on this jar of jelly?"

Slightly staggered by the extent of Fuselly's knowledge, Auburn changed the subject. "Doesn't it bother you at all that your program probably precipitated Wallach's death?"

"Lazarescu's death. Not really. We probably saved the taxpayers a bundle."

"And suppose it turns out he wasn't Lazarescu? Will you broadcast a retraction?"

"We don't do that. We run a disclaimer at the beginning of each program, to the effect that we publish information as a public service, and that we believe program content to be accurate at air time. The public assumes the risk of shifting opinion."

"I'm not talking about opinion, Fuselly, I'm talking about facts. Truth versus falsehood, if there's room in your philosophy for that distinction." Auburn hung up.

He felt sure Fuselly had been trailing him on his investigative rounds earlier in the day. For all he knew, the muckraker was out in the parking lot now, watching his car. He went through the covered walk to the police garage facing on Gates Street and signed out an unmarked jalopy. He didn't see anybody following him, but, just in case, he spent some time jockeying around the downtown Interstate ramps to baffle any possible pursuit before heading for Philadelphia.

It took him an hour and ten minutes to get to downtown Philadelphia. Hultice Auctions and Liquidations was housed in a single, sparsely furnished office on the fourth floor of a building that had been the latest thing in architectural chic when it was put up in the 1920's. The sole occupant of the office, a fortyish woman wearing a red-and-black-checked golfer's cap with an exuberant red pom-pom on top, was doing something with an adding machine and stacks of papers. Auburn waited while she obtained a total and wrote it down.

"Help you, sir?" Her voice was too soft and sweet for an auctioneer's.

Auburn showed identification and laid the FastFriend routing slip on the desk in front of her. "I'd like to get some information about the source of this parcel."

She examined the slip and shrugged. "This didn't come from us." The voice was no longer quite so sweet.

"I understand that's your account number."

She frowned, fumbled in a drawer for a notebook, and consulted it. "Well, you're right about that. It is our number, but that's not our name or address. And the slip is dated the day before yesterday. We probably haven't used this service in the past six months." She pushed the routing slip away from her like a plate of cold french fries. "We don't know anything about this, and we're not paying for it, either."

"Is there anybody associated with your firm who might have used the number without your knowledge?"

She frowned again. "I wouldn't think so. There's just my brother and me. And three or four drivers and laborers who work for him part-time. But they never come to the office. I doubt if Jerry even knows we have an account with FastFriend."

"Does the address where this package was picked up mean anything to you? Or those names—Amic, or Anton Wallach?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, but they don't."

"You say you haven't used the parcel service for several months. Would you remember who you

sent something to the last time you used it?"

"I can find out." She said it in the tone she might have used to offer to lend money to a deadbeat relative.

"I'm sorry if it's a lot of trouble, but whoever sent this parcel didn't pull your nine-digit account number out of thin air. They must have seen it somewhere. If we can identify the sender, maybe you won't get a bill at the end of the month for a service you didn't use."

She was already at a steel cabinet leafing through a neat manila folder of statements and invoices. It took her about ten minutes to work up a list of five addresses to which the firm had sent parcels via FastFriend during the past three years. All were in other states and none of them meant anything in particular to Auburn. He thanked her and headed home. He was back at headquarters by four o'clock.

Using the Internet, he found the telephone number of the firm in North Bergen, New Jersey, near New York, that had imported the preserves from Romania. Instead of identifying himself as a homicide detective, much less mentioning cyanide in connection with one of their products, he pretended to be a customer in search of a local outlet carrying Romanian delicacies—in particular, "dulceata de caise." (He hoped the clerk at the other end of the line didn't know any better than he did how to pronounce it correctly.) In three or four minutes, he was informed that the only place within a radius of fifty miles where Europa Ethnic Specialities shipped products from Romania was Primo's Foods and Gifts on Jefferson Street.

He decided to make a solo visit to Primo's, even though the atmosphere along Jefferson Street was decidedly unhealthy for a solitary wayfarer who looked as if he might have the price of a fix tucked away somewhere on his person. He signed out the unmarked car again.

Primo's was bigger than he'd expected—practically a supermarket, in fact, and probably dating from the era when that neighborhood had been populated chiefly by European immigrants. Now there were bars on the windows, and security cameras seemed to follow Auburn's every move as he searched up and down the aisles for "dulceata de caise." After finding a jar of it and taking it through a checkout lane, he asked to see the store manager.

The downtown branch of the public library had only one Romanian dictionary, an ancient, dilapidated volume that was literally held together with heavy plastic tape. After ascertaining that "dulceata de caise" was apricot preserves, he translated the rest of the label word by word. On a hunch he looked up *amic* and found that it meant "friend."

He was on the point of returning the book to the shelf when he made another discovery. Before approaching the reference librarian, he paused at a distance to judge whether she would receive his unusual proposition with

courteous complaisance or shock and indignation. He guessed right and left the library with yet another specimen in his briefcase.

When he arrived back at the lab, he was informed that a qualitative test on the preserves in the jar from Wallach's kitchen had confirmed the presence of potassium cyanide. Before turning over the jar he'd just bought, he scratched his initials and the date in the glass with a diamond pencil.

It was nearly five P.M. when he called Channel Four again and asked to talk to Gilberto Shareef, the program director. The Department of Public Safety was on reasonably good terms with Shareef, and although he declined to release the tape of "A Slew of Slayers," he agreed to arrange a private showing of the tape for Auburn that evening.

Auburn drove the jalopy again. He wasn't making any secret about this visit to the studios of Channel Four, but by this time his own car was tied up in the police garage. Neither he nor Shareef alluded to Wallach's death. After a flunky wheeled in a large-screen TV and VCR, Shareef personally ran the tape of "A Slew of Slayers" for him, minus commercials.

To Auburn, the program seemed technically crude even by Fuselly's usual standards—long on rhetoric and hyperbole, short on continuity and style. It began with a series of brief vignettes about famous mass murderers, some still at large and others, such as Vlad the Impaler, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Eichmann, and Papa Doc Duvalier, who were now part of history if not folklore. As background material, Fuselly had cobbled together footage from old black-and-white newsreels and even a Dracula movie or two.

The final segment pertained to Florian Lazarescu, the Red Axe of Romania. First came a mélange of taped material on the final days of the Ceauşescu regime in Bucharest, with a voice-over that sounded like a muddled version of the material Auburn had found on the Internet. Then Fuselly was suddenly interviewing Anton Wallach in the privacy of Wallach's studio suite at the Lindenhaven Manor Retirement Complex.

As both Mr. Quick and the old woman with the walker had pointed out, Wallach's English was abominable. In fact, Fuselly had resorted to subtitles, which got around Wallach's accent but only emphasized his hopeless grammar. Yes, he liked living in the States. No, he wouldn't want to go back to Romania. Yes, he did miss some things—foods, customs, people who spoke his language. The climactic scene came when the interviewer abruptly asked Wallach if his real name wasn't Florian Lazarescu.

The reaction was electric and pathetic. Wallach flinched and gasped as if he had been struck in the face. His denial of the charge, vociferous and accompanied by violent gesticulation, was tantamount to an admission of its truth.

Before leaving the studio, Auburn asked for and obtained a

complete listing of Fuselly's programs for the past eighteen months. He didn't make it to bowling that night.

It was late Friday morning when Scott Fuselly picked up Auburn's trail again outside police headquarters. Keeping well back in traffic, he flattered himself if he thought that the most scrupulous surveillance on the part of Auburn or his uniformed companion would have failed to detect his presence. The police officers went straight to the Lindenhaven Manor Retirement Complex, parked in the inner court, and entered the building.

Fuselly waited five minutes, parked on the street, and followed them in through the main entrance. The same squawky background music greeted him as he walked along the same worn carpets past the same potted plants and pamphlet racks. After many years as a journalist, he had no inhibitions about going wherever he pleased, and his only rule was, "Just keep walking till they start shooting."

He had to do quite a bit of walking before he caught up with Auburn and company. They weren't in the medical director's office, which stood open and empty beyond the secretary's desk. They weren't in the south lounge either, where the heavy curtains were drawn for a slide lecture on stocks and bonds. He finally ran Auburn down in the smaller north lounge, seemingly conducting a seminar of his own.

Fuselly already knew two of the participants: Dr. Winstead, the pompous nitwit of a medical director, and Iris Benedict, the giddy octogenarian who dressed like a teenybopper and slithered up and down the corridors behind her walker. He'd gone through the motions of interviewing both of them in preparation for his interview with Wallach, which was all he really wanted for the show on mass murderers. He'd never seen the elderly man next to Auburn before. Auburn's companion, a stoutly built officer in uniform, had his back to Fuselly, so he couldn't see the officer's name tag.

They were all seated around a massive, ornate oak table on which sat a tray of cookies and a coffee pot with cups. Despite the refreshments, the atmosphere was anything but festive. The Lindenhaven people sat with an air of gloom, watching the Public Safety officers and one another in uneasy silence.

Fuselly marched up to the group without slackening his pace until he was practically leaning on the table.

Auburn eyed him with disfavor. "If you don't mind, Fuselly, this is a private discussion," he said.

"No, I don't mind. Carry on."

"Is there something we can do for you?" asked Dr. Winstead.

"Sure. Pass the sugar." Fuselly sat in an empty chair and reached for the coffee pot. "What'd I miss?"

"You're going to be missing a couple of teeth if you don't get out

of here," Mrs. Benedict assured him. "These men are police officers, in case you don't know it."

"I know all about police violence, Iris. Somehow I don't think they'll bother me. I might be wearing a hidden camera."

Auburn laid aside some papers. "Nobody invited you here, Fuselly, and you're completely out of line butting in where you don't belong. If you're going to stay, you're going to be expected to contribute something to the discussion. For once and for all, who gave you the idea that Anton Wallach was Florian Lazarescu?"

Fuselly nibbled a cookie and sipped some coffee. "You know perfectly well that as a journalist I can't reveal my sources. If I did, they'd dry up, and I'd be out of business."

"We've all heard that many times before," said Auburn. "But, on the other hand, with no knowledge of your sources, the public can't possibly assess the validity of your material. The worth of unsupported facts is exactly zero. They're just rumors around the country club—gossip over the back fence."

"Okay, so I got an anonymous tip."

"Baloney. If you didn't know the source yourself, you wouldn't have acted on the tip." Auburn picked up a file folder and opened it. "I already know one of your sources. The only person I talked to yesterday about a jar of jelly before I called you on the phone was the courier who delivered it here. So the only way you could have known about it then was if you followed me to the office of the courier service and pumped the driver. Unless, of course, you sent that jar yourself?"

Fuselly hastened to deny the murder charge with a vigorous shake of the head.

"You might as well have sent it," remarked the white-haired man sitting next to Auburn. "Programs like yours are a blight on society. Has it ever occurred to you that when you make it your business to broadcast every last detail of every instance of human depravity and moral decline, you become a social problem yourself? That when you pander to the public's thirst for scum and garbage, you legitimize and glorify moral decadence? That the media are an integral element in the proliferation of serial murders and suicides, copycat killings, hate bombings, and school violence?"

"You have a way with words, sir," said Fuselly. "You are—?"

"Donald Quick. I'm a retired teacher. Although I'm not a devotee of television, I did see your exposé of public education a few months back. You argued that, since teachers make no effort these days to inculcate principles of ethical behavior, we should be held responsible for the crimes of our former students."

"It makes sense to me," said Fuselly. "Just a matter of putting blame where it belongs."

"You seem to have appointed yourself to spread the blame around pretty broadly," said Auburn. "You did a program on pa-

tient abuse, theft, and insurance fraud in nursing homes during the summer. And here we have Dr. Winstead, a nursing home director, right in our midst. Mrs. Benedict was head nurse of the pediatrics department at the Chalfont Hospital for more than twenty years. You did an exposé of shoddy practices in hospitals just last month.

"Maybe you've never seen Patrolman Dollinger up close. You broadcast an editorial about him a year ago when he shot a teenager in the leg to prevent him from decapitating his aunt and uncle with a fire axe. You said police officers are licensed killers—trigger-happy cowards unwilling to face up to the dangers of their profession. Everywhere you look, you find somebody to blame for something. You might even say you've got a whole slew of slayers sitting right here around this table."

Fuselly gestured impatiently while he swallowed another cookie. "Okay. But let's cut to the chase. Which one of them sent the jelly jar? I understand the lab confirmed that that's the way Lazarescu got the cyanide."

"So you've got a snitch in the police lab, too. Then you probably know all about cyanide. How the potassium salt takes twenty or thirty minutes to reach a lethal blood level when taken by mouth. And how the taste can be disguised with almond, peach, or apricot, or any strong spice or seasoning, such as clove or anise. Like these German spice cookies, for instance, which are made with clove and anise and pepper. How are you feeling, Fuselly?"

Fuselly scowled in silence at a jest that even he felt was in poor taste. As a matter of fact, he was feeling somewhat unsettled in the gastric department. Coffee never bothered his cast-iron stomach, but those cookies had set up a burning from the tip of his tongue all the way down to his gizzard.

"By the way," continued Auburn, "the coroner's office has established that Anton Wallach was Florian Lazarescu, but not *the* Florian Lazarescu. The Lazarescu you interviewed as Wallach was once a lawyer with the Romanian Ministry of Labor. Twenty years ago he came to this country as part of a political delegation and defected to the West. He became a naturalized citizen under his own name of Lazarescu, and only changed his name legally after his namesake back home had gained an international reputation as a torturer and mass murderer. You could easily have found that out if you weren't such a sloppy investigator. Wallach's Social Security records—"

"Records can be falsified," said Fuselly a bit hoarsely. His throat was on fire and his cheeks felt flushed.

"Maybe. But the press services have dozens of still shots of the Red Axe, and plenty of newsreel footage, too. One glance at those pictures would have been enough to show you that Anton Wallach was somebody else. You threw 'A Slew of Slayers' together with junk from old files based on slipshod research by other journal-

ists who were as careless and irresponsible as yourself.

"Your program director tells me the show was run prematurely. It was originally scheduled for sometime in November, but he put it on earlier because the program planned for this Monday had to be pulled at the last minute. He couldn't reach you to tell you about the change because you were out of town on Monday. You really don't look at all well, Mr. Fuselly. Are you sure you're okay?"

Patrolman Fritz Dollinger stirred uneasily. "I hate to say this," he remarked, "but I wonder if maybe that cyanide I took home could have gotten into the cookie batter somehow. Marilyn made twenty-four cookies. There are nineteen left on the plate, and I just watched Mr. Fuselly put away five of them, one after the other. And they seem to be disagreeing with him something fierce."

Winstead hurried around the table to examine Fuselly, who by now was feeling breathless and faint. After looking at his eyes and feeling his pulse, Winstead's manner grew grave. "This man is suffering from cyanide intoxication," he said. "He needs an antidote immediately."

Fuselly half rose from his chair and then dropped back into it. "Well, is somebody going to call an ambulance," he demanded, "or are you all just going to sit around and watch me croak?"

"No need for that," said Winstead. "We have the antidote right here in the pharmacy."

"Let's go for it, then," gasped Fuselly, trying again to rise.

To his shock, Winstead sat down again and looked at his watch. "No rush," he said. "We've got five, ten minutes before the tissue changes become irreversible. I think you have something to tell Sergeant Auburn."

Fuselly clutched his burning chest and looked around the table at the impassive faces of the others.

"You can't do this!" he said, his voice a rasping whisper. "This is a put-up job. You deliberately lured me in here and slipped me those poisoned cookies."

"Nobody invited you here," Auburn told him again, "and nobody offered you any cookies. Dr. Winstead will administer an antidote when you've told me the source of your information about Wallach, and not before."

Fuselly writhed and grimaced and gripped the edge of the table with trembling fingers. "Mrs. Armonico," he hissed through clenched teeth. "She's a nurse at the Chalfont—in the operating room, recovery room, I don't know. Wallach let his real name slip out while he was still halfway under an anesthetic. That's all I can tell you. Absolutely all. Now where's this antidote?"

Winstead was gone before Auburn finished writing down the name. He returned promptly with a glass of water and a roll of antacid wafers.

"What's this?" grunted Fuselly.

Winstead told him.

"There's nothing wrong with those cookies," said Auburn,

"except a little extra white pepper and cream of tartar."

Fuselly chomped the wafers and guzzled water. "I'll break you," he fumed. "I'll destroy every one of you. When this hits the streets, you'd better run for your lives. Wait till my program Monday night. Wait till the Director of Public Safety hears from the state Attorney General." He slammed down the empty glass and rose on shaky legs.

"We're glad you're feeling better," said Auburn. "But don't go yet." Dollinger stood up and drifted behind Fuselly to prevent his leaving the lounge. "You've done your part; now I'm going to do mine and tell you who sent that jar of jelly. You did." Somewhat futilely, Auburn also told him he had the right to remain silent.

"This isn't going to get you anywhere, Auburn," growled Fuselly. "What possible reason could I have for killing Lazarescu?"

"That's obvious. You had your pathetic botch of a program on Lazarescu mostly in the can before you ever got around to doing any serious research. By the time the program was broadcast, you knew Anton Wallach wasn't your mass murderer. But Shareef unexpectedly ran the program ahead of schedule, before you had an opportunity to tone it down or scrap it. The quickest way to prevent Wallach from suing you and the station for libel was to kill him. You figured that, as an elderly immigrant with no family and no close friends, he'd probably go to his grave unmourned and unavenged."

Fuselly snorted. "How poetic. And how do you plan to prove that I had anything to do with this murder?"

"Yesterday afternoon I went to the library to look up some things in a Romanian dictionary. It's an old book, falling apart, and it's been repaired with shiny tape. On that tape I found a couple of fresh fingerprints that match some of the ones you left on my windshield when you were having your tantrum out in the parking lot yesterday."

"Very clever. I could have told you that myself if you'd asked me. I had to look up some words when I was putting the program together."

"Words such as *amic,* which you wrote as the name of the sender of the poisoned preserves? By the way, you charged the express delivery to an account number that belongs to an auction and liquidation business in Philadelphia. They sold an antique camera to a dealer in Idaho a couple of years ago. That dealer subsequently sold it to a collector here in town named Scott Fuselly.

"The dealer thinks he probably used some of the packaging material in which he received the camera when he sent it to you. I suppose a guy with your interest in old cameras and photographic methods could easily lay his hands on a supply of potassium cyanide."

Fuselly drank more water and shook his head. "This is pathetic. Do you really believe any court would accept all this as proof of guilt?"

"Maybe not. But I don't think any court would have trouble interpreting the evidence I collected at Primo's Foods and Gifts. Their security cameras run all day, recording everything that happens at the checkout lanes, and elsewhere in the store, in stop motion. The tapes are stored for a week before being recycled. I have a complete video record of your visit to Primo's on Tuesday morning. The time you passed through the checkout lane perfectly matches the time that a jar of dulceata de caise was sold in that lane—the only jar bought in the last six months, until I bought another one yesterday afternoon."

Mrs. Benedict leaned on her walker with one hand and patted Mr. Quick's shoulder with the other. "Well," she said, "it's obvious you haven't lost your touch as a drama coach. The farce came off without a hitch."

Dr. Winstead wrung his hands. "I can't believe you people persuaded me to participate in this charade," he said. "Pretending to repudiate all the values and ideals of the medical profession—"

"Oh, puh-*leez!* Wasn't it worth it to see the look on that weasel's face when he thought we slipped him a mickey?"

"Speaking of drama," remarked Mr. Quick, "what an instance of dramatic irony that said weasel was hoist by his own petard—caught red-handed on videotape, just as he'd caught so many others."

Mrs. Benedict grinned with glee. "It's a good thing he wasn't wearing a hidden camera while we were giving him the third degree," she said.

"Just how sure are we," asked Dr. Winstead with a glance over his shoulder, "that he wasn't?"

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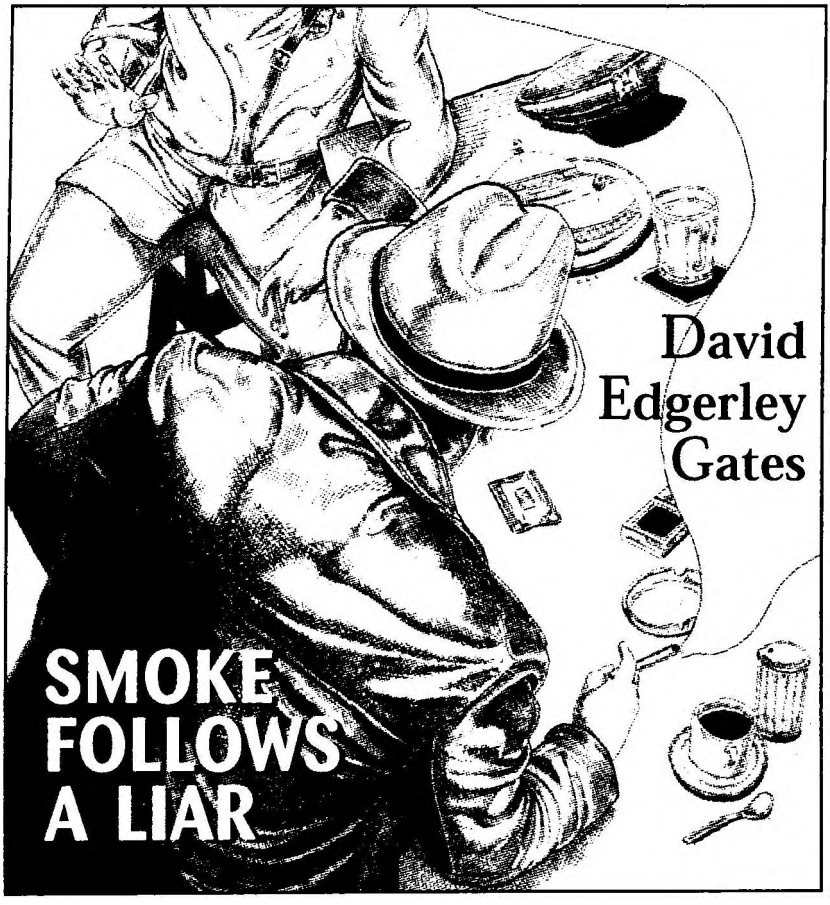


SMOKE FOLLOWS A LIAR

David Edgerley Gates

Johnny Darling paid his debts. I should know. We'd run liquor in from Canada together for Tim Hannah's mob, back before Repeal. Old Tim, him that was, not Young Tim Hannah, who was to be boss after. Old Tim had come up in the Five Points, and he was a rough cob, but he had a certain grace, although it was fact he'd beaten Declan O'Dougherty to death with a sash weight in the early days, some said over an insult to Tim's missus, and the Hannahs weren't a tribe to suffer insult. The point being that Old Tim always treated Johnny with the gravest courtesy, recognizing that loyalty and respect begets its like in return.

And he'd not mistook his man. Johnny was always square with Old Tim, and more than square with me.

Johnny was a college boy, and a handsome mug, who wore good clothes well. Women loved his company. He played the swell, and cultivated an air of danger, but he was no gangster. He had other op-

portunities. Bootlegging was no more than an adventure. I'd grown up in the rackets myself, when a kid from the slums took the low road. Some joined the cops, it's true, but that was only the other side of the same coin. We made an odd pair, me and Johnny, but he never gave me to feel he was my better. I imagined him a natural democrat, and it was part of his charm.

This was all before the Germans and the Japanese and the whole world turned upside down, of course. Johnny joined up right after Pearl Harbor and went to fight in the Pacific. I stayed out of it, thanks to a tame draft board and a job at the Navy Yard, courtesy of Old Tim Hannah, who pieced out the action on the docks.

I didn't see Johnny again until after the war.

It was Christmas, 1947.

Old Tim Hannah had died the week before, not of violence, but in the fullness of his years. Even the Italians came to his funeral, and there had always been an uneasy peace between the Hannahs and the Sicilian *capos.* Frank Costello himself, the most feared Mafia warlord in New York, was there to pay his respects, but for me, the biggest surprise was to see Johnny Darling among the mourners, and know he hadn't come out of hypocrisy.

I caught up with him outside after the service.

We shook hands, and he seemed glad to see me. "You've put on a little weight, Mickey," he said. "The years have been good to you."

I didn't want to tell him I'd sat out the war, but he was kind enough not to ask. I noticed his left leg was now a little crooked, giving him a slight list.

Johnny smiled, unembarrassed for himself. "Souvenir of the Solomons," he told me. "There's a pin in my knee."

I felt awkward, him being a wounded hero and all. I asked what he did with himself these days.

"I took up the family trade," he said.

Me too, I thought without irony. "And what would that be?" I asked him. He'd never said much about it back in the old days when we were smuggling whiskey across the border.

He shrugged. "My father's in railroads, you know."

I didn't, but then the penny dropped. F. J. Darling, the Black Cardinal of Wall Street, so called, onetime confidant of Gould and Fiske, and a robber baron of the old school. I'd thought Johnny's last name but coincidence, or an affectation.

My astonishment must have been plain on my face. "There's a scoundrel calling," I remarked, smiling to take the sting out of it. "I trust you've made an honest man of him."

Johnny gave me his lopsided grin, like in the old days. "I was a grave disappointment to him, failing Yale, and he never knew about

our subsequent adventures, you and me and those cases of so-called Canadian."

"He's proud of you now, sure," I said.

"He didn't believe in the war, either," Johnny said. "It was never our fight, he was America First all the way, and of course he hated Roosevelt for getting us into it, but all that's water under the bridge. I've made my peace with him."

He hadn't convinced me of that, but it wasn't my place to say so. You let friends escape in a small lie when it does them no harm and costs you nothing.

"And you?" Johnny asked.

I'd have thought that was obvious, with my being at Old Tim Hannah's funeral, but I was spared answering.

"Himself would like a word with you," Jerry Feeney muttered in my ear, having snuck on me like the shifty weasel he was.

"I'll be there by and by," I told him. I refrained from saying that "himself" was the man in the coffin, so far as most were concerned, and that Young Tim had yet to gain the respect of his own underbosses, let alone Costello and the Italians, who might begrudge him his station.

"*Now,* he says," Feeney hissed.

"I'll come when I'm damn good and ready, you scut," I said, irritated with his importunity.

Feeney slunk away.

"And who's that one when he's at home?" Johnny asked me.

"Another of the boy king's ready acolytes," I said.

"Ah, so you're still in the muscle."

"Never left," I told him.

We don't always get the choices we want in life, and although I wouldn't deny America is the land of opportunity, social class is destiny, more often than not. This was as true for Johnny Darling as it was for me, and perhaps that's what this story I'm telling you is about.

That year, 1948, was an election year, Dewey running against Truman. Dewey had made his name as a rackets-buster and had gone to Albany on the strength of that reputation, but it was common enough knowledge in some circles that he'd been on the pad, taking hush money from Charlie Luciano. Luciano had been deported just after the war, and it was said that Governor Dewey had reneged on a contract he'd brokered with the Feds to keep Luciano in the country. The skinny went that Naval Intelligence made a deal with Luciano to use his influence with the Mafia in Sicily for their cooperation with the Allied landings.

Now, the compromise or corruption of public officials is nothing new. Surely the Romans and Egyptians weren't strangers to sticky fingers. It's salutary to be reminded, though, that oftentimes the shadow instruments of power were originally vehicles meant to include

those who were excluded from eating at the big table. Tammany is but one example, the Mafia another.

You might think this merely rationalization, or beside the point, but when Johnny Darling came to me with a favor to ask, he needed the kind of service his own connections were powerless to grant, had they even wished to.

"Mickey," he told me, "there's a guy."

He meant a guy more in my line of work, of course, not his.

I waited for the name.

"Leo Quinn," he said.

It took me by surprise. "What's his bother?" I asked.

"Blackmail," Johnny said, never one to beat about the bush.

This was unlike, I thought to myself, there being nothing in the least leonine about Leo Quinn. He was more a squirrelly sort, and the notion he'd have the brass to hold Johnny up for a penny's worth of extortion money took getting used to.

"I'm engaged to be married," Johnny told me, with his quick, crooked smile. "You'd approve of her, Mickey. She's no wallflower. A girl who speaks her mind on most occasions, but has the courtesy to hear you out, if you speak yours."

I offered him my congratulations.

"She's got a brother," he said. "Not entirely foolish, but not particularly wise."

Ah-hah, I thought. Quinn might be daring enough if Johnny himself weren't the mark. Then another idea came to me. "Leo's not the principal," I said. "He's an errand boy."

Johnny nodded, pleased to find me so quick. "Not the best choice for a delicate negotiation," he said. "I don't trust him to see past his own advantage."

"And you want me to stand in for you."

"No," Johnny said. I could see he was slightly affronted. "I wouldn't ask such a thing, although I appreciate the offer. I want to find out who Quinn's acting for. I'm on the periphery of the thing myself, Mickey."

And so it came out, more or less of a piece, but with a little backing and filling, which was only natural. The basic lineaments were these: this girl's brother was in queer street right enough because of his gambling, and he'd put himself in deep to one of the uptown syndicates, but now it seemed somebody else had bought up his markers, for leverage.

"Can you pay off his chits?" I asked.

"I don't know who's holding them, and our friend Leo didn't name a price," he said.

"What is it you're not telling me?" I asked him.

The boy had his leg over the wrong fence in more ways than one, Johnny explained. And there were damning photographs. The late forties might have seen jazz music and women smoking cigarettes in

public and an end to the worst of Jim Crow, but there was no public acknowledgment of The Sin That Dared Not Speak Its Name, although it was whispered about.

I met Benny Escobedo in Jack Sharkey's. Benny was one you could depend on to know the odd corner of New York nightlife.

"Not your patch of ground," he said, when I told him what I was looking for.

"Let me be the judge of that," I told him.

He gave me a funny look.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," I said.

Benny shrugged. He wasn't a man to express his opinion if it were unwelcome. In that sense, he was honest.

He sent me down to the Village, which wasn't unexpected. I suppose I anticipated secret signs at the door, or a bouncer giving me the fish-eye through a peephole like the old days during Prohibition, when you had to give up a name to get into a deadfall or a blind pig, but those who led the lavender life weren't as shy about it as you might have assumed. I thought to find circumspection, but there were no half measures here. I was puzzled by it at first, but the Bohemians, after all, made a thing out of flouting convention, and this was of a piece. In the event, I got nothing out of it but a collection of cocktail matchbooks, some with telephone numbers written inside. In this landscape, it appeared I was the exotic.

Next morning, I took a more direct approach and went after Leo Quinn. He was harder to get a line on than I figured. Nobody would admit to seeing him over the past day or so, and this in itself was strange. Most people I spoke to were simply indifferent to Leo's whereabouts, but a few of them actively avoided looking me in the eye when I asked, which caused me to realize I wasn't the first to inquire after him. I thought this disquieting.

Leo Quinn was a creature of habit and was usually to be found below Penn Station and east of Sixth Avenue, no small distance from the Empire State Building. He was a part-time runner for a bookmaker by name of Fingers Moran with a drop on lower Broadway.

I knew of a tame harness bull in the 43rd, one Leary, who took up the collection. I'm not speaking now of the offertory at St. Brigid's, but the weekly pad. Leary was the 43rd's bagman, and he picked up the precinct payoffs at Moran's knocking shop. I tracked him down in a small saloon off Madison, drinking from a pitcher of draft beer with his tunic undone and helping himself to the free lunch displayed on the bar. Leary was of the old school and took graft as his due. I didn't doubt the beer was on the house, too. Beat cops in those days were paid protection as a matter of course.

Leary looked at me with his mouth full. He was a beefy joker with

a face full of broken veins, very nearly a cartoon of himself, the crooked uniform cop gone shapeless and seedy.

I put my foot on the rail and asked for a coffee.

Leary regarded me with neither curiosity nor malice. He took a swallow of beer to chase down his corned beef. "You'd be Mickey Counihan, bare knuckles for the Hannah organization," he said. "I heard you was about the neighborhood. Little off your graze, ain't it?"

"I wanted a word with Leo Quinn," I told him.

"And why would the Hannahs be wanting such a word, and with himself such a wee ferret?" he asked, squinting at me.

The bartender brought me my coffee and had sense enough to move out of earshot again.

"I've a question to put to him," I said.

"Ach, haven't you put questions to him enough?"

I didn't like this. Leary had the advantage of me, and he knew it. I folded a twenty and dropped it on the bar. It was a lot of money for what was likely very little return.

"I don't truck with the Hannahs," he said, rather stiff.

"You're a whore, Leary," I said. "You'd step over a dollar to pick up a dime."

"We look after our own," he said. "You think we'll let a bunch of Harp toughs muscle in on our turf? I saw what was left of the little fella. You ought to be ashamed."

This was why those who already knew hadn't met my eyes. They'd thought I was establishing my own alibi, or a cover story for the Hannahs. "When did this happen?" I asked Leary.

"We pulled him out of the East River by Bellevue not six hours ago," he said. "Naked he was, and his skin blistered with cigarette burns. You've a strong stomach, Mickey."

There was no point in telling him it hadn't been me. "I won't take your money, you barstid," he said.

I picked up the bill and turned it between my fingers. "Who profits by it?" I asked. "Not the Hannahs if it makes for bad blood."

But he was dull man, without speculation, and his eye on an easy chance. He had no more to tell me.

"What do you make of it?" Johnny asked me.

We were in a bar on Third Avenue, under the El, which meant it was a shadowy place, even in early afternoon.

"It suggests he was striking out on his own," I said.

Johnny nodded. "Uncharacteristic," he remarked.

"And it further suggests the event was precipitated by your upcoming wedding," I said.

"Where do you get that?" he asked.

"If your fiancée's brother is no stranger to these dens of iniquity—" His

name was Julian and the girl's name was Elizabeth, but I'd been avoiding using either one out of delicacy. Johnny smiled at that phrase and put me at ease. In truth, I'd found the places I'd visited harmless enough.

"You were saying," he prompted me.

"Consider the timing," I said.

Julian Barnaby's problems were of his own making, and they were nothing new. His family had bought him out of scrapes in the past, from what Johnny told me, to mitigate disgrace. It seemed obvious to me that Johnny himself was the new ingredient.

He considered it, and agreed with me.

"Where were you, by the by, last evening?" I meant when Quinn was killed. I didn't think him capable of torture, but it was only sensible to eliminate Johnny as a possibility.

He narrowed his eyes. I didn't withdraw the question. He shrugged, seeing it was unnecessary to be offended by it. "I had dinner with my father," he said. "At the Yale Club. I was his guest, of course. I'm not entitled to apply for membership."

I thought his self-deprecation a little too studied. "Your father's a man of no small influence," I said.

"You think his writ runs to bookies like Fingers Moran?" he asked, and he didn't mean it as a joke, either.

"That wasn't where I was going," I said. "Leo Quinn is small change—or *was,* I should say. He got wind of something and thought he could set you up for a quick buck, but somebody's playing for higher stakes. As a result, Quinn's dead."

Johnny had always been a quick study, and I suspect he'd already turned this over in his mind. "You think it involves my father," he said.

"You told me yourself that Leo didn't name a price," I said to him. "It could be something other than money."

"Or it could be a great deal of money," Johnny said.

"A great deal of money makes a man thoughtful," I remarked. "And less precipitate."

He saw what I was getting at. "A thoughtful man might have stayed his hand," he said, musing out loud.

"Or at least dumped Leo's body in Sheepshead Bay," I said.

There was an uneasy truce now between the Hannahs on the West Side and the Irish clans in lower Midtown, and if the Italians chose to take advantage of it, they couldn't have picked a better time. Our divisions were historical. A mob like Old Tim Hannah's went back to the Bowery gangs, the Dead Rabbits and the Plug-Uglies, whereas the Mafia families took after the Black Hand. An old-time *mafioso* like Maranzano would never have thrown his hand in with anyone who wasn't Sicilian, but these days they did business with Jews, Germans, the colored rings who ran numbers and drugs

in Harlem, even the Irish. It was a marriage of convenience. Nobody doubted, all the same, that a man like Frank Costello would sell us out for chump change or to avenge an insult or, most likely, to consolidate the Syndicate presence. What none of us guessed at the time was that the Five Families were about to go to war with each other.

None of this was an immediate help, however. Fingers Moran had got the wind up with his people, who claimed the protection of Owney Madden, a onetime nightclub owner and gaming kingpin. There was nothing for it but a negotiation, and the man the two sides chose was Avram Lapidus, Abe the Diamond, a Litvak or a Ukrainian—stories differed—in any event, a tough nut out of the Lower East Side who had the skills and nerve to bring about an accommodation.

We arranged a meeting at Duke's in Jersey, a restaurant owned by Joe Adonis. I went with Young Tim and we brought Feeney along for comfort. Owney Madden came himself with Moran and a hard young slick who reminded me overmuch of Bugsy Siegel—the same sharp tailoring and sleepy eyes. We repaired to a private room upstairs, and Abe the Diamond brought us to order, reminding everybody that we weren't to speak out of turn. He asked Fingers Moran the cause of the grievance.

Well, it was about muscle, Moran said. Now that Old Tim was dead, his son wanted to prove himself by leaning on Madden's turf. Before, it had been live and let live.

Young Tim put up with a good deal more of this than was needful out of politeness and finally told Moran he was a fool if he really believed any of it.

There were more sharp words, and Abe the Diamond tapped his pencil on the table. The argument subsided.

Abe invited Moran to give better evidence.

"Hannah's man Feeney was seen squiring Leo Quinn the night he was killed," Moran said. "And another Hannah man came around the day after to paper it over." He looked in my direction.

It was news to me that Feeney had been in Quinn's company, but now I saw how it looked. I was standing just behind Young Tim's chair, and I bent down next to his ear. "It's a frame," I murmured.

He nodded.

Owney Madden spoke for the first time. He cultivated a languid air, as if these details were beneath him, but every man at the table knew he'd personally taken out Mad Dog Coll years before when Vinnie put a price on his head. "I have to agree with Tim Hannah," Madden said. His accent, once Cockney, had been smoothed away by his time in New York. "I see no benefit."

Fingers Moran puffed up, but Abe Lapidus waved him down.

"I lay this at no man's door," Owney said. "Feeney might have been

placing a bet." He smiled. "We all stand to lose by this feud. We might better ask who stands to gain."

He meant Costello and the Italians, of course, but this was a direction Abe the Diamond thought best not to explore. After all, we were in Joe Adonis's place, a common meeting ground for the New York *capos.* It was unseemly, an abuse of form, perhaps, and then the walls had ears.

I didn't imagine the problem was solved, although the meeting broke up with handshakes all around. Owney wasn't a man to forgive a slight, and if he felt himself threatened, he'd move briskly and without remorse. As for Costello, I asked myself why he'd precipitate such a muddied quarrel. And last, I asked Feeney what he was doing with Quinn.

He bridled and made to give me a short answer. We were crossing the George Washington Bridge back into Manhattan. To my surprise, Young Tim brought Feeney up with a tug on his leash. "We're being played for suckers," Young Tim Hannah said. "You've got no secrets from me."

"I owed him money," Feeney said, grudgingly. "I had no way of paying it off. I asked him for time, is all there was."

He was lying, or at least holding back some of the truth, and Tim Hannah knew that as well as I did, but neither one of us called him on it, more's the pity.

There was a thing left undone that I wondered I hadn't thought of before. When you walk back the cat, as the expression has it, you should start with first causes. I went uptown, not to Lenox Avenue north of 116th, where dark complexions can turn hostile to a white one, like as not, but beyond upper Broadway on the West Side, just below the Bronx, overlooking the river.

The gambling dens in Washington Heights had come to be known as carpet joints in the trade. They were remodeled brownstones or detached townhouses, very genteel, with doormen in livery, and the muscle discreet, some even wearing black tie.

The pad was heavy, with uniforms assigned to keep the blocks safe, and the skim to the precinct captains running as high as twenty percent of the house, but then they were expected to pay off down the line, a common enough arrangement for out-of-pocket expenses. The clubs made serious money.

You needed an invite, or a sponsor, or a known face. I had the last although this was in some respects a handicap.

It took a while, of course. I couldn't simply come out and ask. Julian Barnaby was well known in these circles, but I had no good reason to put questions and raise suspicions. I was on my third visit before I happened into the right talk.

The pit boss was Feathers McCarthy, a cousin of my mother's from the old neighborhood. I remembered him as a pudgy boy, no bigger

than a fire hydrant, but he was sleek now, with the gloss of bespoke clothes. We stepped into the street for a smoke.

He leaned down into the match. "I know him," he said. "A plunger." He straightened and picked a flake of tobacco off his tongue. "Doubles his bets when he loses, looks to see a system in the wheel, and wonders why it won't turn his way. The kind who imagines more than chance."

"*Is* it?" I asked him.

He grinned at me. "Chance robs the blind," he said. "We don't need to gimmick the wheels, or load the dice, or mark the cards. The house evens out. Someone like Julian Barnaby thinks it's a plot laid by the gods, but it's a conspiracy of one."

"Who bought up his markers?" I asked.

McCarthy stiffened. "I don't talk out of turn, and I keep my own confidences," he said. "Don't ask something I'm not free to tell you."

In the end, I broke some of his fingers to get what I wanted, and it made me feel small to have to do it. He wasn't a bad sort, although needlessly stubborn. I admired his loyalty.

"Owney Madden," I told Johnny.

"It doesn't add up," he said.

"No," I said. "It doesn't. There's a piece missing."

"More than one, I'd imagine."

"You talk to your father?"

"About this?" Johnny asked. "He'd laugh at me. What would Julian's disgrace be to him?"

"Then where's the leverage?" I asked. "With you?"

He shook his head. "I love Elizabeth and respect her, but I can only do so much," he said.

"So you'd let her brother go down?"

"Sticks and stones will break my bones," he said.

"Nobody's calling you a dirty name," I said.

"And if they did, I could tough it out."

"There's been no direct contact?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "None," he said.

I was puzzled. "Quinn came to you with blackmail on his mind, or so we've assumed," I said. "And then he wound up dead. Why hasn't somebody else come forward in his place?"

"Perhaps they're frightened."

"Or biding their time."

"Because it's not short-term," he said.

I considered this. "I'd like to talk to Julian Barnaby," I said. "Your brother-in-law to be."

"You can't put the screws to him, Mickey," Johnny said.

"I hadn't thought of it," I said, "but if it comes to that, better me than you."

He studied me, trying to decide whether I was in earnest or not. "He's on the sensitive side," he said at last.

"As are we all, Johnny," I said, smiling. "As are we all."

I could have easily broken Jerry Feeney's fingers, too, to get more out of him, and had half a mind to, but someone beat me to it. He was found in a parked car by the Fulton piers, under the Manhattan approaches to the Brooklyn Bridge, his skin scabbed with cigarette burns. I thought of Owney Madden's hard boy with the sleepy eyes, who put me in mind of Benny Siegel.

"You think it's the Micks or the dagoes?" Young Tim Hannah asked me.

"I vote the Micks," I said, "sorry as I am." I didn't want to bring Johnny Darling's name into this just yet. I knew it might be a mistake to keep my silence, but I'd never had such power before to precipitate a gang war by choosing not to speak up, and I suddenly swelled with my secret knowledge.

Besides, it had to be Owney. Who else would dare?

Who could be so easily led? I thought later, but of myself.

I met Julian Barnaby for the first time over drinks at a club on 52nd Street. It was early evening, and the band wouldn't start for another two hours. Coleman Hawkins, the tenor man. I liked jazz, and I was thinking about staying on, but Julian put me off my feed.

Johnny was trying to explain things, in a veiled way, and I finally had to cut across the blarney.

"Listen," I said, "two men are dead, and my feeling is that it leads right back to you, sport, so let's deal the cards."

Julian gave me an absolutely blank look, as though I were a grifter on Broadway shaking a tin cup.

"Mickey, uh—" Johnny began, trying for a more civil tone.

"No," I said, interrupting. "We haven't heard word one from Mr. Bojangles here, and me, I'd like to know what he thinks he's playing at."

"Your friend's a little shirty, isn't he?" Julian remarked.

He said it to Johnny, not even acknowledging me.

Now that got to me, and Johnny knew it. I don't believe I was predisposed to any animosity toward Julian. His sexual adventures were of no concern to me, or so I told myself, and Julian wasn't particularly swishy, but he had a condescending manner that stuck in my craw. If you were to ask me now, what I heard and despised was the drawl of privilege. He took no responsibility. It was beneath him to account for his actions. The rest of us were only walk-ons.

Johnny set himself, shifting his weight slightly, ready to block me when I lurched across the table at the oblivious little squirt. In the event, I surprised him.

I held my temper, but not my tongue. "I honestly don't think you know the risk you're running," I said to Julian. "In fact, I'd say you're incapable of understanding it. I'll try and explain it, if I may. Owney Madden's got your markers, but you owe him your life, and you can't buy your way out of a blood debt."

Julian looked at Johnny, expecting a translation.

"You're not bulletproof, Julian," Johnny said.

"Oh, but I am," Julian said. "I've got insurance."

I took a shot in the dark. "F. J. Darling will throw you to the wolves."

Julian Barnaby gave me his complete attention for the first time at the mention of Johnny's father.

"You're no more to him than a damp spot on the pavement," I said. "He'll wipe you off his foot."

Julian had recovered his careless air. "You don't know from Shinola," he said, dismissing me. He got to his feet and gazed down thoughtfully at Johnny. "I'd think about the company you keep," he said and walked away.

Johnny looked at me.

"Leo Quinn wasn't a go-between for Owney Madden," I said to him. "He was carrying water for Julian."

"How do you figure?"

"Julian's working both sides of the street," I said.

Later that same evening I went to the Stork. Owney Madden had owned the Cotton Club, one of the city's more glittering water holes, and then he'd spent some time in Hot Springs, Arkansas, a wide-open gambling town, but reform had shut it down, and Owney had come back to New York, none the worse for wear. There was a story making the rounds he'd invested in Benny Siegel's desert venture, a town called Las Vegas, out in Nevada, since the state had legalized casino gaming. I was more interested in the here and now, and Owney was a regular at the Stork, with a table near Winchell's. The newspaper columnist cultivated mob contacts.

I asked for Owney at the headwaiter's station, and he led me across the room. Owney glanced up and saw me coming. He slipped out from his banquette before I got to the table, but I certainly had no intention of embarrassing him in public. I had no need to make him an enemy.

We stepped over toward the rest rooms.

"Well, speak your piece, Mickey," he said.

I knew he'd heard about Feeney, if in fact he hadn't given the orders to see it done. "Feeney and Quinn were running a badger game. What's happened to them since might be laid at your door. If you can give me reason not to believe it, I may be able to pour oil on troubled waters."

"Young Tim send you?"

I could have said yes, but I told him no. It was up to him whether he gave it credit.

"What's your stake in this, then?" he asked me.

"It's a personal matter," I said.

"It could have an unhappy end for all of us," he said.

"Julian Barnaby," I said. "You covered his paper. Which makes it seem as though you're the *éminence grise* behind Quinn's move against the Barnaby family."

Owney frowned.

I glanced around the club. "Where's the hard boy?" I asked him. "Your understudy."

"I didn't have a hand in this," Owney said.

"No, but your hand's going to be forced," I told him. "Tim Hannah won't take it lying down."

He didn't want to admit he was in the dark, so he had to be careful what questions he put to me.

"I'll make it easier on you," I said. "Julian Barnaby's queer in more ways than one. My guess is that he wants to score on F. J. Darling."

Owney was no fool. He simply nodded, assimilating it.

"You understand the position I'm in," I said.

"I understand the position you've put *me* in," he said.

I shrugged. "The cards have been dealt," I said. "We play them the best we can."

"You've done me a good turn, Mickey, if it turns out you're on the square," he said. "I won't forget it."

I didn't mean to let him forget it. "Talk's cheap, Owney," I said. "We'll see where it leads."

Where it led was obvious, to my mind. Johnny had a blind spot. But maybe I did too. I'd imagined the blackmail to be extracurricular, having nothing to do with the Hannahs or the rest of the gangs. That was a distraction, a conscious one, certainly, but accidental or fortuitous, not part and parcel of the deception. I was mistaken.

Now, the bloodletting that followed among the Five Families was *very* Italian and settled longstanding grievances, I'm sure, but I still wonder to what degree it was contrived.

Contrived in the sense of the flames being fanned. There were competing influences at work, on the docks, with contract trucking and linen services, in wholesale fish and meat and produce. Everybody had a piece of the action, and if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I remembered Owney's remark, Who stands to benefit? The mob war that followed benefited nobody.

Then again, who came out on top, after the *capos* exhausted themselves? Capital, when all is said and done. I'm no Red, by any means, but who's kidding who?

This was something I worked out for myself afterwards, of course, but I must have had some intimation of it, or I wouldn't have been so fixed on the course I took.

Now, the rich, we know from observation or report, live insulated lives. They don't mix with crowds or suffer the hem of their garments to touch the ground. F. J. Darling was no different from the rest of his caste, but I had it on good authority he lunched at Fraunces Tavern when business took him down to Wall Street. This was no gin mill, but a genuine historical curiosity, opened by a Creole from the West Indies in 1762. George Washington gave a party there for his officers on one occasion. And of course when the Black Cardinal was on his way, somebody always called ahead for the private dining room.

A place like Fraunces has a reputation for discretion to maintain, an equity easily wasted and hard to win back if compromised. In the event, I pulled rank. The back end of a restaurant offers many opportunities. Suffice it to say that Hannah interests had a percentage of wholesale in lower Manhattan and were in a position to do favors for selected buyers, the reverse being true as well. Nobody pays market price when a better deal is offered, and the chief steward at Fraunces was open to inducement. We came to an agreement, purely handshake, nothing on paper. My next problem was how to keep it quiet from my boss and his nest of informers. I thought I might have a day, at most, so I was gambling that F. J. Darling would be taking his ease in Fraunces by the morrow, and so it developed.

As it happened, however, getting in to see Johnny's dad was my only piece of luck. The outcome I should have foreseen.

Fraunces is at the corner of Pearl and Broad. This is *old* New York—New Amsterdam, in fact. When they dig down for the foundations of new buildings, they find oyster shell middens left by the Indians and Negro burial grounds from slave days.

This part of the city *was* the city, all there was in bygone times, forted up behind a stockade, which is where Wall Street got its name. North of it was wild and untamed, before it was turned into farmland later. You can still see the haphazard imprint of the Dutch in lower Manhattan, and of course there's a warren of alleyways behind the storefronts for deliveries.

I waited on the loading dock for my signal.

F. J. Darling had been given the Governor George Clinton room, a private retreat not open to the public. I was slipped in with the cold fish and the hot soup as they were set on the buffet. It was an intimate, cozy space with a fireplace and a number of oil paintings on the walls of Revolutionary heroes. But there was no talk of revolution. The men gathered here were cushioned from the guillotine by breeding and long practice.

I wasn't wearing an apron, only a reasonably good suit, but it was plain I'd overstepped my place. There was still nothing for it but the

straightforward approach, in spite of the looks I got. The funny thing was that no one intercepted me, as if the very notion I had business there was too ridiculous to take notice of. They must have thought I was a busboy captain, out of uniform, certainly not well dressed enough to be the wine steward. President McKinley must have wondered who the odd gent in broadcloth was, too, before the man produced his pistol.

"It's about Johnny," I murmured into his father's ear, like a waiter in passing, not meeting anyone's gaze.

F. J. Darling peeled away like a trout following the lure, but so smoothly he gave no offense to the men he was talking to, nor gave them any indication he had an interest in me.

I went and stood by a plant, next to the window. There was a portrait of some Puritan divine hung beside me.

"You've been to some trouble," the Black Cardinal said. He took a glass from a tray being passed, his back to me.

"Julian Barnaby intends a scheme for profit," I said. "Can he do you harm?"

F. J. Darling studied the room, champagne glass in hand.

"Your son's trying to protect you," I said. "I admire his decency, but I suspect his faith in you is misplaced. I imagine you'd have no more loyalty to Julian Barnaby than to a gob of spit on your shoe. My question is, what's Julian after, and why should you care?"

"And who, exactly, do you purport to be?" he asked. He was soft with the question, but he was quiet with outrage.

This was no time to shimmy-shammy around the answer. "I'm a bull moose with the Hannah crowd," I told him. "I know that Owney Madden holds Julian Barnaby's gambling chits. I know that Julian threatened your son, in some obscure way. I don't know why you haven't put Julian out of his misery, but perhaps you thought to spare his family pain, or yourself the inconvenience. So, at bottom, what's Julian got on you?"

Johnny's father turned around and looked at me in absolute astonishment. I knew it was feigned, but his impersonation of disingenuousness was so utterly trustworthy I almost fell for it myself.

The rest was humiliation. I was ushered out with little ceremony. I had to think, though, that afterward, standing in back of the restaurant, it was no more than a small step from here to the Fulton fish piers, where Jerry Feeney had been found dead, his flesh puckered with fresh burns.

"The Italians would appear to have problems of their own," Young Tim said to me.

"So it seems," I agreed.

This was an understatement. There was now open warfare among the major Mafia families for control of the docks, the gambling, drugs, and the major protection rackets. All the small-time scavengers were

keeping their heads down. Tim Hannah felt he was big enough to broker a larger piece of the action for himself and his. I thought he might be right. The risk, as Young Tim knew full well, was in attracting too much attention.

"Where do you think Owney's in this?" he asked.

Owney Madden had always held his place in fief to the old Sicilian mob, Maranzano's people. Tim was asking whether Madden had thrown his lot in with Costello. "I don't know," I said.

"Find out, then," Tim Hannah told me.

Easier said than done, I admit. Then again, I had a notion where to start.

I went back up to Washington Heights that night. Feathers McCarthy, three fingers of his left hand in splints, was in no voice to spend time with me over idle talk, but the Hannah writ ran large enough that he couldn't keep me out of the club. I was genuinely sorry for what I'd had to do, and told him so, but he wasn't consoled by a makeshift apology.

"He's in the back, ye barstid," Feathers said.

I offered him a fifty, folded in half.

He spat on my money and turned away.

Like most rug joints, tables in the front room had low minimum bets. The serious action was in smaller, private rooms, farther back from the street. A bouncer let me pass.

The only house game that gives you even half a chance is blackjack, where at least you get some play for your money. And with craps, the trick's in knowing how to bet, with or against the shooter, so it takes more than you can afford to lose to learn the odds. Roulette, of course, is for suckers, people who imagine they can beat the laws of physics.

The roulette table, as a matter of course, is where I found Julian Barnaby.

He was a mug, playing a mug's game. Always betting black, at two-to-one, doubling when he lost to recover his losses and letting it ride when he won instead of backing off the wager. The math was against him, but he had the fever, you could see it in his concentration.

I like poker myself, a quiet game among friends, for table stakes, say, but no more than a quarter or fifty cents a raise until the last card, which means you can only lose twenty or thirty dollars a hand. All the same, with cards, unlike life, every deal starts clean, the clock begins again, each hand is a new opportunity. You see what I'm saying here. I might have thought Julian a fool, throwing money away, but I understood his impulse, his raw optimism, his—dare I say it?—innocence.

Still, he wasn't an innocent, any more than I was. Julian had chosen to throw in his lot with ruthless men, and it was his misfortune to be a rabbit penned with wolves.

I didn't have to wait long for him to burn through what chips he had left. He asked to sign a chit, of course, and Feathers McCarthy, as pit boss,

came over to the table to countersign Julian's marker. I put myself right behind them, standing a little too close for good manners.

Julian turned, affecting to stare me down. In his circles, that might have been enough, but I had thicker skin.

"Taking the long view doesn't seem to be your strong suit," I remarked.

He didn't appear to recognize me.

"A word with you," I said, deferential, taking him by the left arm. It looked a gentle touch, but I had him just above the elbow, my thumb digging into the nerve, pinning it against bone, so all sensation was gone in his wrist and hand, while at the exact point of pressure, it would have felt like an auger. Julian cast a despairing look at Feathers McCarthy, but Feathers glanced away, humiliated. He knew better than to interfere.

Like many New York tenements and apartment blocks, there was an enclosed space in the middle, an airshaft or a courtyard, say, or in this case, a garden. The townhouses fronted the street, but in back, they gave on terraced landscaping, some indifferent ornamental sculpture, a concrete goldfish pond, dry, it happened. The garden was dark but not uninviting.

I ushered Julian Barnaby out through the French doors.

Julian broke away from me and lit a cigarette with shaking hands. We were in shadow, unobserved.

"Owney's going to call in your debt," I said. "What do you figure to pay him with, information?"

"I'll see you in hell, you Irish plug," he hissed at me.

"Ach, but you're the tiresome one, you are," I sighed. I hit him straight from the shoulder, punching him just under the heart.

He staggered and dropped to his knees on the gravel. I caught him by the tie to keep him from falling on his back and jerked his face up to mine. He was having difficulty breathing, so I gave his airway a little slack.

"This is nothing, you stupid bint," I told him through clenched teeth. "Owney Madden's got a hard boy who'll take your flesh from the bone and boil your eyes for soup."

He coughed, trying to clear his windpipe.

"What did you think you were about, boyo?" I asked him. "Did you imagine there'd be no consequences? You've put yourself in the terlet, right enough, and I'm the one who's here to flush you down the bog, if you don't speak your piece."

Julian, of course, was having trouble getting his diaphragm to work properly, and his brain was short on oxygen.

I shook him again, mostly for show, but the state he was in, it must have felt rough enough. "Nothing to tell me, then?" I inquired. "You useless scut. I'll finish you here."

He pawed at my wrists, his eyes bulging.

I let him drop.

Julian bent over, gagging, clutching his chest.

Lest you think I took pleasure in my performance, you can think again. Some men enjoy bullying the helpless, and it answers some inner need. I did what I did out of necessity, but it gave me only a queasy satisfaction.

Julian was weeping, and when I squatted down beside him, he flinched away.

"Don't be ashamed," I said. "Strong men break. A weaker man bends, or finds his own courage. Or not." I almost smiled, but he'd been condescended to enough. "Come on, up with you. Wipe your nose." I gave him a handkerchief as I helped him to his feet. "Understand me, now," I told him. "No one's going to come to your rescue. Not your sister's future father-in-law or Owney Madden or Feathers McCarthy. There's nobody here to help you but me."

He snuffled, thinking no doubt of his dignity.

"Don't trifle with me," I advised him.

He told me, naturally, what he knew, and although it was incomplete, what Julian told me was enough to fill in the larger picture. You only had to see it from a different angle.

It was obvious, in retrospect, and why I'd overlooked it, I leave to you.

The answer, of course, is that I had a blind spot, and the blind spot was Johnny.

"Owney's a gambler," I told him.

He nodded. "And?"

"They say he put up money with Benny Siegel, looking to get in on the ground floor out there in Nevada."

"Bugsy Siegel's dead," Johnny said.

True enough. Somebody had put a .30 caliber carbine round through Benny's eye the year before while he sat on the couch in his girlfriend's Hollywood bungalow.

Johnny studied my face. "What's the connection?" he asked.

"There's two schools of thought," I said. "One is that Owney got burned and needs to recoup his losses. The other is that he had an active hand in the hit."

"How would that further?"

"Benny Siegel was no choirboy," I said. "He was a cold killer with a mean streak. But he had an idea approaching genius. And that idea is Las Vegas, if something can be made of it. All it takes is money."

"Siegel got pushed out by people with bigger ambitions?"

"More or less," I said.

"Who? The Mafia families here in New York?"

"A little closer to home than that," I told him.

He stared at me.

"Owney Madden's gone partners with your father," I said.

Johnny barked out a short laugh. "Don't be daft," he said, but his skepticism was unconvincing.

"Oh, they've found common ground, right enough," I said. "After all, what bigger gamble than the stock market? Although from what I hear, the Black Cardinal only likes to bet on a sure thing. Owney Madden's offered to fix the game for him."

"Where do you come by this?"

"Julian Barnaby. He's got a foot in both camps. I think Owney, though, must have first seen the advantage in cultivating kinship relations. He has an eye for the main chance."

"As does my father," Johnny admitted.

"There's no crime in being a farsighted investor," I said. "Real estate, hotels."

"Las Vegas is a whistle-stop on the transcontinental."

"It can be made more than that. A destination. Your dad's a railroad man. He doesn't need it spelled out for him."

"You needed to spell it out for me."

"Well, there it is," I said, getting up from the table. It was early to be drinking, and we'd only had coffee.

He looked up, surprised to see me going.

"Oh, and Johnny," I said, turning back, as if this one last thing had nearly slipped my mind. "You should have told me."

He didn't have the face to brazen it out, not with me.

"Leo Quinn never came to you with blackmail on his mind," I said. "You sought him out yourself, and put him on the scent. Feeney, well." I shrugged. "The world's no worse a place with both of them out of it. And as for your fiancée's brother, not much loss, truth be told, if someone fits him for a pair of cement shoes. But me? I expected better of you. Then again, I know you now for your father's son."

"Mickey," he said, finally meeting my eyes.

"Don't waste your breath," I told him and walked out.

"It's not the Italians," I told Tim Hannah. "It's not the Mafia at all. Owney wants to go legit."

Young Tim gave me a skeptical look, as well he might. "Why kill Feeney?" he asked.

I was certain enough Feeney was Owney's doing, as I now laid the torture and murder of Leo Quinn at his door, but I was unready to go halves with Tim Hannah just yet. You may say I owed Tim Hannah my livelihood and my allegiance, and Johnny Darling nothing after he'd betrayed me—as they say, in small, in large—but I was loath to tell what I knew.

"What's troubling you?" Tim Hannah asked.

Here again, a narrow answer seemed best. "Frank Costello and the godfathers have their own fish to fry, and we're well out of it," I said.

"We might look to pick up a piece here and there while their attention's distracted in killing each other off, but that's the short term. Owney's looking at the long game, how to position himself afterwards. So what bothers me is his impatience."

Hannah heard me out and appeared satisfied. "Feeney could have been done with less flash," he said.

"Feeney and Quinn both," I said.

"Is he sending us a message?"

"No, not us," I said.

Tim Hannah was no fool. His eyes narrowed.

"Owney's in league with other interests, so far as I can determine," I told him. This was as far as I dared go, but it would be enough to put Hannah on board. "Give me a little rope, maybe we can hang him with it."

The danger here was that Hannah would catch me in a lie, so the trick was to seem both transparent and obscure, to appear guileless on the one hand and unsure of my information on the other. The less said, in other words, the better.

Young Tim went along with me, in any case. It might have been better had I not held out on him, but I told myself that my private concerns needn't interfere with his grander designs.

This was, of course, self-serving.

There was, however, something I'd neglected to consider. Owney Madden was a dapper, sophisticated, and altogether calculating man, but in temperament he wasn't that far removed from his dead partner Bugsy Siegel. Sudden to anger and slow to forgive an injury. Owney *never* forgave, not to put too fine a point on it. In this, he was almost Italian, or Irish.

I was sharply reminded of my oversight later in the day.

It was toward the end of afternoon, that odd, luminous hour when the clock is suspended and time expands and stills, with dusk hovering. But the light swells, thickening, settling like a snowfall. The dust and noise of this enormous, sweaty city fall away. Kids are playing stickball. Their voices carry. New York seems to inhale, hugely, the great lungs or bellows of its engine taking a deep breath at twilight, a pause between the raucous day and the fevered, clandestine night.

I was briefly spellbound. But all it takes is a moment's inattention. They had me in that one peripheral moment.

Somebody brushed against me from behind and apologized, hurrying past. It was meant to distract me, and it did. I'd been daydreaming. The two in front were inside my guard before I had time to react.

I was pinned between them, two guns jammed in my belly. A heavy, dark car slid up to the curb, almost noiselessly. It was pre-war, a Packard V-12, plenty of power, solid coachwork. You could probably

shoot off a bottle rocket inside, and with the windows rolled up the guy next to you in traffic wouldn't hear a pop, which I took no comfort in knowing.

There was plenty of room in back for the four of us, the two gun handlers like bookends next to me on the bench seat, the guy who'd jostled me from behind taking one of the jump seats and pulling the rear door closed. The driver put the car in gear and drove us off.

It still seemed like twilight, although I imagined it was fully dark outside by now. These were men who liked the dark for their business. Being in the trade myself, I understood, but I expected no professional courtesies from this crowd.

They'd brought me up two flights of stairs. It was an abandoned warehouse, somewhere near the Fulton piers, Peck Slip or South Street. I was tied in a chair, the chair bolted to the concrete floor. There was a single light, the unshielded bulb in my face, the three of them back behind the light. Off to my right, a cigarette glowed in the shadows. I knew who that would be.

He stepped into the light, and I was proved right. Owney Madden's young tough with the feral look that had reminded me overmuch of Benny Siegel. "Word has it that you're a hard one," he said, drawling the words.

"No more than most, a good less than some," I told him.

He took a long drag on his smoke and exhaled up toward the steel trusses that arched overhead. He turned the cigarette in his fingers, studying the hot ash at the tip. I wondered if this was where they'd dragged Feeney and Leo Quinn, where he'd worked them over with lit cigarettes until they told him what he wanted to know. "This doesn't have to be painful," he said.

I didn't believe that. If, indeed, I'd known what he wanted, I would have given it up readily to spare myself what I knew was coming. But the immediate fact was that it was coming, and nothing I could say would stop it. You could see it in that heavy-lidded gaze. He was looking forward to it.

He read my expression and smiled.

I tried anyhow. I was a dead man either way, and I'd rather have it quick than slow. "Owney's putting together a package with himself as front man, and F. J. Darling as his silent partner." I thought about how that sounded. "Or perhaps the reverse," I mused. "Owney knows the casino business, the Black Cardinal knows real estate and railroads. When all is said and done, they're both capitalists. Julian Barnaby's into Owney for gambling markers. He put the two of them together. I imagine it's dangerous knowledge, should word leak out of their venture. I wonder how long it's going to be before Julian finds himself in this same chair."

"Who else knows?" he asked me lazily. "The gimp?"

I'd wanted to keep Johnny out of it, just as I had with Hannah. "Owney has to realize that if he goes after Johnny, the deal with his father falls through," I said.

Owney's tough boy smiled again. "The girl's brother stands surety," he said.

I understood now. Julian had said he was protected. He meant Johnny had to keep quiet, or he'd see Julian dead. How would Johnny explain it to Julian's sister, almost his wife? It would all come tumbling out, if I knew Johnny. The bootlegging, the mob connections, the fact that he had it in his hand to save her brother and didn't. And so I finally saw the fork Johnny had been put in and why he had come to me. It had nothing to do with shame or advantage. He was only trying to rescue Julian. And they'd counted on it. It was a bitter pill to swallow to choke on your own sense of honor.

"Took you long enough to work it out," the hard boy said.

It was of course no help to me in my present circumstance and little satisfaction.

"Time to begin," he said, stepping forward.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him he could do something unsavory with his mother, but he'd have me weeping and begging soon enough, I knew. Why give him more pleasure in my disgrace? It was sure to be unpleasant. I'd lose control of my bladder and bowels, and the rest, hopefully, would be silence.

I retreated into myself, into that silence, and the gunshot was very loud, ringing off the concrete and the girders.

Owney's hard boy took a step back, gagging on the bullet in his throat. The look on his face was one of absolute surprise.

Then he folded slowly, going to his knees. He was still staring at me, disappointed and betrayed, as he fell dead on his face.

The others were scurrying behind the lights, in a panic. The next shots were evenly spaced, picking them off deliberately one by one. BANG. Pause, while the shooter found his target. BANG. The last of them scrambling at a window, trying to open a latch. BANG. I heard him slither bonelessly to the floor.

Johnny Darling stepped into the light, a big service .45 in his hand.

"Jesus," I said. My head sagged.

"You're looking a little the worse for wear, Mickey," he said, and came around in back of my chair to untie me. "If it hadn't of been for Young Tim Hannah, I wouldn't have known where to find you."

"How did Hannah know?" I asked. My voice was rusty.

"He did a deal with Owney Madden," Johnny said. "Hannah's got a piece of the action in one of the new casinos in Vegas as of this afternoon."

I spat out the bile in my throat.

"Not such strange bedfellows," Johnny remarked.

I rubbed my wrists, looking at Owney's hard boy dead on the floor. "It was a trade," I said. "Him for me."

"Oh, not for you," Johnny said, smiling down at me. "I had to make that one myself."

"What did you get in exchange?" I asked him.

He pretended to think about it, for a minute. "A return on my investment," he said.

Las Vegas, all the world knows, turned into a gold mine for them as got in on the ground floor. Benny Siegel, though, never saw a dime and never got any credit for his vision. And the Mafia families were later pushed out, or absorbed by larger corporate interests. The mob was unable to adapt, and they were overtaken by a sleeker class of predators.

That was all a good while in the future, and this that I've been telling you was only a footnote to a larger history.

In the here and now, Johnny was married to Miss Elizabeth Barnaby that May. Somewhat to my surprise, I was invited to the wedding. The ceremony was held in some enormous Episcopalian pile on Fifth across from the park in the upper seventies. The reception was down a piece, still the Upper East Side, one of those private clubs whose membership claims to date back to the Dutch. I went to the church and was seated toward the back. I like to think I went out of respect, and friendship, not out of obligation. Johnny, after all, had attended Old Tim Hannah's funeral the previous year out of respect, hadn't he? (Well, we can leave that aside.) In any event, I skipped the reception. Could be, the thought of all those carousing Protestants gave me the chills. But perhaps I'm being less than candid.

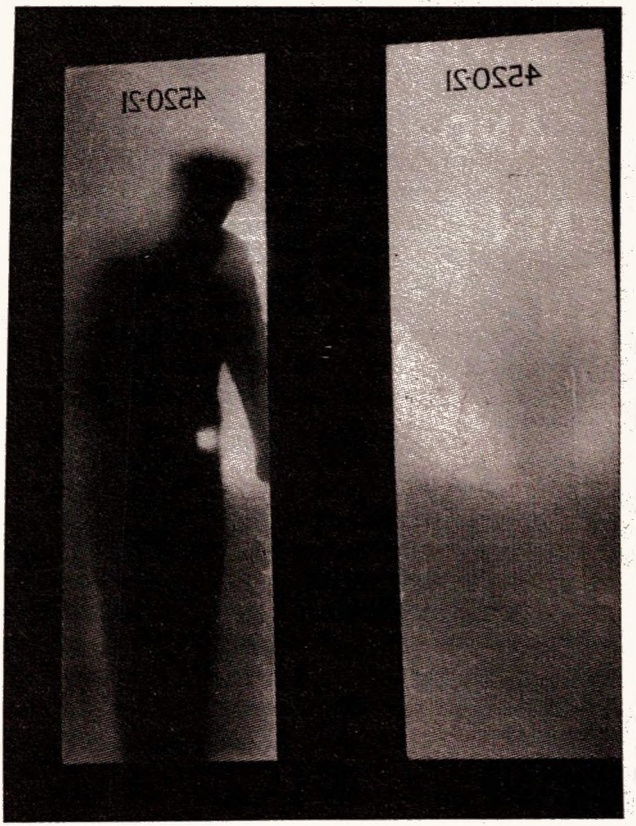
All right. Here it is, then. It was one thing to witness the sacrament, to wish Johnny and his bride well from a distance. It didn't matter whether he knew I was there or not. I knew, and that was sufficient. It would have been quite another thing for him to introduce me to Elizabeth in a social setting, where his father and her brother were certain to be on the periphery. I simply anticipated an awkward situation. I may have been second-guessing myself, or making excuses.

Johnny Darling always paid his debts, as I remarked at the outset. Certainly he discharged any obligation to me. So it was only fair that I return the favor, and with interest. Which meant not embarrassing him at his wedding, for one.

Oh, and a final irony. Dewey lost to Truman. Maybe it was poetic justice. He should have kept his word.

Lucky Luciano died in 1962, still in exile.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

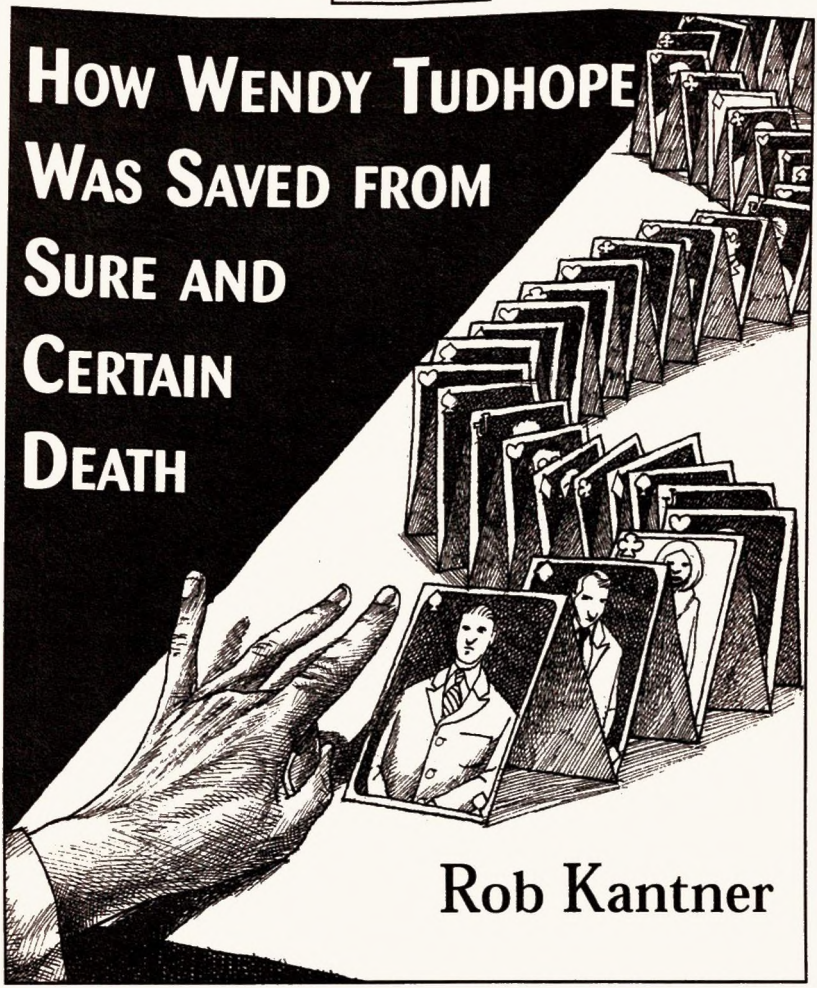


Hulton Archive

Through the glass, darkly. 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 141.

How Wendy Tudhope Was Saved from Sure and Certain Death



Rob Kantner

Had Officer Nick Bolthouse not rolled up her street at just the right moment, Wendy Tudhope would now be dead, shot to pieces by an ex-husband who finally snapped.

It was a miracle, Wendy now tells one and all—a miracle that a most opportune radio call sent Officer Bolthouse to her home at just the right time.

But Wendy, God bless her, doesn't know the half *of it.*

1. Brian

The vanity license plate on the big gold Lexus read SUE. But this was not the driver's name; it was business promotion. For Brian was a lawyer, an "attorney-at-law." Also, according to his business card: counselor, advisor, advocate, and litigator.

The most accurate label did

not, however, appear on his card. For truth be told, which when the topic is a lawyer can be problematic, Brian Dobozy was above all else an awesome earner. Last year he admitted to the IRS net income well in excess of half a million. Clients paid him this as a result of time sheets, which if totaled would have posited for that year 5,333 hours of work performed by him on behalf of innumerable divorcees and drunks. Which, it follows, left him with just 9.4 hours during each of that non–leap year's 365 solar days to do all other non-cash-generating activities, such as eating, sleeping, and playing.

Thus, Brian M. Dobozy's law practice was the juridic equivalent of stack 'em deep and sell 'em cheap. Herein the principles are: 1. When considering a new case, what matters is not current caseload or legal merit, but client pocket-depth. 2. Give priority to the client screaming loudest. 3. When in doubt, delay. 4. Bill for everything, tangible and non. 5. Always get paid. Success as an earner came partly from sticking to these principles, which made up for his being an indifferent legal mind, a so-so writer, and not quite the world's greatest strategist. With even an iota of self-awareness, Brian Marcellus Dobozy could also have attributed his prosperity to a vivid courtroom presence, strong manipulation skills, fast footwork, blithe willingness to be detested, inurement to embarrassment, and unparalleled ability to keep twirling a dozen plates at once.

Which makes for one heck of a hectic 14.6-hour workday. That's why, on this sunny autumn morning, Brian Marcellus Dobozy, J.D., simultaneously drove his big gold Lexus at twenty over the limit on Detroit's Lodge Freeway, talked on his cell phone, and scribbled notes on a pad braced to his steering wheel. He was, of course, late on this occasion for a show-cause hearing in a divorce matter. But that was all right. The client was tame, the judge was a poodle. Brian Marcellus Dobozy, *Juris Doctor*, was sure he could get the hearing dismissed for a few weeks.

He had no clue who Wendy Tudhope was.

He did not know the impact he would have on her today.

And never would.

2. Brian, Donna, and Dario

Dario Giannetti also knew nothing about Wendy Tudhope. And even if he had, Dario would have dismissed her out of hand. Happy, contented women were of no use to him.

This is why, on this particular sunny autumn morning, Dario Giannetti sat on a hallway bench outside Judge Popcorn's courtroom, chatting up one Donna Nenno, whom he had just met. Though quite heavy and showing more than her fair share of middle-aged wear, Donna was not uncomely. But Dario was not picky about size, age, or looks; he had other criteria that Donna met to a T. She was female. She was embroiled in a messy divorce. Her soon-to-be-ex had dumped her for another. She

was hurting for money. She was filled with fear at the bleak alone-years she saw ahead, and though she tried hard to hide it, she was almost giddy with disbelief at the unexpected attentions of a handsome, well-spoken, obviously professional man.

Having flashed her and distracted her and lathered on the chatter, Dario Giannetti proceeded to work her expertly, fielding her tentative questions with smiles, direct eye contact, and occasional humor. *What do you do?* Law enforcement, he answered. That pleased her. He not only obeyed rules, but enforced them too. He knew she was thinking, he probably carries a gun, giving him the tangy odor of danger. *Where do you live?* Plymouth, he told her. Really good. Upscale community with a veneer of class. *Do you have kids?* All grown, he replied. Perfect, he saw in her eyes. He brought to the table the weary experience of parenthood without inflicting on the impending Donna-Dario relationship (for that, he knew, was the head-movie she was watching) the burden of having to deal with them. Plus, he knew that to her he looked yummy. Lithe and slight, exotically dark complexion, great cologne, and that perfectly coiffed, very thick, brilliantly white hair. Women like Donna, he knew from experience, yearned to wear him like an emblem.

Oh yes, for Dario Giannetti things were moving well there in that busy courthouse hallway, as Donna Nenno shifted herself a bit closer on the bench, gave him an occasional casual touch, furtively adjusted strands of her blonde hair, tittered at his jokes. He'd passed her screening questions with flying colors, and ta-da! all without lying. The one question she had not asked was how his own divorce was going. To that question he would, without blinking, have lied. Not only was his divorce not in fact "going," it had in fact been over and done with for five years already. It was during that experience that he'd learned first-hand that these courthouse hallways teemed with many a Donna Nenno—shell-shocked by her marital trainwreck and for this one time in her otherwise average, proper, and wholesome life unlikely to resist the almost visceral urge to smear a man like Dario "Mister Right Now" Giannetti onto her emotional wounds like a big old salve stick.

Having regular professional courthouse business, Dario trolled this hallway once or twice a month, "to pick the low-hanging fruit," as he thought of it. Mostly nothing happened, but eight times it had, and quite tastily too. Feeling Donna's warmth, Dario had her toe-tagged for Number Nine. Excellent, he thought. He didn't want to work today, anyway. He'd wait for her here and have a tasty itinerary to present to her after her court business. Probably lunch at Tres Vite, then a drive around Belle Isle. Afterward, drinks at Half Past Three, and then they'd head up to the St. Clair Inn where

the wine and romance would flow in the candlelight

"Wait a minute, hon," Donna said, touching his hand as she threw a look over her shoulder. "Here comes my lawyer. We're going in. Can you stick around?"

"Sure," he said casually. He glanced past her to see who she was eyeing, and the sight of the tall handsome man in a gray suit bustling toward them made him flinch. Damn. Why him? Why now?

Donna stood; he followed suit. "It's just a quickie," Donna said nervously as the lawyer cruised up, smiling sardonically at them. "Morning, Brian," she said.

"Hi," he said, squinting down. "Who's your friend, Donna?"

"This is Dario," she answered, beaming.

"Hi-ya, Counselor," Dario said, with a wink Donna could not see.

Brian's eyes, aware but unimpressed, shifted to Donna. "Let's go," he gestured.

"Okay," she said. "Wait for me," she told Dario, squeezing his hand.

"I think not," Brian said casually.

"What?" she asked.

"Dario has someplace else he needs to be." Brian smiled. "Isn't that right, Mister Dario Giannetti."

Dario's inward sigh was sullen. "Yeah, come to think of it."

Round face pale, Donna's blue eyes glanced back and forth between the two men. "You know each other? What's this about?"

Brian had a large hand steady on her elbow. "Tell you later. Let's go," he murmured, guiding her toward Judge Popcorn's door. Over his shoulder he threw lightly at Dario: "Buzz off."

Grim, vexed, Dario Giannetti marched down the hall toward the elevator. Donna or no, he had not planned to work today. But now, denied Donna by the evil appearance of Dirtbag Dobozy, one of the few men in the world who had ever whipped him, he had steam to blow off. The best therapy was to collar a few rascals. He owed himself a return visit to the Bide-a-Wee. He knew the big bust last Monday hadn't bagged them all. The remaining rascals would have their guards down, never expecting him to strike again so soon.

Just as Wendy Tudhope, a whole state away, did not expect the visitor who was preparing to hit the road.

3. Dario, Hua, and Roger

Qian Hua, on the other hand, fully expected the impending visit. She did not know who it would be, or when they would come, but it was certainly on its way. For *ren shi* like her—the term translates roughly "human snakes"—life is a constantly watchful, vigilant, and tense business, characterized by close calls and narrow escapes. As with last Monday's raid, during which the agents—plainclothes men with guns, supported by uniformed police with more guns—had blocked the Bide-a-Wee Motel exits and then overrun the place. Hauled off had been several of Hua's co-

workers who, like her, had no papers. Mr. Max was cited again. Hua herself had been showering at the time, preparing for her night job at Humphrey's. The agents had overlooked her.

That time. But they would be back. The certainty did not scare Hua. She had been at this too long, been through too much, to let what was wholly out of her control distract her from the job at hand. Which was, on this bright, sunny autumn noontime, making up the ground floor rooms of the Bide-a-Wee Motel. She had two to do before going to her afternoon/evening job. Hard work, but she was very good at it, and she knew her good work pleased the generally unpleaseable Mr. Max.

He was certainly one of the better people she had met since leaving Guangdong Province last year. As Hua scrubbed the tub with brisk, efficient movements, she let a slide show of faces parade through her mind. The loan sharks who took the equivalent of ten thousand dollars of her parents' money as down payment, and required Hua to sign a *renqing* for the other two-thirds, with her family literally held as collateral. The *shetou* (snake heads), the smugglers whom she paid for her seagoing escape. The Vietnamese gangsters who, after bringing her ashore in California, informed her that for this "service" she owed them a thousand dollars, which she clearly did not have. The thugs who ran the "safe house"—what a contradiction in terms that was—where Hua, treated less than kindly by men without souls, worked off her debt under sweatshop conditions. Until one glorious day she saw her chance and escaped.

Sure that if caught by the INS she would be jailed in American dungeons for many years, and anxious to avoid recapture by the Vietnamese thugs, Hua had stayed on the move. From city to city on a zigzag course east, she hooked up and split off, worked jobs good and bad, dodged trouble sometimes through luck but usually by pluck and daring, worked on her English, applied her formidable intelligence learning all she could about being an American, and in all ways and at all times did what had to be done.

Metro Detroit, with more varieties of non-Caucasians in larger numbers than just about anywhere else, seemed like a safe haven for now. Here Hua went from simply surviving to starting really to live, perhaps even to thrive. Certainly the Bide-a-Wee housekeeping job was grueling work with its disgusting moments. And no question her exhausting work on the stage at Humphrey's, with its raucous music, fetid smells, and usually intoxicated and often grabby customers, was a trial for one as fastidious and proper as she. But the jobs brought in the cash she needed. Especially the dancing. With her exoticness and flair, Hua earned more cash in one night than her housekeeping job brought her in a full week. All of

which she parceled out, every Saturday: a portion for the loan shark, some to her family back in China, the rest to pay for her tiny room and books and food.

Today, Hua thought as she wiped down the bathroom mirror, she was tired. Two rooms to go here, then she would have liked nothing better than to go home and collapse and sleep till dawn. But she knew she would do her shift at Humphrey's anyway. Because every day she went there, she told herself, was one day less that she'd have to. Things would get better. Things always got better. This was America.

According to the clock, she had spent twelve minutes in Room 322. Just enough. Hoisting the full plastic garbage bag, she stepped out onto the sidewalk. To her right she saw a plain blue sedan pull past. It was driven by a man with brilliantly white hair and seemed to be headed for the motel office. The sight piqued her curiosity, as she walked with the heavy garbage bag past her housekeeping cart and other motel room doors and toward the end of the courtyard. Rounding the corner into the shorter driveway she passed a few more rooms and a white Buick on her way to the garbage dumpster. She disposed of her bag and had started back the way she'd come when she noticed a middle-aged man just finishing changing the tire on the white Buick. Obviously rushed, he was throwing tools back into the trunk.

She wondered why she suddenly felt so edgy.

As Hua approached room 322, two things happened. First, she remembered what she'd heard about the INS agent who'd led Monday's raid: "bright white hair." Second, she saw him again. It was *him,* she was sure, down at the end, walking straight at her.

Without thinking, Hua turned and skipped quickly back the way she'd come. She was certain the agent had seen her and was picking up his pace. She had to hide, but where? Rounding the corner, for the moment out of his sight, she saw the white Buick. Its owner was absent, and the trunk lid was still up. Flying on her lithe dancer's legs, Hua raced for the car and leapt lightly into the trunk, at once bending down and pulling the lid shut atop her.

Inside was close, warm, and very dark, like the container in which she'd ridden over from China. Hua measured her breathing and forced herself into a relaxed stillness as one minute grew into two, three, four. The thud against the car almost made her jump, and for an instant she thought she was done for. But then the engine started and the car lurched backward, and Qian Hua knew that she had slipped through their fingers yet again.

But to where? And for what?

4. Hua, Roger, and Eric

Roger Twine was an unhappy man.

As such, he was just like another man who at that moment

was driving his Ford Expedition south, bound for the Cincinnati home of Wendy Tudhope. Both the Expedition driver and Roger Twine, who were wholly unaware of each other, wore the stern, tight-lipped scowl that Wendy would have recognized. She was just now greeting her twin daughters as they returned home from junior high; for the record, she did not know and would never meet Roger Twine.

Unhappy Roger Twine, standing in a long, shuffling line of boarding passengers in the humid jetway of Gate A56 at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, was cheesed off to be standing in the long shuffling line of boarding passengers. For one thing, Roger Twine was a PacLantic Airways Gold Club member. Gold Club members do not stand in lines—long, shuffling, or otherwise. Gold Club members are not limited to just one carry-on bag. Gold Club members are not assigned a middle seat on the starboard side of a DC–9, only to be injection-molded, Roger expected, between a couple of linebackers. Gold Club members do not board planes by row, thereby losing first shot at overhead compartment space for the one carry-on that Roger was allowed today by the snotty gate agent, thank you so much, you really earned your six bucks an hour today, butthead.

Roger Twine was also cheesed off because he wasn't supposed to be on this 4:05 flight in the first place. Roger had been ticketed on a two o'clock flight. Had he taken it, Roger would, as carefully planned, have rolled into his driveway by five thirty, safe and sound, clean and green, his wife no wiser.

Now, he had to figure out a cover story, which would be tricky. Ellen clearly had her dark suspicions about him, especially after that cell-phone episode last month.

Those damned security people! Roger shuffled ahead a step or two. It was all their fault. Sure, he'd been running late anyway. That flat tire—who'd have predicted that? Of the hundreds of cars he'd rented over two decades of travel, he'd never had a flat. Not till today at the Bide-a-Wee, forcing Roger, who was, as usual, cutting things close getting to the airport, to change the tire himself. He didn't dare call his road service: Ellen opened all the mail.

Even with that delay, he'd have made the 2:00 were it not for the Gestapo Checkpoint Charlie that now "guarded" the airport rental car plaza. Security was one thing, but wasn't it overkill to search every returning rental car? Why, Roger seethed, couldn't they use a little commonsense judgment? Did Roger Twine, tall, middle-aged, gray-haired, distinguished-looking, casually dressed in pricey polo and Dockers, toting an expensive laptop computer and rolling a leather wheel bag, fit the profile of a terrorist?

Yet, common sense notwithstanding, the guards—no kids, these; he wouldn't have been surprised if they'd starred in the old

Adam-12 TV show—approached both sides of Roger's car and peered in. And then asked him to pop the trunk release. Which of course he did.

Oops.

A long time later, the cops of various flavors—Roger never did get straight how many agencies were represented in the airport security office, but it seemed like everybody showed up but Tom Ridge—grudgingly decided that Roger was telling the truth when he insisted that he had NO idea, *none* whatsoever, why the trunk lid of his rental car had swung open to reveal a young Asian woman.

Luckily, she was alive and unhurt. Even more helpfully, the very young woman, though obviously scared and lacking English language skills, had attested to the cops that Roger had not known she'd secreted herself in his trunk.

And so, after taking down all Roger's information and grimly assuring him they'd contact him again if needed, the cops had turned him loose. Clearly late for his 2:00, barely in time for his sardine-can center seat on the 4:05, with an hour in the air to eke out an alibi for Ellen. She had paged him twice and left a message on his cell-phone voice mail and was already ear-pricked and sniffing the wind and lying in wait.

With excruciating slowness Roger shuffled through the DC–9 door. Peeking around the corner, Roger saw that first class, where he *should* have been, was indeed full. Damn it to hell, he thought. Probably not a one among them with the miles Roger had!

What to tell her? By now Ellen had certainly called the post and learned he had not been there at all today.

Inching down the first-class aisle, dragging his roll bag, Roger bobbed and weaved, trying to get a glimpse of the overhead storage compartments back in coach. He could see that the rear compartments were full already. Above row 12, where Roger had (freakin' *middle)* seat D, there was still space in the overhead compartment. Maybe enough for his roll bag.

It was hot on the plane, and Roger was sweating. His face felt like it was burning up. From somewhere ahead a baby was screaming. Making things worse, it occurred to Roger that Ted probably had the duty today. Ted had been told that Roger was spending the day at a conference at the Carlisle. Roger's stomach wrenched.

Almost out of first class now and into coach. Ahead, Roger could see people stuffing the overhead compartments full. Space was running out. The girl behind him turned for some reason, giving him the backpack-smack, without so much as a glance of apology. Roger flinched and tensed for an instant, brimming with harsh words.

If by evil chance Ellen had gotten to Ted, and Ted had mentioned the Carlisle to her, and Ellen had checked for Roger at the Carlisle, then Katie bar the

door. Through Roger's mind kaleidoscoped scratchy audio and video samples of Ellen screeching questions, demands, and accusations; lawyers and judges and accountants; e-mails and chat logs and AmEx invoices; testimony by Darlene and Carol and (ohmyGod no) Jenny; exposure of the funny business with Roger's retirement fund. Not to mention the permanent loss of Ellen's fat inheritance.

Up ahead, a blond man in glasses and sport coat thrust a big silver steel box into the compartment above row 12. And then moved on to his seat in row 15.

"Hey!" Roger shouted. "You! Get that out of there!"

Faces turned. The man looked at Roger, puzzled.

"That's *my* row!" Roger yelled. "You get that piece of junk out of there!"

The man smirked, like this was some kind of put-on. "Take it easy, man. First come, first served."

Roger was almost to 12 now. His middle seat was empty, the flanking ones occupied. Above, the steel case hogged half the compartment. Clearly there was no room for Roger's roll bag too. "Are you taking it out?" Roger demanded. "Or do I do it for you?"

Murmurs bubbled all around Roger in the hot aircraft, with the uncomfortable shuffling of people politely pretending they weren't paying attention. The row 15 snotnose, who had obviously never flown before and did not know the rules, said calmly, "Please leave it alone and find your own space."

"We'll see about that," Roger said. Hovering over the passenger seated at the aisle, Roger reached into the compartment for the steel case. It was heavy and seemed to be stuck. Grunting and cursing, Roger tugged at it, as protesting voices echoed around him. The case shifted and then came loose. Triumphantly Roger pulled at it hard, freeing it from the compartment.

But the steel case, being heavier than he expected, and awkward and slippery, tumbled loose from his hands.

And fell.

And landed with a sickening smack.

5. Eric and Missy

"Can you tell me his condition?" Eric asked, cupping his cell phone to his ear as he swung shut the door of his car. Listening intently, he ambled up to the tinted glass door of Suite 300 on which was stenciled FEDDERSPILL BROS. ENGINEERING SERVICE. "That's good," he said into his phone as he sauntered through the door and past the receptionist with a wave and wink. "No," he said presently, "just, uh, I saw the incident, just wanted to be sure he was all right. Thanks for the update."

Eric clicked his phone shut as he passed a well-dressed woman seated in a visitor chair. She looked expectantly at him, sizing him up; Eric smiled back. In the sprawling open-plan offices, the air was hissing slowly out of yet

another very hectic day. Eric knew, because he'd checked before leaving for the airport, that the Visteon team would be burning midnight oil on a rush RFP, but otherwise most employees left by five thirty or so. Unlike many in his position, Eric did not believe in routine overtime, voluntary or otherwise. Work people too many hours and the law of diminishing returns kicks in. Besides, he believed, people needed and deserved lives outside the job. Even employees.

As was his habit, Eric first breezed into the corner office, to find Jerry, as almost always, on his feet and on the phone. The younger man wore a dress shirt and tie and sported a buzz cut, the opposite of Eric not only in job function but also in apparel, appearance, and attitude. Creative friction was one secret of a well-run business and Fedderspill Brothers was well run indeed, as attested to by their growing list of tier-one automotive clients. What Eric and Jerry shared, besides some DNA, was white-hot intellect. And fierce loyalty.

Jerry dropped his phone on the hook without a goodbye. "What happened? Miss the flight?"

Eric shrugged lazily, dropping into a visitor chair. "Got canceled. Some air-rage yay-hoo wigged out, dropped a suitcase on another guy's head."

Staring bug-eyed, Jerry exhaled in disbelief, but stayed on-message. "But what about Monaghan? When you going to see them now?"

"Fortunately, the guy wasn't hurt bad," Eric said. "He'll be all right."

"What about Monaghan?" Jerry pressed.

Eric shrugged again. "I'll run out there tomorrow instead. Lainie was fine with it."

"She can afford to be," Jerry answered, fussing with something atop the pile of papers on his desk. "She's not the one needs something from us, it's the other way around."

"I'm sure we'll work something out," Eric replied.

"You realize," Jerry fussed, "we need them inside the tent with us, peeing out. You'll have to hit a home run for us, Ricky."

"So," Eric said patiently, "instead of meeting Lainie and Tom tomorrow, I'll see them the day after. It'll be all right." The two eyed each other, Jerry tense under the weight of a thousand details and innumerable eventualities, Eric living more in each moment, calmly taking things as they came. "Any fires for me to fight? I've got tee-ball tonight."

"Nothin'," Jerry fussed, fluttering fingers. "Go on, take off, I'll lock up." Eric rose. "Oh, wait a minute," Jerry rushed on, "there's one more second interview—"

"Sitting out there?"

"Her, yeah," Jerry grumped. "I was supposed to see her a half hour ago, I've been jammed. But now that you're here—"

"I'll take it," Eric said easily. "No problem. For which slot?"

"The marketing," Jerry said, handing the file to him.

"If I like her," Eric grinned, "I might give her a friendly warning to steer clear of that jinx job."

"If you like her," Jerry said darkly, "and she's willing to work for what we're willing to pay, you handcuff her to a desk."

Laughing, Eric eased out and up the hall with his languid way of walking. In contrast to Jerry's, his own office was a riot of papers and drawings on a U-shaped work surface, dominated by a boxy CAD terminal and two wide-format printers at one end, and a conference table at the other. Several prints from Goya's *Los Caprichos* lined the walls. Above his cluttered desk a framed sign read, TO THE OPTIMIST, THE GLASS IS HALF FULL / TO THE PESSIMIST, THE GLASS IS HALF EMPTY / TO THE ENGINEER, THE GLASS IS TWICE AS BIG AS IT NEEDS TO BE. Eric leaned against his desk, glancing over the resume as the woman came in. "Mr. Fedderspill?"

He smiled at her. "Eric. Have a seat, Ms. . . . Bowmer?"

"Melissa," she acknowledged and seated herself stiffly in a visitor chair. She was Eric's age, about, but seemed more ground down by the years. Full face and figure, been-around eyes squinting through tinted lenses, dark hair pulled back indifferently into a loose tail. She wore a navy single-breasted suit over what looked like a white tank top. Her ears and fingers were ringless; she sported no jewelry at all save an anklet chain above a stain that appeared to be a tattoo. Eric thought she worked overly hard at her smile and sensed that her dynamism—what little she had—was forced, especially for one of the marketing persuasion, for whom perkiness was the default demeanor. He wondered what her problem was. The late hour? Quiet desperation caused by who knew what? Bad spot in the meds cycle? At first take she seemed not terribly likeable, but that neither surprised Eric nor ruled her out for the job. People who were good at marketing, he had learned, were not for him the likeable sort. But this wasn't just that. With her there was something more. He felt it almost at once. Something way back, just beyond reach in the fog.

Skimming the resume, Eric realized he had seated himself on his drafting stool, with his big work desk between him and the applicant. He was surprised at himself; usually he conducted interviews at the conference table to foster a more relaxed atmosphere. Oh well, he thought, here we are. With a smile, he started the interview, as usual, with the present, working his way back.

She answered questions by rote, reeling off well-oiled set pieces with all the verve of an actor at a long run's end. To Eric she looked blurry, her features not quite in sync. For a man who earned his bread with his ability to see clearly and render tangible the most obtuse concepts, Eric found that his eyes and his perceptions kept trying to stretch Melissa Bowmer into someone else entirely. Even her name was all wrong.

Gradually one particular smile of hers emerged that seemed right. In earlier days that one particular smile had played many minutes per period. Now it just flickered from time to time, suggesting that three decades of intervening life had not disabused her of her self-image of privilege and entitlement. Eric began to hear from an echoing distance the clatter of a manual typewriter and the *chugga-chugga* of the Associated Press teletype. In his mind's eye he saw Melissa Bowmer, or whoever she was, sitting cross-legged in jeans on the city room table. Never pretty, just young, she cradled a bottle of red pop, smiled that one particular smile, and was most pleased to be giving Eric his "reality adjustment."

At this point in the interview they had worked their way back to her college career. Eric set the resume down. "Ever get back there?"

"Where?"

"The *Daily.*"

Melissa Bowmer sat stock still. Several times, unwillingly, her lips pressed, as if trying to hold something in. "So you do remember," she said steadily. "I couldn't tell."

"But it wasn't Melissa," Eric said vaguely, looking past her. "You were Missy. Missy . . . Schrupp."

"I'm flattered," she said.

"Why?"

"Because you remember me." Again with that one particular smile.

"Why wouldn't I?"

Vacating the smile, she released a long long breath. "Okay."

Eric watched her and said nothing. Outwardly composed, inwardly he was stunned to find himself face to face with someone he had not encountered in nearly thirty years.

"Sometimes, you know, sometimes—" Melissa said, nervously swiping her hair, "—decisions are— well, they're hard."

"I know," Eric said. "I've made a few myself." Sitting there, he realized the shock he was juicing in wasn't from meeting Missy again. The shock came from being forcibly brought face to face with someone he'd thought long gone, the long-ago Eric who was insecure, sensitive, scared.

"Then you understand."

"Oh, I do indeed." Which was true. He understood that Missy Schrupp, simply by appearing, had the power to take him back to that place and hurt him, quite profoundly, once again.

She looked away. "I do wish I'd handled it better. I was just a kid."

"Whatever."

"Well." She eyed him. "Any point in continuing?" she ventured.

Because he was a kind man, Eric's instinct was to fog. Instead he told the truth: "None."

She blinked once and looked away. "Okay. Thanks for your time." She rose. He did too, and out of innate politeness walked her to his office door. There she looked up into his eyes, her confidence and balance gone. "I really need this job."

"Sorry it didn't work out," he

said, putting her back in the past where she belonged. Despite the gentleness of tone, his words felt terse and vindictive in his mouth. But, he reasoned, he was showing her far more mercy than she had shown him, there at the end.

"I could do a hell of a job for you here," she said quietly. "If you'd just let go of what happened."

"Let go?" Eric repeated softly. After a moment she realized he would not—or could not—say more. Stonily, she ducked her head and turned and walked down the hall. "Good luck," he forced himself to say, well out of her earshot.

Strolling back into his office, tired from the long day, the airport calamity, and the emotions that had just swept through him, Eric found the words he'd groped for before: I can let go of what you said, and I can let go of what you did. What I can't let go of is how you made me feel.

6. Missy, Ty, and Sam

By now, on that bright autumn day, Len Schooley was passing Wapakoneta, his black Ford Expedition cruising steadily at the speed limit in the center lane of southbound I-75. Wendy Tudhope sat at her iMac in the library of her suburban Cincinnati home, surfing the Net for an article on the translation of relics. And, some two hundred and fifty miles north, Missy Bowmer drove west on the boulevard, passing the GM Poletown plant at the Detroit–Hamtramck line. Sitting stiffly at the wheel of her red Chevy Celebrity, she drove by instinct, in a place all too grimly familiar: dead numb.

She wanted a drink, but what else was new. Since the age of thirteen, when she'd stolen her first taste of her grandma's homemade raisin-jack from a big jug in the cellar, she'd wanted a drink. During and after each day of high school and before every piano recital. Before each date and after having sex. Before both weddings, throughout the marriages, and especially during the divorces. She'd wanted a drink to celebrate and to grieve, in crowds and alone, by the glass or out of the bottle, fully engaged and utterly blacked out. She'd especially wanted a drink since her most recent one, twenty-two wretchedly white-knuckled days ago, when Evan issued his ultimatum and underlined it by abandoning her.

"I'm not going anywhere," the son of a bitch had insisted, even while packing his PlayStation 2 (a sign of how serious he was). "Just over to Merle's." This paintball pal and NASCAR nut lived, Missy believed, somewhere in Detroit's Boston–Edison section. She remembered, vaguely, visiting his place once. His big house was across from a park where she thought she recollected Evan saying Ty Cobb used to hit baseballs in for the neighborhood kids, way back when. She thought about going there now. She was pretty sure she could find it. She needed to see Evan. To tell him about her twenty-two sober days; to tell him

how badly she needed him; to tell him about Fedderspill.

Another hard knock, and like all the others hardly her fault. Who could have predicted it? Oddly, she did remember Eric. He was a cute puke a year behind her, bespectacled and earnest as could be. She was pretty sure they'd had a flinglet, and why not, in those liberal pre-AIDS seventies; it was just something to do, like trying on different skates. To dally carnally with someone who worked for her was probably not the wisest thing, but rules were looser back then, too.

Let's see, she thought, checking street signs. Boston–Edison, that was northwest of here. Maybe she'd take Woodward. If she could find that park, she could find Evan's house . . .

Oh, those had been grand times. Missy was the university paper's first female managing editor. What a glorious and long overdue switcheroo to have all these males working for her for a change. Each vying for position, currying her favor, waiting on her hand and foot, and hoping for that single nod from Missy that would put his skinny fanny in an editor's chair. Missy had enjoyed that courtship routine, especially with the most ambitious ones. They'd do anything to please her. She gave them extra work assignments, she made them take her to lunch, she played them off each other, she'd get them backbiting and gossiping about and against each other—always exciting.

Missy slowed up at the old GM World Headquarters building for the light at Woodward. North, that's right, and then west on—what would it be? Virginia Park? She'd try that. She was a little vague on exactly where this Ty Cobb park was.

Eric had paid her court, as she remembered things, but in a more businesslike way. Thinking about it now, she thought he never seemed to like her very much. He did precisely what she asked, and he seemed pleased at her hints that an editor's chair would be his. Of course there had never been a chance of that, ever; his application was dead on arrival. As a junior, he should have known that! Juniors never got to be editors. Missy had been amused that he'd taken seriously her double-talk and empty hints, trailing after her like a donkey stretching its neck for a carrot. After Missy had finally, and with quiet satisfaction, given him his reality adjustment, she had been surprised (but only briefly) that he quit the newspaper entirely. What a waste, she thought. He'd have made a great reporter someday, he really would—if he ever quit acting like a baby.

The Woodward red lights were not synchronized. Missy plugged north, barely getting into second gear. At Seward another light stopped her. Thinking about Eric was upsetting, but why, she could not have said. Presently she discerned, from the drill-down deep into the sludge of her memory, that those days had not been so great after all. Moreover, Missy

realized with dull certainty that she had never slept with Eric at all. He had been engaged to be married, she remembered now, to a mousy English fellow. He had never had the eye for Missy that others had had back then—*way* back then.

Focusing, Missy realized she was staring at a bar sign. Below the bar's name and a neon beer ad was a poster that said PITCHER NIGHT! With instant and brutal clarity Missy's fertile imagination conjured a large glass pitcher brimming with thick, golden, ice-cold Sam Adams beer, foam slopping richly over the edges, condensation misting the crystalline sides. Ty Cobb's park and Evan's house were a few blocks away yet. And Eric, Eric Fedderspill, damn him. Why not? Why the hell not?

After two beers, Missy started to leave. Then she decided to have just one more.

7. Sam and Fern

The electric hole saw whirred and whined with a piercing scream as it cut its cylindrical path through the thick wood of the Christian panel door. Fern Kluska, braced and intent, leaned on the saw till it cut all the way through, then shut off the saw and set it, spooling to silence, on the plastic sheet on the carpet. Beside it lay in meticulous order the twinkling brass pieces of the deadbolt lock set. Scooping the clear plastic safety glasses up on her forehead, Fern picked up the instruction sheet and strolled out to the big bay window in the living room.

In theory, Fern was pausing to review the instructions—she had, after all, never before installed a deadbolt lock. But the real reason for her pause was to check Avril's driveway yet again. Sure enough, the Expedition had not returned.

Question was: why had it been over there in the first place?

All day Fern had wondered. After all, Avril's personal protection order barred Len from coming within a hundred yards of her. Yet late this morning there it was, his black Ford Expedition, sitting in the driveway of the home he and Avril had shared till last month. Fern's first notion, upon spotting it while leaving for work, had been to call the cops. Her second thought had been to ring Avril to be sure she was all right. Her third option, and the one she had actually acted on, had been to do nothing and await developments.

Fern was, after all, no busybody. And she and Avril had never been *friends* friends. Fern had learned long ago not to get too chummy too quickly with newcomers. Many, especially much younger ones like Len and Wendy, bought into Boston–Edison on a pink cloud of infatuation with the neighborhood's rich history. Celebrities, even dead ones, are a draw, and Boston–Edison had been home to names like Dodge and Fisher, Ford and Gordy. Why, the Georgia Peach himself, Ty Cobb, once lived beside Voight Park, three doors down from where Fern now stood. Decades later, people bought in, and having

discovered in due course how much TLC (time, labor, and cash) it took to restore and maintain these dilapidated homes and how maddening it was dealing with the City of Detroit's turgid bureaucracy, they often gave up and moved away.

So Fern never got too close too quickly to newcomers. She did make a point of taking them fresh bread and introducing herself (with Jathan, when he was younger, but never Latroy, who was too self-conscious). The house across from hers had gotten two loaves: one when Len and Wendy had arrived ten years ago, and the second when Avril had moved in with the freshly divorced Len. The departed (and, Fern knew, remarried) Wendy had become a chum; Len, some sort of businessman, was always brusque and on the go with no time to talk. Avril, however, fell somewhere in the middle: a front-porch chatmate.

Like Wendy before her, Avril had confided in Fern the play-by-play of the decline of her marriage to Len. Fern knew about the affairs, she was aware of the fights, she had read the personal protection order, and through it all she patiently provided a thin, reedy shoulder for Avril to cry on. Avril was annoyed that Len had built Wendy a swimming pool, but refused to install a hot tub for her. She was angry at the increasing amount of time and money Len spent in Detroit's topless bars and new casinos. Most of all, she was terrified of Len's stony silences and hair-trigger, fist-swinging rages. When the PPO was issued Avril swore, fluently and convincingly, that she would never speak to Len again. Even so, Fern knew that PPO notwithstanding Len had spent several nights with Avril across the street. Evidently, Fern reflected, the "fun" part of their dysfunctional relationship still worked pretty well.

Which was the main reason why Fern had done nothing when she saw Len's Expedition in the driveway this morning. It had had no dew on it, so he must have come by after breakfast. By late afternoon, when Fern returned from her part-time job, it was gone.

Rousing herself, Fern went back to the master bedroom door. She had to finish the lock job quickly. Jathan would be home from school (or wherever, Fern reminded herself glumly) soon, and Fern needed no repeat of yesterday. Popping the hole cutter out of the saw, Fern inserted the spade bit into the chuck. The lock was half the business; the other half was the necessary sit-down with Latroy. Jathan was, after all, his son.

From out front came a piercing screech, a rapid series of loud thumps, and then a ripping metallic crash. Dropping her tools, Fern raced to the bay window. Across the street, the peacefulness of Avril Schooley's property had been marred by a car, a red sedan, that had jumped the curb, plowed through a hedge, mangled several sections of wrought-iron fence, and smacked

dead center into a utility pole, where it now sat steaming.

Fern ran throat-clenched out the door, down her sidewalk, and across the street. Dead silence from Avril's house; ditto from the other neighbors. The only action was a man obliviously walking his dog in Voight Park up the way. Digging in her pocket, Fern pulled her cell phone and called 9-1-1 while walking tentatively toward the hissing car. Its driver door gaped open and a woman Fern did not recognize slumped halfway out, immobile in her shoulder strap. Fern trotted over and bent down, checking vital signs. The woman was alive, semiconscious, and moaning softly, "Evan," it sounded like, over and over. She reeked of alcohol, but Fern had seen and smelled much worse. Finishing her call, she situated the woman comfortably on the front seat and waited for the sound of the sirens.

Like prairie dogs popping from their holes, neighbors started to appear. But still there was no sign of Avril, no movement or sound from her house. Fern peered past the car and the demolished fence into the back yard, looking for signs of life. Nothing except wilting plants, a weedy patio, tipped-over lawn furniture, and the swimming pool showing the sheen of green.

And on the pool surface floated something else, something darkish. Fern squinted and stepped closer. Indistinctness gave way to a set of shapes that presently became a whole. It was a dog, a small spaniel. Not moving, dead still, floating there, a big dark wound gaping. Avril's dog Sasha.

Frozen, Fern stared, then whirled around as a police car pulled up. In a flash Fern connected one dot after another: the violence, the PPO, the black Expedition in the driveway, the silent Schooley house.

Oh my God, Fern thought frantically, running toward the cop car. Avril!

8. Fern and Nick

Officer Nick Bolthouse was just getting out of his squad car when his radio crackled: "Patrol one-ten."

Easing back into the driver's seat, he pressed the shoulder mike: "Go."

"What's your ten-three, over."

Bolthouse had not yet signed out for dinner. "Beechmont at Eight, over."

"Roll on a potential ten-seventy-two at one eight oh oh nine, Loiswood, acknowledge."

"Patrol One Ten," Bolthouse said, pulling his door shut, wondering: potential domestic disturbance?

"Be further advised that a black Ford Expedition with Michigan plates may be on site or nearby. If so, obtain backup and detain the driver on a wanted-for-questioning out of Michigan."

"Roger," Bolthouse acknowledged, starting the engine. The big Police Interceptor engine roared as he goosed the black-and-white Crown Vic onto Beechmont, swinging left immediately on Eight

Mile. Driving with one hand, he switched frequencies with the other and said, "Watch Commander, Patrol One Ten, over."

"Watch Commander," crackled the radio. "What's up, Nick?"

"That's my question," Bolthouse said, racing north on the two-lane.

"Probably nothing," the watch commander said. "Detroit P.D. had a ten-eighty-nine up there today. Suspect is one Schooley, Leonard Aitch: Caucasian, fifty-one, two hundred, black on brown. Victim was his second wife. Detroit got intelligence from a neighbor lady that Schooley's first wife lives down here now. Name of Tudhope, Wendy. Thought is that Schooley may be heading our way to visit her."

"Maybe looking for a clean sweep?"

"That's the thought."

"Roger," Bolthouse said, running the light onto Clough Pike east.

"We tried to call her but her line's busy," the watch commander added.

"I'm two minutes out," Bolthouse reported.

"Probably nothing."

"Patrol One Ten."

The entrance to the Anderson Hills subdivision came up fast. The patrolman rolled right and then left onto Loiswood. He knew this to be a dead-end street, and 18009 was at the end, driveway empty, two young teenaged girls playing badminton in the front yard. Bolthouse eased into the cul-de-sac and around, eyeing the house; the girls ignored him. Thumbing his mike he said, "Patrol One Ten, show me ninety-eight at one eight zero zero niner Loiswood. All's calm. Intend to make inquiries. Please advise, over."

"Patrol One Ten, stand by," came the dispatcher. Bolthouse completed his U-turn and was facing out on Loiswood, barely moving now. Ahead of him, coming into the street, was a large boxy vehicle, an SUV, black. As it drew closer, Bolthouse saw that it was a Ford Expedition, and it had no front plate, which meant it was not from Ohio. Abruptly the Expedition slowed, then swerved sharply into a driveway.

"Got him," Bolthouse reported without emotion, hitting the lights. "Now effecting traffic stop." He shot toward the Expedition, which backed out in front of him and took off the way it had come. "Correction," Bolthouse said, punching the gas. "Now ten-thirty-eight, eastbound toward Clough Pike, of a black Ford Expedition, Michigan plate Norma Michael Norma Two Six . . ."

After leading police from several jurisdictions on a high-speed chase, Leonard Herman Schooley, cornered in a pasture just east of Lexington, Kentucky, took his own life.

The others, whose lives intersected just once in the chain-reaction that saved Wendy Tudhope, met fates various, sundry, and wholly unconnected:

Officer Nick Bolthouse continues to patrol Cincinnati's eastern

zones. He just passed the sergeant's exam.

Fern Kluska still lives with her husband, Latroy, in Detroit's Boston–Edison community. Son Jathan is away at school.

Eric Fedderspill flew without incident for his Monaghan visit, where he hit the "home run" hoped for by his brother. They're building a new headquarters.

Roger Twine's marriage and career came to a rather abrupt end. For the time being he works the counter at an alternator shop in Westland.

Qian Hua now lives in Philadelphia. She is two days away from meeting the lawyer who will help her gain American political asylum as a member of Falun Gong.

Dario Giannetti unfortunately believed his most recent honey when she told him her soon-to-be-ex was not the jealous type.

Donna Nenno is happily single and steadily dating a man who worships the ground she walks on.

In Cincinnati, with her husband and daughters, Wendy Wilton Schooley Tudhope lives.

9. As for the others

Missy Bowmer lurched upright at the sound of her name. Her vision clearing, she saw an officer leaning in the cell door. "Let's go," he said.

"Where's my lawyer?" Missy asked, stumbling to her feet. Her head pounded and her vision wobbled. God, I stink, she thought morosely.

"Meet you in the courtroom. Come on." Taking her by the arm, the officer led her out of the cell and put the cuffs on her. Then he led her up the corridor, around a couple of corners, through two or three doors, and into the teeming courtroom. "Stand right there," he said, taking off her handcuffs. "They'll call you."

Amid the courtroom clamor, a hearing seemed to be going on. Penned in behind a wood railing, Missy stood with several other people. After a moment she spotted her lawyer in the spectator area. He gave her a single nod. She waited, dry-mouthed. Brian had told her what to expect, but still she was scared.

"People versus Bowmer," boomed a voice. "Step forward."

Brian strode to a podium and beckoned her. Going to him, she turned and faced the judge, a stern-faced blonde woman wearing a black robe up high behind the bench. Papers ruffled, the microphone squeaked, and the clerk rattled, "Melissa Schrupp Bowmer, you are charged with driving while intoxicated, first offense. Reckless driving, property damage under five thousand dollars."

"Your plea?" Judge Somers asked.

"Guilty," Brian Dobozy said.

The judge issued the sentence —word for word as Brian had predicted. Then the next case was called. With a large hand on Missy's back, Brian guided her out of the courtroom. As they reached the lobby, she heard him say, "I was brilliant in there, wasn't I." □

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

Gerald Garnett, manager of Tiffany's Jewelers, was worried. "Five potential clients have appointments here tonight," he explained to Detective Ima Reston. "Each proposes to purchase a large lot of high-quality gemstones. Millions are involved. I don't want anything to go wrong."

"I understand, sir. What do you know about these persons?"

"Only that all have reservations at the Empress Hotel, and each will be accompanied by his wife."

At the evening gathering at Tiffany's, each prospective client came wearing a different colored necktie, maroon, navy, orange, purple, and red. Posing as a buyer, Detective Reston chatted with the wives. She learned that each husband desired a different gem, and that:

1. Jane, Mrs. North (who isn't Helen), and the woman whose husband wants diamonds are married (in some order) to Abe, Bill, and Cal (who isn't interested in sapphires). Bill's tie isn't orange.

2. Ed (who isn't Mr. Katz), the man from Wisconsin, and the man wanting emeralds are married (in some order) to Flora, Gigi, and Helen. Their ties include navy, orange, and purple.

3. Dan, Ida's husband, and the man from Virginia (who doesn't want amethysts) are (in some order) Mr. Katz, Mr. Lutz, and Mr. Miller.

4. Abe (who doesn't desire emeralds), Bill (who's not married to Flora), and Mr. O'Hara (who doesn't seek amethysts) are the men from South Carolina (who doesn't want diamonds), Tennessee, and Utah (in some order). None wears a navy tie.

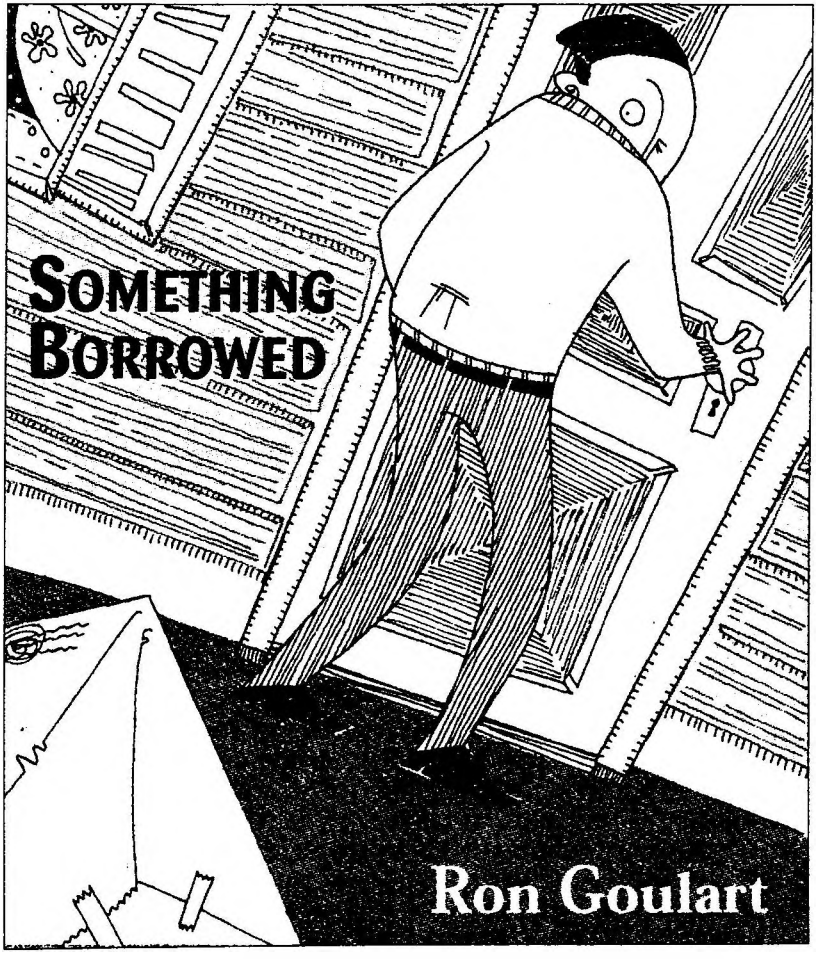
5. Mr. Katz (who's not Helen's husband), Mr. Miller (whose tie isn't navy), and the man from Tennessee (who isn't Cal) want amethysts, rubies, and sapphires (in some order). The man in the maroon tie doesn't want rubies.

The prospective clients promised to make their final offers the next day, and all departed. As Mr. Garnett was putting his merchandise into the safe, he suddenly gasped, then checked with his jeweler's loupe. "My lord!" he exclaimed. "That man wearing the red tie somehow managed to substitute fake gems for the real ones he inspected!"

"I'll issue an APB immediately. He won't get far!"

Who tried to pull the old switcheroo at Tiffany's?

See page 139 for the solution to the March puzzle.



The fateful package, about two feet square, was waiting for him on the porch of their beach cottage when he got home from the animation studio. He tried the front door, found it locked, and fished the key out of his trouser pocket. Nudging the redwood door open, he bent and picked up the UPS package. It wasn't very heavy, couldn't weigh more than a few pounds.

Crossing the threshold and shutting the door with a backward shove of his foot, Wes Goodhill called out, "Hi, Casey. Another wedding present."

There was no reply and the twilight house had an empty feel.

"Case?"

Obviously she wasn't home.

Wes glanced at the address label on the package for the first time. Then, making a noise that came close to being a gasp, he

Illustration by Kelly Denato

thrust the package out at arm's length, rushed it over to the coffee table.

He plopped it down upon the glass top, backed swiftly off, and stood watching it uneasily. "He can't be planning to come to our wedding next week?" he murmured in a rueful voice. "I was hoping he'd disappeared in the mists of time for good and all."

Gingerly, Wes approached the sinister package again. Leaning, he read the entire return address. ERLE STANLEY MCLEOD was as far as he'd gotten on the first go-round. GENERAL DELIVERY, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92112.

Feet dragging, he crossed the dusky room to sink into a fat armchair, his back to the darkening Pacific out beyond the wide window.

Wes watched the package for several silent seconds. "San Diego, my God," he said finally and forlornly. "That's only a few scant hours from Santa Rita Beach. Therefore, Casey's ne'er-do-well father could drop in at any time." He sighed. "Casey's father. In less than a week he'll be my father-in-law. I'll have a conman, crook, and world class bullshit artist as a relative."

"Are you suffering a complete and total nervous breakup?" asked Casey McLeod from the open doorway. "Sitting here in the darkness and babbling to yourself like—"

"Nervous breakdown," he corrected, remaining slumped in the chair. "No, nope, I was only filled with fear and trembling and unreasoning dread. Stuff like that." He stood up.

Casey shook her blonde head, eyeing him. "Getting cold feet? Lots of impending grooms, so I'm told, get the wimwams as the wedding date draws—"

"The package." He pointed in its direction.

Casey brightened. "Boy, we're sure getting a lot of . . . what's wrong, Wes?"

"It's from him."

"Who?" She approached the coffee table.

"Your dear father."

"Oh." She halted, frowning. "Well, that's not too scary. Pop probably read about our upcoming wedding in some foreign newspaper in Guatemala or Hong Kong or wherever his far-flung business activities have taken—"

"Your father doesn't have business activities, Casey," Wes reminded her. "He's a bunco artist, a top-seeded conman who—"

"Still, you have to admit it was thoughtful of my dad to send us a—"

"He sent that from San Diego."

"So near?" she said in a small voice, perching on the coffee table and crossing her long tan legs.

"The only time I met your father," said Wes, commencing to pace back and forth across the darkening room, "he got us mixed up with the spurious skeleton mess that—"

"It wasn't actually spurious. It was a real skeleton."

"Yeah, although not the skeleton he conned his cronies into thinking it was," he reminded.

"We got kidnapped. Came close to being shot."

"Oh, nobody was really going to shoot us. And it's not much of a kidnapping when they just take you a few blocks in a minivan, Wes."

"Be that as it may, Case, I'd just as well your dad didn't barge in on our wedding."

She nodded. "To be honest, I'm not all that enthusiastic about the idea myself," she admitted. "Most brides want their fathers at their weddings to give them away and to make a cheery toast at the reception afterwards . . ." She stopped talking, frowned, shrugged.

"Maybe," suggested Wes, stopping his pacing, "you ought to open that thing and see exactly what he's sent us."

"Sure, I . . . oops."

"What?"

"There's a warning printed here." She tapped a forefinger on the package. "It warns, and I quote, 'Do not open until Wedding Day.' With two explanation points."

"Exclamation," Wes corrected. "Even so, I'd feel much better if I knew he hasn't shipped us the British Crown Jewels or the Dead Sea Scrolls or some other loot he's pilfered from someplace."

"Oh, I doubt he'd pass stolen goods on to us, Wes, especially on the darn eve of our marriage," she said. "It won't hurt anything if we wait awhile to open his gift."

There, however, she was wrong.

The yellowish midday smog seemed to be pressing against the windows of his office at the Sparey Arts Animation Studios. Wes tacked the last of six rough sketches to his cork bulletin board. "Okay, Mike, which one of these dancing vegetarian meatballs looks the most appetizing?"

"I'm not a vegetarian," answered his redheaded screenwriter friend, who was sprawled in a very venerable armchair. "Frankly, I don't see how you can concentrate on knocking out a thirty-second animated TV spot for Ma Nature's Vegan Kitchens when you stand on the brink of wedlock with that . . . with Casey."

"We have different opinions of Casey," Wes told him. "On top of which, she's not given to lying anymore. That's all in the past; Case's reformed."

"Did Dracula ever quit nipping at throats? Did Medusa give up turning ginks to stone?" The writer gave a forlorn shake of his head. "And now, from what you tell me, her prevaricating swindler of a father has resurfaced to blight next week's nuptials even further."

"He's probably lying low, won't even come near us."

"When I was writing scripts for *The Doctor Is An Angel* two seasons ago, old buddy, I did research on DNA. The liar gene is very tough and is passed on from father to son or, as in this case, from father to daughter, so that—"

"Which vegan meatball?" He pointed a thumb at the wall.

Mike Filchock considered. "The one with the top hat and cane," he

decided. "If I ate faddish crap like that, he'd be the one I'd go for. Looks like Fred Astaire."

Returning to his drawing board, Wes sat. "I like him the best, too," he admitted. "Thing is, I'm wondering if the eighteen to thirty-four audience even knows who the hell Fred Astaire was."

"The only people who'd eat vegetarian meatballs are old coots with few if any teeth of their own," his friend observed. "So Astaire is perfect for them. Now, as to your impending doom, suppose—"

"How's your new television show concept coming? Sold it yet?"

"The studio is convinced network TV is ready for the Western to come back. Thus far, however, the networks don't agree."

"*Pardon My Sixgun* is a catchy title and your idea of a—" The phone sitting on his taboret rang. "Hello?"

"Don't get upset," said Casey.

"I'll try not to. What's wrong?"

"Well, possibly nothing," she admitted. "Could be I'm making a mountain out of a mole, but—"

"Molehill," he corrected. "But what's up?"

"I've been getting some odd phone calls all morning, and some weird e-mails, too," Casey explained, sounding uneasy. "And for the past hour or more a dusty gray Mercedes has been driving by our place and slowing when it passes."

"You think this has anything to do with that mysterious package your father sent us?"

"I'm afraid so, Wes."

"We'll have to find out what's in the damn thing."

"I opened it just now."

"So? What is it?"

"The Holy Grail."

"The Holy Grail?"

"Not *the* Holy Grail," she said. "But, I think, a valuable facsimile."

After inhaling and exhaling slowly, Wes said, "Lock all the windows and doors. I'll be home in less than an hour."

When he saw that the front door of their beach cottage was open, Wes went running up across the lawn from his car.

"Casey!" he yelled as he approached the doorway.

There was no response.

Shouldering the door, he rushed into their living room.

"Casey?"

From the spare bedroom she used as a studio came a groan. But it was a growly, barrel-chested masculine groan.

"What in the hell?" Entering the room, Wes saw a large sunburned man of about forty, wearing jeans and a once-bright and still gaudy Hawaiian shirt, sprawled flat out on his back beside Casey's drawing board.

The collection of nine wedding presents that had been piled atop two of the metal filing cabinets was now scattered on the hemp carpeting and two of the smaller packages had been ripped open. The package that had contained the alleged gift from Casey's conman father lay empty next to the unconscious man.

Kneeling next to the big intruder, he noticed a bloody abrasion near his left temple. Wes spotted a small, age-yellowed label lying next to the empty box that had contained his prospective father-in-law's present.

He picked it up. The long ago glue on its back was brittle. The label had typed on it #203/HOLY GRAIL/PARAMOUNT (1933). He slipped the label into the pocket of his shirt.

"Who," murmured the sprawled man. "Who cold-cocked me?" His eyelids fluttered, then lifted, and he scowled up at Wes.

"Here's an even more interesting question," contributed Wes. "What are you doing in our house?"

The big man winced, groaned again. "I was out on the goddamn lawn, looking in the window. Then *bam!* Somebody conked me from behind." Using his elbows, he pushed himself into a sitting position on the studio floor.

"Looking in a window, huh? You a Peeping Tom?"

"Naw, I'm a private investigator."

"Even so. Why were you skulking around our house?" asked Wes. "More important—where's my fiancée?"

"You mean Casey McLeod?"

"That's her. Where is she?"

He rubbed at his injured head. "I figure the little bald guy with the .45 automatic snatched her." He grimaced as he looked around the studio. "Crap, he swiped the Holy Grail, too."

"What little bald guy?"

The big detective shrugged. "If I knew who he was, buddy, we could locate your girlfriend *and* the damned Grail."

"Who are you, by the way?"

"Alex Hootman." He raised his left buttock, fished a fat alligator wallet out of a hip pocket and showed Wes a copy of his state license. "Run the Hootman Investigation Service in West Hollywood." Putting the wallet away, Hootman extracted a folded photocopy out of his shirt pocket. "We're looking for this."

The copy was of a newspaper story that had run in *Daily Variety* two weeks earlier. The headline read MOVIE MUSEUM LOOTED OF MILLION BUCKS WORTH OF MEMORABILIA.

The story explained that a large quantity of motion picture artifacts, valued at over a million dollars, had been stolen in a well-planned after-midnight raid on the Hollywood Memories Museum. One of the most valuable pieces, said to be worth as much as three hundred thousand dollars, was the real gold Holy Grail chalice that had been used in Cecil B. DeMille's 1933 Paramount Pictures biblical epic, *The Miracle of the Chalice.*

"We got an anonymous tip that the Grail had been shipped to his daughter by the notorious Erle Stanley McLeod," said Hootman, rising, with some help from Wes, to his feet. "Wow, I still feel spacey. Usually when I get bopped on the head I don't stay giddy so long."

"Did you see who slugged you?"

"Nope, it was as surprising as a bolt out of the blue."

"And the bald guy had a gun pointed at Casey?"

Hootman started to nod his head, then thought better of it. "Right, and he had the Holy Grail in his other hand."

"If he wanted the Grail, why take her, too?"

The private investigator said, "Maybe the guy needed a hostage—or could be he wanted to use her to persuade her father to turn over the rest of the museum loot."

Gesturing with the copy of the *Variety* story, Wes asked, "Is this Hollywood hype or is the stuff really worth a million?"

"Hell, it might be worth even more," answered Hootman, rubbing his palm, carefully, over his injured temple. "Collectors are nuts about crap like that. Lot of them don't give a damn if it's stolen goods either."

"I've got to find out who took Casey and where she is."

"You could hire our agency," suggested the detective.

"Don't think I'm being overly critical, Alex, but your track record on this case hasn't been too impressive so far."

"I can probably find out who the bald guy is. I have a lot of connections."

"If I can't track her down by tonight, I'll go to the cops."

Hootman grinned. "Police might conclude that Casey McLeod's as big a crook as her old man," he said. "If they find her, she's likely to end up in the can."

"You better go have your injury taken care of," Wes advised.

"My medical plan always makes a holy fuss ever time I get slugged." He made his way toward the door. "Nice meeting you. Here's my card in case you change your mind about having us find your lady for you."

Wes took the card and opened the door. He watched the private detective start for his car, wobbling some. The glare of the smog was starting to fade as dusk approached.

He'd been sitting at Casey's computer for nearly an hour and the night had long since closed in. Going over what you might call her voluminous e-mail correspondence for the past couple of days, Wes had located two letters that seemed to pertain to the Holy Grail. One was from a man named Sid Pevney in Altadena, who claimed to be a historian, and the other from Lafe Gilete, an alleged antique dealer in Long Beach.

Casey's voice mail, which he checked earlier, contained only a saved message from a gruff-voiced woman who'd expressed interest in "a certain art object" and suggested that Casey had better be willing to deal with her. The surly woman had left no name or number. There was no record of further messages from the woman, but that might only mean she'd reached Casey directly on her second try.

Sighing, looking yet again at his wristwatch, Wes got up from

the chair that faced the computer monitor. He crossed the studio, for some reason skirting the spot where the private detective had earlier been sprawled, and flipped on the light switch. He'd been sitting in the dark.

He'd taken one step out of the room when the phone on the taboret next to Casey's drawing board commenced ringing.

Wes sprinted to it. "Hello."

"Just listen, Wes," said Casey in a very quiet voice.

"Where the hell are you?"

"They won't let me mention that."

"Somebody's kidnapped you?"

"Exactly," she said. "Now here's what you have to do and—"

"Is it the bald guy who was here?"

"In part," answered Casey, "but not entirely. What you have to do—and they say you only have twenty-four hours, Wes—what you have to do is go get the *authentic* Holy Grail from wherever it is you hid it for me. Then stand by. Somebody, maybe me, will phone you tomorrow and tell you where to deliver it. Then they'll turn me loose."

"Are you okay?"

"As okay as can be expected," the young woman said. "Oh, and tell my publisher I'll be late with the next issue of my comic book. Since I—"

The phone went dead.

Very slowly he hung up. "She hasn't been working on an issue of her *Bertha the Biker* comic book for over a year," he said. "So that must've been some sort of message. But what the heck does it mean?"

He was still standing, scowling and thoughtful, beside the taboret when he heard a bebop version of "How High the Moon" coming from the upright piano out in their living room.

Making what came close to being a snarling noise, Wes went running into the other room. As he'd expected, it was Casey's ne'er-do-well father seated at the piano. "Who the hell let you in?"

"The door, my boy, was open."

"No, it wasn't."

Erle Stanley McLeod shrugged, smiled, and continued playing. "Most doors are open to me, Wesley," he told him. "Now then, lad, whereabouts is my darling little Casey Ann?"

"You tell me, you conniving bastard." He moved closer to his soon-to-be father-in-law. "And also explain what kind of new mess you've gotten Casey mixed up in."

McLeod ceased playing. He was a tall, lean man in his early sixties. "Mess? What do you mean by that, son?"

"You shipped her some of the loot from one of your recent burglaries," Wes accused. "Apparently your rival thieves got wind of that and kidnapped her to force you to turn over the *real* C. B. DeMille movie Grail over to them."

A believable look of pain touched the older man's face. "Ah, I see that my little subterfuge has gone awry." He pushed back from the piano, shaking his head.

"What'd you do, swipe the Holy Grail from the museum and then

get one of your crooked cronies to whip up a fake to pass off to some halfwit collector?"

"I assure you, young man, that I was in no way involved with stealing that collection of invaluable motion picture memorabilia." McLeod, who was wearing white duck trousers, Mexican sandals, and a navy blue pullover, rose up off the piano bench. He touched his hand to his side, grimacing and reminding Wes of a silent-movie actor registering sorrow and regret.

Sitting next to their coffee table was a large, much-traveled suitcase.

Casey's father halted beside it, nodding down at it. "As you must've learned when last we met, Wesley, I am neither a thief nor a robber," he said. "I am, rather, an entrepreneur, a traveler along, I will admit, some usual byways. I've lived by my wits for many a moon and—"

"Your damn wits have landed you in prison more than once," cut in the angry Wes. "Now they've got Casey in trouble. Cut the crap and tell me where the real DeMille prop chalice is. We'll get it, hand it over to the guys who grabbed Casey. They think I had it and hid the damn thing someplace."

"What I'm trying to convey to you, my boy," said McLeod as he hefted his suitcase up onto the coffee table and began to unzip it, "is that I never had the authentic stolen Grail."

"Then what the hell is—"

"When I read of the theft last week, I was recuperating from a somewhat strenuous business deal down in sun-drenched Mexico," he continued. "Obtaining detailed photos of the relic, I had a skilled artisan chum of mine who dwells near Tijuana fashion me three convincing copies of the DeMille Holy Grail."

"Three?"

"It was my notion that there are enough easily conned and avaricious memorabilia collectors in Southern California to allow me to pass off my handsome copies as the real thing at least three times. And no questions asked." From out of the open suitcase he withdrew one and then another tissue-wrapped, seemingly golden, seemingly jewel-encrusted chalice. He placed them side by side atop the glass table and drew away the tissue paper. "You'll note that each has an authentic looking label attached to its base."

"But where's the real stolen Grail?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea."

Wes asked, "Why exactly did you send one of the fakes to Casey?"

"Ah, that's a complex and tangled story."

"Tell me," he requested.

After once again consulting his platinum wristwatch, Filchock once again stood up from the living room armchair he'd been uneasily camped in. "Your father-in-law is now over an hour late," he mentioned, as he once again began wandering around the living room of the beach cottage. "I'd bet,

as they used to say in Bogart pictures, that he's taken a powder. Erle Stanley is probably long gone, heading for the border."

Wes was seated on the edge of the piano bench. "He'll be back," he assured his friend. "He really is concerned about Casey."

The red-haired writer produced a noise indicating disbelief. "When I was story editor on the *Bill Shakespeare & Wife* miniseries a couple of seasons ago, I learned a lot about the classic ingredients of drama," he said. "You, old buddy, have what Shakespeare would've called a tragic flaw. That flaw is that you believe all the baloney that the rarely truthful McLeod clan tells you."

"In this instance, Mike, I do believe that the guy is worried about Casey."

"So worried that he sent her one of these phony Grails." Filchock gestured at the two that McLeod had left sitting on the coffee table. "Which caused assorted crazed con artists and thieves to descend on her."

"He explained that," said Wes. "He says that word had gotten around Mexico that he had the authentic stolen DeMille chalice. McLeod figured if he was seen shipping a Grail-sized package out of the country, it would draw off his rivals."

"Hooey," observed the writer, more or less sitting down again.

Wes shrugged. "He claims he didn't think anybody'd be able to trace the package to Casey."

"Hooey."

Getting up, Wes walked to the window to look out into the surrounding night. The waves hitting the downhill beach were topped with luminous foam. "Okay, you don't have to have any faith in Casey's dad. Or in Casey," he said. "But I do need you to help us get her back."

"I already told you I'd help out, Wes," Filchock reminded. "But if the old boy doesn't show up soon, you and I are—"

"Forgive my tardiness," said McLeod as he came in through the front doorway. He'd put on a very old and crinkled leather jacket. "Ah, and this redheaded gentleman must be Michael Filchock." He went striding over to him, hand held out. "I happen to be a great admirer of your dramatic output."

Reluctantly, the writer rose and shook hands. "Such as?"

"It would take too much valuable time to list all your many achievements," Casey's father told him. "However, I especially admired your *Ventura Vice Cops* in the late 1980's. More recently your *Bill Shakespeare & Wife* was marvelous. Shame you never expanded it into a theatrical feature."

"Well, we tried that, but—"

"Where's Mina Googins holed up?" cut in Wes.

Turning to him, McLeod said, "It took me longer than I'd anticipated to run down my informants, Wesley. One of them had moved from Long Beach to Manhattan Beach. I eventually learned, however, that Mina and her baldheaded associate Ansel

Lightner are residing in a small ranch-style house in Beverly Glen, an area above Sunset and—"

"I know where it is. You got an address?"

"The place is on Scenario Lane." He recited the address numbers. Nodding at Filchock, he added, "I don't know if my son-in-law-to-be explained to you, Michael, the previous detective work that we did. You see—"

"I got to thinking that Casey's mentioning her female comic book character was maybe her way of trying to tell me a woman was involved," said Wes.

"When I heard the woman's voice preserved on Casey Ann's voice mail," put in her father, "I was fairly sure we were dealing with Mina Googins, an art thief of some renown. When Wesley passed on the description of the gent who was actually involved in carrying off my dear daughter, I concluded it must be Ansel Lightner. He's long been Mina's right-hand man and sometime paramour. Though how a fellow can romance any woman of Mina's girth is beyond me. Myself, I've always favored slim, svelte women. Casey's dear mother, a woman both slim and svelte, was—"

"I've outlined our plan of attack to Mike," interrupted Wes. "Do you know how many people we can expect to encounter at Mina Googins's hideaway?"

Casey's father frowned. "My chief informant states that Mina may have one other lout aboard in addition to Ansel," he answered. "That means you lads will have at least two minions to disable while I distract the immense and formidable Mina." From a pocket of his venerable leather jacket, he produced a .32 revolver. "Take this along."

"I don't want to shoot anybody."

"You can't with this gun," McLeod said, placing it in Wes's hand. "Not loaded. I rarely work with loaded weapons. However, I've found that a gun in itself, pointed in a sufficiently threatening and determined way, can be very persuasive."

Wes kept the weapon. "Okay."

"Now, gentlemen," suggested McLeod, gesturing toward the door, "let us be up and doing."

It had started raining, a light, warm sort of rain. Wes and Filchock were cautiously working their way down through a patch of night woods directly behind the house that supposedly held Mina Googins, Ansel Lightner, and hopefully, the abducted Casey.

"I didn't know," said Filchock quietly, "that your father-in-law owned a Jaguar."

"He's not officially my father-in-law until next week and own may not be the right word," whispered Wes. "What time is it?"

"Ten twenty-nine." The writer, after consulting his watch, turned up the collar of his sport coat.

"There's the backside of Mina Googins's temporary lodgings." Wes pointed at the somewhat ramshackle ranch-style house that was visible now about twenty

yards ahead of them. Several windows were showing light. "McLeod is supposed to go into his part at exactly ten thirty-five."

"All the shades are down back here," mentioned Filchock. "So we can't peek in to spot where they're holding Casey—if they've got her here at all."

"Let's continue optimistic." They'd reached the edge of the small wooded area. "We'll have to force our way in through the back door there. What time is it now?"

"Ten thirty-three. Door'll likely be locked."

"Meaning we bust it down." He left the shadowy woodland, started down across the damp, weedy back yard, hunching low.

The rain had grown heavier, and it didn't feel quite as warm out here in the open.

Filchock was following close behind him.

From the front of the house came the sound of a car being driven onto the short gravel driveway.

The horn of the Jaguar sounded, beeping twice and then once again.

A car door opened, closed.

"Mina, my dear," called out McLeod. "I've come to negotiate. Can't wait any longer to be reunited with my daughter. Therefore, I've brought the authentic item. See, I'm holding it in front of my headlights."

After about thirty seconds, the front door of the house creaked open. "Quiet out there, you idiot," came the gruff voice of Mina Googins. "How the devil did you find me?"

"Tracking is but one of my many gifts, dear lady."

Wes tapped his friend's arm. "She sounds diverted. Let's try it."

Side by side they ran toward the back door.

The venerable lock gave way after three brisk kicks from Filchock's imported Italian boot. He then kicked the door itself, causing it to go flapping open.

"Get out the damn gun," the writer ordered Wes as they hesitated on the threshold. "Hold it with both hands. Authentic detective style."

Wes dug the revolver out of his pocket. "Oops, the bald guy's down at the end of the hall."

Toward the front of the dimly lit hallway a small hairless man was turning toward them. Behind him at the partially open front door stood an immense blonde woman in a lime green pants suit. She was haggling with McLeod.

Grabbing the unloaded gun away from Wes, Filchock gripped it with both hands and leaped ahead into the corridor. "Freeze, Baldy," he ordered. "Reach for it."

The bald man, giving up any notion of reaching for his shoulder holster, raised both hands high.

"What kind of double cross is this?" demanded Mina.

Filchock trotted rapidly toward the bald man. "I'll just take this perp's piece."

Wes was about to follow him. Then from a room on his left he

heard a chair fall over. Scuffling followed.

"Darn you," said Casey. "Hey, ouch."

Wes kneed the door open and dived, somewhat cautiously, into the yellow and white kitchen.

A lean, dark man had an arm around Casey's waist and was struggling with her.

"Let go of her," said Wes.

The man shoved her toward a cluttered lopsided table.

"Look out, Wes. He's going for the fry pan."

The lean man had unplugged the electric frying pan and was wielding it like a fly swatter.

About to close in on him, Wes stepped on a soft drink can that had rolled off the kitchen table. He stumbled.

The heavy pan came down on his head, hard. He was whapped again twice more.

Darkness commenced, dotted with quivering green stars.

Then he fell to the floor and passed out.

After a moment, Wes realized that he himself was producing the low moans and groans he'd been hearing.

"Are you okay? How many fingers am I holding up?"

Opening his eyes, he found that he was lying with his head in Casey's lap. "None," he answered in a gargly voice that sounded to him almost as gruff as that of Mina Googins.

"Darn, I'm so rattled I forgot to hold up my hand. Sorry. Now how many?"

"Two fingers and a Mars bar."

Casey sighed. "When I get truly upset, I always get a craving for sweets."

Wes felt a bounce, glanced carefully around, and discovered that they were in the back seat of his Toyota. "Who's driving?"

"I am, old buddy," said Filchock. "Are you okay or shall we stop at an emergency room?"

Wes considered the query. "How long was I out?"

"Nearly twenty minutes. You could have a concussion," the young woman said.

Reaching up, he gingerly patted the top of his head. "Small bump, but my scalp feels gooey. Is that blood?"

"No, soy sauce," explained Casey. "I didn't want to wipe your poor head too forcibly. Edwin was fixing stir-fried vegetables when he conked you."

"Edwin's the other goon?"

"Oh, you have a sliver of shiitake mushroom in your ear," she said, nodding as she extracted it. "Edwin was the other member of the Googins gang, yes."

"And where is the gang now?"

"We overwhelmed them," Casey told him. "Mike used kung fu on Ansel and—"

"Actually a few tricks I learned from my pal Jackie Chan," said Filchock.

"I slugged Edwin while he was distracted bopping you on the head," Casey continued. "And my father—not very gentlemanly of him, but darned effective—socked the fat lady square on the chin and decked her. She made

one heck of a thunk hitting the floor."

"It probably registered on the Richter scale," added Filchock. "Then we trussed the trio up with some old clothesline we found in a closet."

"My father placed the Grail they'd swiped from us on the coffee table and we arranged them all on chairs in the living room to await the police."

"You guys called the police?"

From the driver's seat Filchock asked, "What about the hospital, Wes?"

"Nope, don't think I'll need it."

Casey took a bite of her candy bar. "My father telephoned the police, explaining that he was a concerned citizen and that they could find the scoundrels responsible for the Hollywood Memories Museum theft, along with part of the loot, there on Scenario Lane."

"The cops'll discover that the chalice is a fake and that Mina's bunch had nothing to do with the robbery."

"My father says they're wanted for several other capers. So they'll be held and that'll give him a chance to depart safely."

With an assist from Casey, Wes sat up. "Where's he heading?"

Casey sighed again. "He's on his way back to Mexico," she explained. "He suspected that Mina might well mention his name to the police and he'd feel much safer in another country. Also, he thinks he has a customer for that second fake Grail."

"So," Wes asked hopefully, "your father won't be at our wedding next week?"

"Nope, he'll be lying low south of the border."

"Well, then something good came out of this mess."

"In a way, a girl would like her father to attend her wedding. Yet, in this case . . ."

Filchock suggested, "Tell him about the wedding present."

"Oh, yes. Before my father drove away into the rainswept night in his borrowed Jaguar," Casey said, taking hold of Wes's hand with chocolate-smudged fingers, "he apologized for sending us that fake Grail and marking it a wedding gift. Soon as he gets safely settled, he's going to send us something more useful. But we can keep the chalice he left at our place."

"Something old, something new," recited Filchock, "something borrowed, something blue. That's what tradition says every young lady should have on her wedding day. You can consider the Holy Grail something borrowed."

"Actually, McLeod's Grail wasn't borrowed from the museum," Wes pointed out.

"Close enough," said Casey, leaning to kiss him.

THE RISING TIDE

D. A. McGuire

Illustration by Meredith Lightbourn

"Like a gunshot, isn't it?" she asked, watching him finish off his sandwich. He looked at her quizzically. "That sail, snapping in the wind," she explained, pointing to the one small sailboat tied up to Hannerman's Wharf at the edge of the public beach.

"That? Jory . . . Jory Matthews, he'll take that boat out in the worst weather. Lives across the water. Damn, I've seen him plow that little sloop across Westfleet Harbor in the snow."

Melanie smiled, leaned her elbows on the table, and nursing her second cup of coffee, allowed herself the rare privilege of merely . . . relaxing. When he had called this morning and asked her out to lunch, it occurred to her that he might have some ulterior motive. He knew she wasn't who she claimed to be; in fact, he knew an awful lot about her that she'd rather he didn't. Still, in the last few months, he'd done nothing to indicate he was planning to check any further into her background. He'd left her alone, in other words, and other than waving to her when they'd passed on the street and bumping into her at the local convenience store, they'd barely spoken a half dozen words to one another. Now this, out of the blue, on the first mild day of March, a day with a sky full of swiftly moving cumulus clouds. Out on the beach a group of children were flying kites. It was low tide—a fact she could smell even from the restaurant.

So an invitation to lunch? "Nothing special," he'd said on the phone. "Got the day off. If you're not doing anything."

She'd cringed at the sound of that voice. Every day since they had met and worked briefly together on a case, she'd lived with the fear that Detective Mac Jackson would give her a call and demand to know more about the things she couldn't tell him.

That call had come. After hanging up the phone, she'd stared across the kitchen, through the dining area and front rooms, and out the bay windows overlooking marsh, beach, and water. I'm a good caretaker, she'd reasoned to herself. I keep this house clean; I keep it safe. I work for a good man, a rich man, the horror writer Jonathan Ross. I don't go into his private affairs. I dust his study and I put aside his magazines—the ones that come to his summer address. I maintain this home for the brief summer months when Mr. Ross returns. He trusts me; he's kept me on despite a few . . . reservations. And I've kept my past hidden, locked up exactly where it belongs—in the past.

But Mac Jackson had started to unlock that past, piece by tiny piece. He was a patient man, and it wasn't a sense of affection, loyalty, or gratitude that had kept him from prying further. No. He simply wasn't *interested* in knowing more about her, so he hadn't asked for more. But . . .

Mac was a police detective—and a very competent, thorough, and

meticulous detective. And worse still: he was well liked and respected by the citizens of the small town of Westfleet.

Yet all they'd talked about over lunch was the weather, ever variable and unpredictable, out here on the inside, upward hook of the Cape. Boston had just gotten buried in twenty inches of snow; the Cape got nothing but rain, then blue skies and temperatures nearing fifty degrees. But there was still a brisk northeast wind and it was lifting the kites down on the beach, much to the excitement of the children. Twenty minutes ago Melanie and Mac had watched them file down the hill from the school up the street. Little kids, no more than seven or eight years old, their faces bright red in the cold breeze. They'd been carrying paper folders, pencils, and their kites. Through the windows of the beachfront restaurant she could hear them laughing and shouting.

"They must be cold out there today," she noted, "even with this sun."

"Excitement creates its own energy," he said, surprising her. Sometimes for a man who didn't say much that was unnecessary, he could be pleasingly perspicacious. "My sister works up at that school," he said, wiping his mouth on his napkin. "The Reubens here are great, Mel, you ought to try one sometime."

Mel? Where had that come from? And why had he said it with a slightly sardonic ring? Because he knew that she wasn't Melanie Wilkerson and that her background and credentials were fabricated? Was he enjoying this—playing it out like a slow, agonizing game of chess? Because if so, it was one game she was determined he wouldn't win.

"You know, a lot of people don't even realize what a real gun sounds like. I hear it on the news all the time. Someone hears a .22 going off, thinks it's a firecracker." She shook her head; she didn't know why she said this. "But not me. I grew up with the sounds of real guns."

"And where was that, Mel? Where did you grow up?"

She looked at him. He needed a shave, she thought. He always looked like he needed a shave, with that dark stubble on his face. He must have a fast-growing beard, or very dark beard, or maybe he shaved at night, and by the morning . . .

She shook her head and turned in her chair to see a great, multicolored—something—soar into the air from somewhere down the beach. A massive kite? She left the table and walked to the windows. A few other patrons were also standing there watching.

"The school kite," Melanie heard one woman say. "If I'd known they were launching it today, I'd have brought my camera."

"School kite . . ." she murmured as Mac joined her, still wiping his hands. He smelled like sauerkraut.

"Yeah, big dragon they got. A master kitemaker in Japan made it for the school. Multicultural, you know." He looked at her and smiled.

"My sister teaches third grade. You should go see the thing, must be forty feet long."

"A dragon." She was impressed.

"Come on," he said, "we'll go take a look."

"Multicultural?" she asked as they left the building and headed across the parking lot to the beach.

"Yeah, this is a class lesson. You don't think they're down there having fun, do you?" He smiled and realized she was puzzled. "That's the way things are done in schools now. Learn your science while doing geography. Paint your vocabulary words, listen to music that teaches you grammar, and if you can throw in some Spanish verbs while you're at it, so much the better. Like real life, you know?"

"Real life?"

"Mix it all up. Come here." He reached forward, and where ordinarily she would have flinched, she held still while he adjusted the collar of her jacket. "You're still careful, aren't you, Melanie?" he said, noticing her reticence at being touched, but of course he'd notice. Not much escaped his attention, which made it all the more uncanny why she had accepted his invitation.

She hadn't accepted any invitation, from anyone, for over a year now. Living as the reclusive caretaker of a great empty house ten miles from the center of town had seemed small price to pay—when she considered the alternative.

"Let's go see this kite," she said.

She wondered later how most adults, parents in particular, learn how to distinguish between the high, frenzied peals of laughter of enjoyment and excitement and that other sound that children make. She had been among the last to realize that the screams she was hearing were something else. The children jumped up and down as the school dragon lifted into the air, its great tail of purple, green, and shades of gold, sweeping back and forth—the kite was so large it took three adult men to hold onto its lines. Then, in the midst of all the excitment, behind the shouting, laughing children was that other kind of scream. It began slowly, like a soft, terrified gasp.

How was Mac able to pick it out? What made him turn away from the crowd on the beach? For, if anything, the children were growing even more excited, clapping their hands and cheering. A small, white, energetic dog had joined the group, too, and was barking and running feverishly among the children. But Mac was moving up toward the beach parking lot and the road. In the middle of all that tumult, he and a few of the other adults who had paused to watch the kite launching, a couple of older women, a woman with a stroller, were turned away at the sound. Then another woman, who had been

standing near the sea wall—she had a cast on her leg—pivoted, too. And even though Melanie was down on the beach, where a group of thrilled children swept past her, she knew something had happened. At that moment she suddenly pinpointed the origin of that sound. It wasn't a child's voice after all. A young woman stood near the road, drawing the other adults toward her. Her voice was no longer a scream, but a thin, punctuated wail: "I can't find her. I can't find her. I don't understand. I sent her up to the nurse. She fell down, so I sent her to the nurse." Then the woman saw Mac, and throwing herself forward to him, screamed: "Mac! I lost one of the children!"

San Francisco, 1989. Melanie remembered the orderly, if somewhat confused, evacuation of Candlestick Park after the Loma Prieta earthquake. She'd been at the World Series game, the San Francisco Giants against the Oakland Athletics. For most people there, it had taken several minutes to understand what had happened. But for others, the response was immediate. The brain has its own speed, its own individual limits, and she saw it happening again here. Some adults were milling uselessly about, confused, distracted, unable to comprehend what was going on. Others were approaching Mac with questions or offering to help. And still others were leaving to ask of anyone, anywhere, if they'd seen a little girl in a yellow parka, red shirt, and faded blue jeans.

She was a seven-year-old girl, and she'd fallen in the sand and scraped the palm of her hand on some rocks down by the shoreline. A brave little girl, who hadn't cried when she showed the teacher her bloodied hand. So the teacher had sent her to the nurse in the school van to have her hand cleaned and antiseptic applied. Everyone agreed she was "always very brave" and "never cried, over anything."

Yes, Melanie thought, the brain moves at different speeds for different people. Some were just standing by, looking shocked or lost, and hoping that somehow, somewhere, someone would emerge with a tow-headed little girl in hand and that she'd be wearing a yellow parka, red shirt, and blue jeans.

She probably fell into that category herself because she didn't know what to do either. There were two parents herding the children into a group, counting heads, calling out their names from a roster. Others, probably parent volunteers recruited for this excursion, including an older woman who seemed to have more authority than the rest, were demanding that the children be silent and listen to the adults who were attempting—so clumsily—to take charge of the situation.

Still, Melanie found the moment amidst all the chaos to approach Mac as he talked to the hysterical woman. She was the girl's teacher; she couldn't have been more than twenty-two or twenty-three. He was trying to calm her and get as much information as he could from

her, while simultaneously calling the police station—someone had handed him a cell phone.

"I'll find my own way home, Mac," she said to him. She was of that group who couldn't help, but didn't wish to be a hindrance. If he didn't acknowledge her, she'd take no offense.

But she never expected him to reach out, grab her arm and say—in a manner and tone that would brook no opposition, "No. Don't go. Stay." For a moment her eyes locked with his, then he added, "I might need your help, Melanie."

Help how? The older woman—identified as the classroom aide by a parent—had managed to get the now nervous and frightened children into a somewhat coherent group. They were actually sounding off their names and class numbers like small recruits in a boot camp. Some men had pulled the dragon kite down. It now lay in a crumpled mass on the beach. There was a police cruiser up at the side of the road, its blue lights spinning; there was a fire truck there, too.

But she remained on the edge of things, which is where she had preferred to be these last two years. She wiped her eyes a few times, but it was only the wind, whipping up colder and faster now that the tide was starting to turn. Still, she decided to try and help—if by her presence only—and moved over to where a pair of little girls were also wiping their eyes. The impact of what had happened—or could be happening—was just starting to sink in.

Two of the men who had helped with the kite were now walking along the beach toward the jetties, calling out the girl's name. Another adult walked past, talking on her cell phone, possibly to her husband: "No, Mac Jackson just called her house. No one came to pick her up. She must have just . . . wandered off. Oh, God, I hope that's all it is."

"What about the dog?" a small voice asked Melanie suddenly.

She glanced down. A small, earnest-looking boy, seven or eight at most, was looking up at her. He pointed down the beach to where the small white dog was running in circles. Someone had tied the tattered pieces of a red and blue kite to his tail.

"Shouldn't someone get the dog?" he asked in a very serious little boy way.

"Of course," she agreed. That was something she could do.

"I don't want to tell you what to do. You know your business best. And I have no right nor reason to interfere, but I've got to say this," Melanie started to say to Mac. He looked up at her. She had found him in the restaurant where they'd just had their lunch. There was a group of adults waiting to talk to him. There was also a pair of young police officers, a man and a woman, with him, busily giving orders and talking over their scanners. As for the children, most were now

trudging up the hill to the school under close adult—and police—supervision. "You've got to find her fast, Mac," Melanie said. "Very fast. You can't wait."

"Melanie . . ." Mac said her name heavily and she sensed what would come next. All right, he had asked her to stay, but that had been in an intensely emotional moment. She could figure out later what it meant—if anything. But now would come the order for her to go home, the "Thanks, but I know what I'm doing here."

But before he could do that, she said, "No. I'm right. I've been close to . . . similar situations and I know you can't wait. You have to cut through official procedure, the red tape, or whatever might slow you down. To do this right, you've got to do it *fast.*"

"The roadblocks are all set up, Mac," the younger of the two officers, a man with short red hair, interrupted. "Of the four roads going in and out of Westfleet, we've got a car on every one. We've radioed all surrounding towns, too, and . . ."

He had more to say, something about notifying the state police, something about rounding up known previous offenders, something, something, something . . .

Mac was listening to every word, and to the interview going on in the booth seat to his left, where another police officer, a young woman, was talking to an excited elderly woman. Of course most of the people there were excited, and suddenly everybody wanted to help—or at least think they were helping.

"You been here before, Mel?" Mac finally said to her.

"No, not exactly, but I have experienced this sense of . . . desperate haste. Whoever's got her is moving fast. I *know* he is. You've got to be just as fast."

"Mac . . ." A man with the name of the restaurant on his baseball cap interrupted, handing Mac a portable phone. "For you. From the school."

"Hell, tell me she went back to school on her own," Mac muttered, seizing the phone.

Melanie watched, frozen, and everyone else seemed to hold their breath. Then, as Mac's face fell, he said, "Yeah, I'll be right up." He handed the phone back. "Principal wants to talk to me." He ran a hand over his face.

Another problem: everybody needed to know. Everybody, of course, had a right to know. Every parent of every one of those children. The people who were on the beach. Everyone standing around now. The entire town. The media. And especially the parents of the missing child.

It goes on and on, she thought. It cuts into what he should be doing. Because if anyone can find her, he can. But as he stands there, sifting through the dross to find the . . .

Is it gold, she wondered? Then she also wondered why she cared so much:

I didn't know this child; she's nothing to me. So why do I feel this sudden urgency, this sense of dread, this feeling that if I—if we!—do not move fast enough, and if we do not make the correct decisions, then everything is lost? Why do I feel like I am steering straight into the wind, making every bad decision possible, allowing myself to get caught up in this—another person's problem? Why do I care?

"The tide is rising," Melanie muttered to herself, "and we can't stop it—just race ahead of it."

"Kerry, over at Kerry's Convenience Mart," said yet another officer, a heavy-set older man. Radio in hand, he walked up to Mac, sighed, and said, "He says he has some information for you, Mac. He's got his police scanner on, heard the call."

What call, Melanie wondered. Was there a code for "missing or abducted child?"

"Okay," Mac said quickly, taking charge. To the female officer he said, "You finish here, bring the chief up to date when he arrives." Then to the officer who'd just come in: "You take Kerry's Mart . . ." And then to Melanie, "We'll go see the principal."

"A kid?" Melanie said with some skepticism. "They were all on the beach when it happened, and it couldn't have happened on the beach, Mac. Too many people were there, including a lot of adults."

"Yeah, all watching the dragon go up," he said dryly as he peeled away from the curb. "But that's what the principal says, that she's got an eight-year-old boy who wants to 'talk to the police.' "

"Maybe he saw something," she said. "But if he did, why didn't he say something before this?" Melanie shook her head. Her experience with children was so sparse as to be nonexistent, and what little she knew was exactly what he told her next.

"Who knows, and in any event we have to be careful. Popular opinion says kids don't lie. Well, that's not always true. I figure I always have a fifty-fifty chance of finding out something worthwhile when a kid claims to know or have seen something. Either the kid will tell the truth straight out, without any embellishment, or watch your face and tell you what he or she thinks you want to hear."

"But you have to check it out, just in case."

"Yeah, just in case."

"This is Jory Matthews . . ." the principal began.

The small, taut face looked up—just as earnestly as it had on asking Melanie about the dog.

Quickly the principal added, "Jory Matthews the Third." She smiled gently at the boy sitting stiffly in front of her massive desk. Then she

came around the desk, ignoring Melanie, and said to Mac, "Jory is slightly autistic, Douglas, but he is very insistent that there is something you need to know."

Good God, Melanie thought, now an autistic kid, and we—Mac is dragging his heels enough as it is.

Mac nodded, thanked the woman, a portly but kind-faced woman, who touched Mac on the arm before she went toward the door.

"Douglas was my student in fourth grade," she said to Melanie, perhaps mistaking her for another police officer. "Room 202. One of the best and brightest, Douglas MacArthur Jackson. Perhaps we should step out into the hall, let him talk to Jory alone."

"No," Mac said quickly, turning around. "She stays."

Apparently the best and brightest are never challenged—the principal just nodded and went out into the hall, pulling the door shut behind her.

"Jory . . ." Mac began, leaning on the edge of the desk and looking down at the small boy. "I know your grandfather, Jory Matthews the First."

Bad tactic, Melanie thought, and though she knew very little about children, she knew that to gain anyone's trust, you had to be on the same level.

"Yes," the boy said in his earnest and straightforward manner. Then he went on, his pronunciation slow, careful, and precise. "My grandfather is *not* a Senior. He calls himself the First, and my Dad is the Second, *not* a Junior."

Mac lifted his eyes briefly to Melanie and she saw the flash of humor in them. And then, Mac did precisely what Melanie thought he should, he grabbed a small student's chair and sat on its very edge, facing the young boy nearly at eye level.

Jory had blond hair, intent eyes, and a handsome face. He was shivering—in excitement, fear, or something else—as he looked at Mac and said, "I think the Bird Man took her."

"Bird Man?" Mac echoed. His eyes raised again and Melanie struggled not to turn away impatiently.

Wasting time, she thought. Wasting more time.

"You think the Bird Man took her," Mac went on carefully. "Jory, who is the . . . Bird Man?"

"I think he did," the boy said.

"Okay," Mac said, opting to return to that topic later, "Did you see her walk away with the Bird Man?"

The boy shook his head.

"So, why do you think he took her?"

"I saw her. She showed him her hand where she got hurt. Right here." He turned his own hand over and fingered a straight line across his palm. "It was bleeding."

Mac sat back, a frustrated look on his face, but before he could ask his next question, Jory blurted, "We *don't* talk to the Bird Man. We're not *allowed* to talk to him. He's a *stranger.*"

"Jory . . ." Mac handed his notepad over to Melanie. He leaned in closer to the boy and asked: "Does the Bird Man have another name?"

The little boy just looked at Mac; his shivering grew more intense.

"Jory . . ." Mac said softly, "*Where* was the Bird Man when you saw him with . . ."

"The dragon went up, but her hand was bleeding. There was a lot of screaming." The little boy made a strange face, almost as though he was in pain. "I saw her show the Bird Man her hand."

Immediately Mac moved to the phone on the principal's desk and punched in a number. To Melanie, he said, "Keep him talking." Then turning away, Mac moved as far from them as the phone cord would allow.

"Jory . . ." Melanie said softly and uncertainly. She slipped into the small chair Mac had vacated. "Where did you see this . . . Bird Man? Is he someone you know?"

The boy shook his head and said, "He feeds the birds."

"He feeds the birds," Melanie repeated. "At the beach?"

Jory nodded very slightly.

"And where was he—the Bird Man—when the dragon went up?"

"If someone is a stranger, you shouldn't talk to them," Jory Matthews insisted almost furiously. "Even if they call you a buffalo-head."

"Buffalo . . ." For a moment Melanie was confused, then said, "That's right, you should never talk to strangers."

"Even if he's there every day. Even if he watches us. He feeds the birds. He gives the nasty gulls bread."

"He's been at the beach . . . every day?" Melanie looked up over her shoulder and met Mac's dark eyes. "Jory . . ." Back to the boy, she asked again, a bit more forcefully, "*Did you* see the Bird Man take your classmate away?"

"I see him every day," the boy replied, with the emphasis on the word "I." "*She* talks to him."

"She talks to him?" Melanie went on, confused and exasperated. She struggled to maintain her patience. "Jory, does the man have a name?"

"Every day." The little boy was trembling so violently now, he looked ready to burst out of his skin.

"Do you know the Bird Man's real name?" Mac interrupted, his voice low and controlled.

"No," Jory went on, looking at the floor. "He watches us. He sits on the bench and feeds the birds and watches us." He lifted his head suddenly. "He has a dog."

"A white dog?" Melanie asked, but at that the boy grabbed the seat

of the chair and started to rock back and forth, back and forth. She looked at Mac; he raised his hand up to her.

"Buffalohead. Buffalohead," the boy began, and then: "I'm going to be in trouble. I'm going to be in such big trouble. Trouble-trouble-trouble. Trouble with a capital T. Trouble with a B-L-E at the end. Trouble-trouble-trouble."

"Get his teacher," Mac said.

But Mac wasn't able to see Jory Matthew's teacher, which was another setback in a day rife with them. According to the principal, the young woman had collapsed in the nurse's office. She'd gotten her small charges back to school safely, then alternately sobbing and asking frantic, unanswerable questions, she had fallen apart. The school staff was now trying to reach her parents.

"We need her to calm down," Mac told the principal. "Maybe my sister Kim . . ."

"Your sister is already with her," the principal patiently agreed. "She just needs a few minutes, Mac. This has been very difficult for her."

And for the little girl, Melanie thought anxiously. What about her? But she bit her tongue as the principal said, "I'll send for the classroom aide instead, Mrs. Bexham."

Mac started to shake his head and made a move as if to leave, but the principal quickly added: "Eleanor Bexham can tell you more about that class than anyone else, Douglas. She's the best teacher's aide this school has ever had, an absolute godsend. She's helped more teachers through their first year than anyone I've ever known. I always team her up with the ones who, well, seem a little . . ." She looked at Melanie, again thinking she was a police officer, or Mac's partner. ". . . unprepared for teaching. If it weren't for Eleanor Bexham, Maggie Iverson would never have gotten through her first week here."

"Get her in here," Mac muttered.

"Well . . ." the woman began in response to his first question: "There is an elderly gentleman who sits and feeds the birds." Eleanor Bexham was in her mid-sixties, slightly overweight, with a gently seamed face, white hair, and a strange sense of detachment that belied a nervous anxiety, which the woman was struggling to suppress. What had happened was traumatic for everyone.

Melanie also recognized her: she was the aide who had taken control of the excited, frightened children down on the beach and gotten them all together in some sort of reasonable order.

"And we did tell the children," Eleanor Bexham went on in a careful, precise fashion, "not to talk to the man, or to any stranger for that matter, but Jory . . . well, it's sometimes hard to make Jory understand."

"Tell me about this man," Mac insisted.

"I don't know what I can tell you." The woman dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, then glanced in the direction of the hall. "Miss Iverson is a good teacher, but so young." She studied Mac thoughtfully. "I think some of the new teachers are just too young. She's had a very difficult year and I've worked with a lot of . . ."

"Miss Iverson . . ." Mac flipped through his notepad, looked at Melanie's notes, then at his own, and then speaking to her over the older woman's head said, "No one else has said they saw the old man and the girl together, just Jory."

"Jory Matthews?" The woman immediately shook her head. "I keep Jory very close to me at all times, Detective Jackson."

"Is that so?" Mac said.

"Jory's a very literal child; he's autistic, you know. Autistic children can be very difficult to work with." Her whole tone and manner was somewhat patronizing, but strangely enough, Mac ignored it. "Oh, I don't want to be critical," the woman went on, glancing from Melanie to Mac, "but I told Maggie, that is, Miss Iverson, that we didn't have enough parents with us today. How can I keep my eye on Jory and all the children at the same time? And then, to send that child off to the nurse alone?" She shook her head. "I'm not a teacher, I'm an aide, but I do think it showed a terrible lapse of judgment. It was very irresponsible of Maggie . . . of Miss Iverson."

"Miss Iverson sent the girl to see the school nurse. The nurse . . ." Mac looked back at his notes. "She's already been questioned, says she saw nothing unusual, but we'll have to ask her about this 'Bird Man.' "

"That's what the children call him," Mrs. Bexham said with a condescending smile. "He seems so kind, just sits and watches the children and feeds the birds. Brings bags of bread and seed and . . ."

Mac cut her off: "The nurse has a broken leg, so she stayed up near the van?"

"That's correct," the woman answered. "And I would gladly have walked the child up, but I learned about it too late. I asked where she was. I try to keep a constant check on all the children, but when they're running up and down the beach, well there's just no order anymore. That's why we should have had more parents with us. I mean, Detective, these children are only six and seven years old."

"How many parent volunteers were there today on the beach with the class?"

"Well, we had three mothers, but two of them brought their little ones, so they could hardly be attentive to ours, could they? Then we had two fathers who came to help with the kite, and another man who came down from the restaurant to help with the kite. So six other adults, but the men were only there to help with the dragon."

"So the girl fell, scraped her hand, and Miss Iverson sent her up to the nurse?" Melanie asked suddenly.

Eleanor Bexham just pursed her lips together and nodded.

"And Miss Iverson, from the statement she gave on the beach, said when she realized the child hadn't come back, walked up to the van herself to check. This was during all the confusion with the kite." Mac seemed to be thinking aloud. "Then she—Miss Iverson—walked back down to the beach, couldn't find the girl, and went back up to the van. This all took about . . ." Mac looked at Melanie again. ". . . approximately fifteen, maybe twenty minutes."

"This is all so horrible," the older woman said.

"And so brazen," Melanie found herself saying. "Mac, whoever did this did so with eight adults, no nine adults including the school nurse, all standing around."

"Oh, I just want someone to tell us a relative came and got her," Eleanor Bexham said suddenly, her voice quivering a bit. "Yes, that an unthinking grandmother, who came to see the dragon fly, said to her, 'Come along, dear, let's go for ice cream, then I'll take you home. School's almost out.' " She gave Melanie a severe look. "People do do things like that. It's happened before. People just don't *think.*"

"That didn't happen this time, Mrs. Bexham," Mac said, but he was looking at Melanie; she knew they were thinking the same thing: that anyone who could be this brazen—nab a child in broad daylight while nine adults were nearby—would do almost anything.

"No, none of us knew who he was, but he was there, I think, almost every day," the nurse said. She was a distracted-looking woman with a cast on one leg and a crutch in both hands. "We had to talk to Jory Matthews about him."

"Jory again," Melanie murmured.

"Tell us about the man," Mac insisted.

"He had white hair, a lot of white hair, and a rather . . . well, plain face. Very average looking, maybe fifty or sixty. It's hard to say. He had a dog with him, and he sat up near the sea wall on a bench. He read his paper and he fed the birds.

"We've been going to the beach all week, you know. I think we saw him . . . well, Monday and Tuesday, and I guess every day. I'm not sure. He seemed so . . . unexceptional. Today was the final day, and we were all so excited about the dragon."

"Did this man . . . did he ever approach any of the children?" Mac asked her. "Stare at them? Say anything to them?"

"No, of course not, except for Jory, and the man didn't *approach* Jory. Jory went over to him. Eleanor caught Jory throwing out some bread the man had brought. Eleanor spoke to Jory and . . ." The nurse gave a nervous shrug. "Well, we would have told the police if

he was bothering us. He was just an elderly man minding his own business. You don't think . . . but of course you do. Why else would you be talking to me this way?" She looked at Mac, then at Melanie. "The principal has told me about Jory. Jory says the girl was with this man, doesn't he?"

"You're the school nurse; you should know a few things about Jory Matthews. Is he reliable? Does he exaggerate or make up stories?"

"Jory? Never. It wouldn't occur to him." She ran her hand over her forehead. "Oh, he's in my office all the time with complaints, little aches and pains. He's very particular, and sensitive, that is, overly sensitive and concerned whenever another child gets hurt. He's . . . it's hard to explain. He's autistic."

"But he doesn't make up stories? He's not known to lie?"

"Stories, no, certainly not. Jory's very . . . concrete. He has a difficult time dealing with social situations, with knowing what's appropriate and what's not. And I do know he was reprimanded that one time for speaking to the man. I was in the van . . ." Struggling not to break down, she said, "It's school policy—I have to be with the children, but because of my leg I stayed up by the van. I can't walk across the sand."

"Did you notice how this man got here? Did he walk? Come in a car?" Mac asked.

The woman was trembling and wiped her eyes. "No. No, I never paid much attention to the man, except for that day when Eleanor spoke to Jory. She was very angry with him; I heard her tell him he must never speak to anyone he doesn't know." She sat back, exhausted. "Unless, of course, it's a police officer." She looked at Mac, at his worn blue jeans and his tired corduroy blazer, then frowned, "Assuming one can tell who a police officer is, that is."

"It's my day off," Mac said dryly. "I want you and Mrs. Bexham to go down to the station and look at some pictures for us, see if you recognize this man. If not, we're going to need as detailed a description of this 'Bird Man' as you can give us."

"A white dog, long-haired Samoyed type." Mac paused, listened, then snapped into the radio transmitter: "Don't you know your dogs?" Then he calmed a bit. "Like a husky, but smaller and white. Friendly, he should still be tied out back of the restaurant. I want you to take him to the lab. Don't touch him too much. If he's carrying anything, seeds or burs or has anything in his paws, his ears, whatever, that will tell us where he might have been. Afterwards, put him in a safe place. Yeah sure, your house is fine, just don't give him a bath."

He pulled over about a quarter of a mile from the school, and there on a bluff overlooking the water, they both got out of the car. She

understood, or thought she did; he needed a moment alone to sort things out.

"Where are we now?" he asked, shaking his head. "Roadblocks on all four roads leading out of Westfleet. Every town around here on alert; state police out on the roads. Half a dozen people giving statements down at the station. Maybe one of them will know something about this Bird Man, his name or where he lives or what he drives—something, anything. We got two women at the station going through the books, looking to see if they recognize this guy, and if not, giving their descriptions of him. Got forensics looking all over the bench where he was sitting, checking for fingerprints or something he might have left behind."

He sighed. "Also got a couple dozen people searching the marsh, the cove, and up and down the beach. Got some more checking out the boats, looking under the docks." He scratched his head and leaned across his car, stared toward the water. It was mid-afternoon. "We also got two distraught parents in the chief's office, a dog down at the lab, and a growing crowd of parents and reporters up at the school demanding to know what's going on and what the police are doing about it." He looked at her meaningfully; she understood.

"Mac, it's not your job to talk to them. You're not PR. Let someone else do it," she said.

"Not exactly PR, Melanie," he told her. "And it is my job. Those people have a right to know."

"Not before your duty to this child," she found herself saying. "This trail is still warm. If you just . . ."

She took his notepad, looked down at what he—and she—had written there.

The girl's name. The circumstances of her disappearance—as far as what was known. Notes on the teacher, the nurse, the classroom aide, the autistic boy, and the mysterious Bird Man.

The Bird Man. Melanie felt a rush of cold move around her neck and she looked out toward the water. Low tide had come in just after noon; high tide would roll in around six. She looked back at the pad, saw a name: "Kerry. Kerry's Convenience? Mac, was there anything . . ."

"At Kerry Owens' place? No. Kerry has a small market about three miles out of town. Claims he saw something. Problem is Kerry's not the brightest bulb on the tree," Mac said. "Listens to his scanner day and night, always calling us to say he saw something, or someone. Hell, according to Kerry, half the FBI's wanted list has shopped at his store. Kerry wanted to be a cop but wasn't—" He looked at her and smiled faintly. "—bright enough. I sent someone out there, but if there was anything to it, I would have heard."

"You would have heard," she murmured softly. "Mac, two hours ago a man saw a little girl coming up the beach with a bloody hand.

Everyone else is distracted, watching the dragon go up, including the school nurse. So suddenly this man sees . . ." She looked straight at him. "Mac, can you *feel* it? Can you be there for a minute? He must have had such an adrenaline surge. This was an opportunity, Mac. It wasn't planned—it couldn't have been."

"I can't *be* there, Melanie—what the hell are you asking? If *I* can imagine . . ."

"But I can," she said, feeling her heart race, her head start to pound. "*I* know what it must have felt like. Not that I've ever wanted to grab a child, but I know what it feels like—to see something so unexpected just fall into your lap! And something you've always—" Her voice dropped; she didn't like the set of his face, the darkness in his eyes. "—wanted. This guy seized his opportunity and ran with it."

He looked disgusted, but he said, "And your point is?"

"You've got to feed a little girl—if you plan to keep her for a while."

"Mel, if Kerry had any information for us . . ." He shook his head, unconvinced. "No, I've got to get back to the school, then the station, see what's happening, help coordinate things. There's an awful lot to be done."

"No." She came around his dusty brown Camaro to confront him. "No, Mac. I really do know something about this. I know this man's sense of urgency and, damn it, I know you're not going to like this, but his sense of excitement, too. You've got to do something now, before it's too late. You can't stop and sort everything out. Leave that to someone else, because right now you've got to keep moving, and you have to call in, find out what this . . ." She jabbed a finger down on the notepad, "Kerry Owens has to say."

But he wouldn't listen to her—who would? He was looking at her as though he was questioning everything about her, including his own judgment. For a moment she felt exactly as he wanted her to feel: soiled, worthless, repulsive.

So he turned aside and while he used his car radio, she stepped away and looked across the road to the water.

"No one made it to Kerry's," Mac said behind her. "Chief Rose—" Melanie turned around, her arms bundled up around herself. The wind was growing stiff, and even from this vantage point high off the road on a bluff overlooking Cape Cod Bay, she could see the tide was moving in. "—called the officer back; he felt it was more important that he use the manpower he has to help with the search. And Kerry's got a reputation for false leads, so the chief figures that's all it is." He paused, squinted his eyes even though the sun was starting to move toward the west, behind them. "Wants me to go back up to the school, talk to the parents."

"Have that principal talk to them," she snapped at him. So he had

been disgusted with her? So what. She'd lived with a lot worse than mere disgust. Suddenly there were more important things to be done. "She's a trusted authority figure—had you in fourth grade, did she? What's she been teaching now, thirty, forty years?"

"This isn't the movies, Mel," was his response. "I'm not some rogue cop, doing things the way I see fit. I do what the chief tells me. I got to go."

"Then take the route to the school that brings you past Kerry's Convenience Mart."

Kerry's Convenience Mart was about two miles down Long Shore Avenue, a road which wound its way past beaches, through marshes and cranberry bogs. She leaned on the door all the way, thinking as she listened to Mac's one-sided conversations:

First with his chief, who Mac evidently knew how to appease. Yes, he was on his way to the school. Yes, he'd be there in about half an hour. Until then, he told the chief, the principal can cover for him. Yes, they'd have to brief the woman, and yes, he knew how urgent this was, how could he not know?

That was the moment when Melanie saw what a skilled operator Mac Jackson really was. Melanie heard the tone of Mac's voice: deferential and yet forceful. Mac was a man the police chief respected; she felt it. She could almost hear the older man say, "Okay, Mac, do what you have to, but get your butt out to that school within the hour."

"Roadblocks, nothing," he said, turning toward her. "The search has turned up nothing yet. No good leads. Everybody saw this guy—a few even spoke to him—but the descriptions are vague: thick white hair, ordinary features and face, maybe a little heavy in the cheeks. Some have pegged him as middle-aged, others as at least seventy. Some say he walked with a limp; others disagree. Not a great conversationalist; might have worn a hearing aid. Came to the beach, watched the kids, fed the blasted birds."

"And had a white dog. Anything there?" she asked as they passed by marshland, then cranberry bogs on both sides of the road. There were houses here, many high up on the bluffs between the scrub pines, hickory trees and oaks. But most looked dark and shut up, summer homes for the most part out at this end of town. For a moment she had the disconcerting thought that in a town like Westfleet—with a population that swelled by over a thousand in summer—that there were dozens and dozens of closed-up homes, cottages and even private campgrounds where a man with a little girl might hide.

And unfortunately, the Westfleet Police Department didn't have dozens and dozens of officers available to go and check each and every one of them out—not with the speed she knew was necessary. Once more she felt cold and unable to breathe.

"The dog was well kept, just a few burs on his underbelly. They're trying to identify the species, whatever. Even so, finding anything on that mutt that might help . . . it's a long shot."

"If I were him . . ." she found herself saying; she felt his eyes turn her way, knew the darkness was still in them. But so what if she did sicken him? "I'd put her somewhere . . . and go home, wherever home is. That's what I . . ."

"That's what you did once," Mac said sharply.

"Yes, but not with a child, Mac. I hid something and went home and pretended I knew nothing about it."

"I don't want to know." He turned his attention back to the road. They were headed north; the sun was sinking in the west. The countryside was growing more and more rural: fields and marsh, more bogs, groves of locust trees behind cedar fence posts. Private estates, many of them seasonal residences as well.

"Several wildlife sanctuaries out this way," Mac said. "Some private, some owned by the state."

"Kerry's way out here?"

"He does a good business in the summer, barely hangs on through the rest of the year. But Kerry's happy. Fishes, hunts, goes out on his boat."

"You think this is a dead end, don't you?"

"Won't know till we talk to the man, will we?" was his answer.

Mac did think it was a dead end, because to every query, Kerry Owens gave a vague response.

"Well, Mac, I think I seen him once or twice before, but I can't be sure." And then: "White hair? No, it was more kind of gray. And he weren't as old as sixty or seventy, but . . ." Kerry Owens, tall, thin, and resembling a scarecrow down to his straw-yellow hair and button-black eyes, stared at Melanie as he answered the detective: ". . . he was old. Maybe 'bout your age, Mac, you know, forty, forty-five or so."

Mac Jackson jammed his pen down on the notepad and looked over at Melanie. The expression on his face hadn't changed since Melanie had confided she understood the sense of desperate urgency the abductor was probably experiencing. Now she felt that if Mac could justify leaving her here out on the edge of nowhere at Kerry's Convenience Mart, he probably would have. But he turned back to the store proprietor and calmly went through the rest of his questions, which the man attempted to answer:

"Well, a little girl?" He shuffled and scratched his head, then looked around the small combination hardware and convenience store. Not part of a chain, Melanie realized, just a rundown place stocked with basic foodstuffs, tools, and odds and ends like fishing gear, lobster traps, and bird feeders in the shapes of small lighthouses. "Might have

been a little girl, 'bout this high." Kerry Owens raised his hand about three feet off the floor, then with a frown, raised it a bit higher. "Had a cap on his, or her, head. Hard to tell. Might have been a girl.

"Blue jeans for sure, I remember that, and maybe a red shirt. But, I think the kid's jacket was blue or black, not yellow and . . ." A shrug, then: "Damn, Mac, sure wish I could be of more help."

"About two hours ago," Mac said, verifying the time; Kerry nodded. "Kerry . . ." Mac sighed, sharing some of the displeasure he felt for Melanie with the poor man. "Is there anything else you can remember . . ." This was more than a dead end.

"Well, he wanted double-A batteries, and I was all out," Kerry said, trying to be helpful. He looked at Melanie, and like the principal, probably mistook her for Mac's partner. "For his scanner . . . ma'am."

"Police scanner?" Melanie stepped forward, then noticed—high in the corner of the store, nearly hidden behind the stacks of painted Styrofoam buoys and children's plastic rafts—a camera. She turned with excitement to Mac: "There's a security camera in this store!"

But Mac barely looked up from his notepad; he was scribbling in it at the cash register counter. "Doesn't work," he said. "Hasn't now . . . in how long, Kerry?"

"I keep that, ma'am, just to keep people honest, you know? But it don't work." Kerry Owens looked at a sober and thoroughly disgruntled Mac Jackson: "Couple of years now, Mac. I keep meaning to have it fixed, just kind of forget."

"A broken security camera," Melanie murmured.

"Everyone knows it's broken, so it's worthless," Mac said, looking up at a slightly embarrassed Kerry, "except for the occasional stranger passing through, right, Kerry?"

"Everyone knows it's broken," Melanie echoed. She turned on the store owner swiftly. "Mr. Owens, what did this man—with the little kid—buy from you? That is, besides batteries."

"Didn't buy batteries, ma'am," Kerry reiterated. "Don't have any. But he did buy . . ." Another scratch of his head. "Some milk and bread, couple of cans of soup . . ."

Melanie interrupted. "Does your register keep a tally—can you check into it to see what he did buy?"

"No, ma'am," the man replied apologetically, showing her the register, which was electronic, but an older model.

"Kerry, as always, I appreciate your coming forth with . . . something you think can help, but whatever made you call this in?" Mac finally asked, totally exasperated. "These two people you saw don't match the description you heard on the scanner, not one lousy . . ."

"A man and a kid, Mac," Kerry said, shrugging, looking embarrassed. "And the kid was, you know, kind of upset."

"Upset?" Melanie walked back toward the register.

"Yeah, like he'd been crying, and oh, the man . . ." Kerry's face brightened, "he bought him—or her—a bunch of lollipops. A whole bag." The man absolutely beamed as he looked from Melanie to Mac, but Mac was still disgruntled.

"Proves nothing. People buy lollipops for crying kids every day." He turned to go.

But Melanie was at the counter, looking at the tall, scarecrow-like man: "You said milk and bread, soup, and he wanted batteries. Now lollipops. Anything else, Mr. Owens, that you can remember about these two? Anything at all?"

"I didn't say cereal?"

"Cereal?"

"Oh, and this . . . he put these back." Kerry Owens leaned down behind the counter and set two cans on the counter before her. "Yeah, that colored alphabet cereal. And these, made me ring everything up a second time, said he wouldn't be needing these."

Melanie looked at the cans, then at Mac, ready to leave by the door.

"Dog food," Melanie said to him. "He put the dog food back."

She was too excited to even think, or to feel, even though that clutch of cold seemed to extend all way the up and over her mouth. This is how an asthmatic must feel, she thought, suffocating, unable to breathe, and feeling such terrible, terrible panic.

Mac turned to her from the driver's seat, and leaning on the steering wheel, said to her: "Okay, Chief Rose—who's not too happy with me, incidentally—has asked for more state troopers. They'll check out the campgrounds and some of the summer houses around here." But even though he had called in this new information, she felt the lack of enthusiasm in his voice. Another dead end, he'd told her; all they'd probably turn up is some old guy feeding his granddaughter alphabet cereal and toast for supper.

"If it's him, he's got a scanner," Melanie said. "He might have gotten batteries somewhere else. He may have been listening, Mac, and knows about the roadblocks, the search, everything. So he's stopped for food where he knows the camera doesn't work, and . . ."

"He's taken off his white wig," he said unenthusiastically. "And put a dark jacket on the little girl—and a baseball cap."

"Listen, Mac, he's planning this as he goes along—just like we are. If we can keep up with him . . ."

"We?"

"You asked me to stay. You said you might need me."

"You got stuck with me, that's all," he refuted. His eyes, still dark, seemed to snap at her.

She knew that look, unfortunately. It was the look of a man who had discovered something so elementally wrong about her that she'd

never get him back—not that she ever had him. Any kind of trust, or kinship, or shared empathy between them was gone. Her admission that she could sense—even for an instant—the excitement that the abductor must be feeling had destroyed any possibility of a relationship they might have had. She'd seen it all happen before.

"And now I'm bringing you home," he said coldly, shifting the car into gear. "Thanks for coming along."

"No." But she surprised even herself, and as she put her hand down on his arm, a series of wild thoughts went whipping through her head.

Why now? Why me? The missing child is nothing to me. Absolutely nothing. I don't even like children—at least I don't think I do. I know I've pretended *to like them, but that was in another life, when I'd needed to gain their parents' trust. It had been a horrible life, too—friendship used to lure people into a miserable and self-destructive habit. People stole to pay me for the euphoria I delivered. And in that world children had been faceless little creatures to smile and fawn over . . . so why do I care now?*

But she cared enough to say, "Listen, Mac, you still need me. You get those state troopers to comb over the houses out here—and the campgrounds, too. Anywhere there's an abandoned or closed-up building. He's going to put her somewhere—and then go home. I know it."

Her hand lingered on his arm.

"And let me tell you this. It's been bothering me since we talked to that little boy. Something's wrong there. Oh, I know he's autistic, but it's something else. He's . . . scared."

" 'Course he's scared, he's just a little kid," Mac said sharply.

"Jory Matthews is more than scared. He's confused. I think he's been told one thing—and has seen another."

Suddenly a flicker of interest: "What makes you say that?"

"Nasty gulls. Buffalohead." She smiled despite herself, despite the tension she felt reek out of her very bones. "Something he said. Jory told us that *she* talks to him. But, who is she? If I could, Mac, I'd go question him myself, let you do something else, but . . ."

"But you're not a cop, Mel, you're just a tagalong, here for the ride." Now the darkness returned, like a shadow falling in full daylight across his unshaven face.

"We . . . you need to talk to Jory Matthews again," she insisted.

Jory's grandfather met them at the end of the crushed quahog-shell driveway. An older man with a painful limp and a stooped-over frame, he walked up to Mac, took his hand, and said in a hushed voice, "Damn, Mac, wish to the devil I could be of more help to you."

"Maybe you can, Jory. I need to talk to your grandson again."

"Boy's mighty upset," the man said, giving Melanie a polite nod of

his head. "Keeps insisting he's in trouble, and I can't seem to shake the notion out of him." He glanced at Melanie, said by way of explanation, "My grandson's a little confused at times, ma'am, about what's acceptable behavior and what's not. It's a struggle for him. He tries to be a good boy . . ." To Mac, with tears in his eyes he said, "So help me, Mac, most the time he is a good boy."

"I know that, Jory," Mac said. "Where is he?"

They found Jory Matthews the Third sitting at the end of his grandfather's dock, huddled up in an oversized fisherman's jacket, staring out at the slowly rising tide. The dock was next to a marsh; already the cord grass was half covered by water.

This time Mac stooped down near the boy, folded his hands between his knees, and looked intently at him. Melanie stood back and away, hands thrust down into the pockets of her jacket.

"No, sir . . ." Melanie heard the boy's small, thin voice answering Mac's questions. "I never talked to him. He's a stranger." And then, "No . . . she didn't either . . ." Then he hung his head down. "She will come back, right? She's not gone . . . forever?" He lifted his head and looked at Mac as Mac stood up.

So whatever motivated her to walk right up behind the boy, her boots making a hard clip on the dock, she would never know. Neither would she understand why she interrupted this way, because the look Mac gave her when she asked the boy, "Did Mrs. Bexham talk to the Bird Man, Jory?" was hard and cold.

So what, she thought to herself. She hadn't wanted Mac as a friend—not even as a friendly adversary. Suddenly all she wanted was to find this Bird Man before . . .

Jory's small face looked at her. "Is the dog okay?" he asked.

So he remembered that, Melanie thought. She nodded. "He's fine. Jory, did Mrs. Bexham ever talk to the Bird Man?"

"He's a stranger," Jory said, almost defiantly.

"Melanie . . ." Mac warned.

Melanie confronted Mac for a moment. Who are we, she wanted to ask? You and me? Am I someone you keep around simply to use? If so, just use me. She turned back to the boy: "At school, you told us that *she* talks to him. Who is she? Is it your classmate—or is it Mrs. Bexham?"

"She said to never . . ." Jory whispered, looking down at the water, the rise of the tide as it swept through the marsh. Somewhere out in the bay a boat horn sounded. "He's a stranger."

"No, he's not," she replied. She dropped down onto one knee and stared the boy straight in the face. She had once been told she had a "look that could melt ice," and strangely, she felt like ice then. Using that stare on a vulnerable little boy made her feel a bit sick, but she did it anyhow. Oh, she could feel Mac's anger, his need to step

between them, but she ignored him as she asked Jory: "The Bird Man isn't a stranger, is he? Tell the truth, Jory. You know this man is a policeman." She indicated Mac. "You can't lie to a policeman, can you?"

"No, yes . . ." Jory whispered, seconds away from tears. "He is. He isn't. I'm in trouble. I'm in trouble. I'm . . ."

Melanie reached out, grabbed the boy by his upper arms and gave him a frantic shake. For a moment she saw the fear, confusion, and panic in his eyes, and then Jory Matthews said: "How can he be a stranger? Mrs. B. talks to him all the time."

She let him go and looked up into Mac Jackson's stunned face. He'd probably been only seconds away from grabbing her and tossing her into the bay, but now Mac was staring down at her, and at Jory Matthews in alarm.

"Mac, if this boy is confused about what a stranger is—and isn't, then the missing girl probably was, too."

Eleanor Bexham had been sent home hours earlier. Her house was on the southwest side of town, twenty minutes from its center; Mac made it in eight. Set back from the road in an area bordered by marsh on one side, a series of summer homes—all closed up and dark, their shades drawn down like an invitation to burglary—on the other, it was across from an area known as Sojourner's Beach, a popular hiking and camping area.

When Mac pulled into the rocky driveway, it was going on four hours since the girl had been seen by her teacher, classmates, or the very surprised woman greeting them at the door. But Eleanor Bexham was cordial enough, inviting them in and inquiring if they'd like tea. She'd been in the middle of making supper, she explained, just a sandwich and soup tonight. She was far too upset to eat anything heavier.

So they went in. The living room was small, spare, and functional—plain wicker furniture, braided rugs, wildlife prints on the walls, and a television set tuned to the local news out of Providence. Eleanor Bexham turned down the volume, but as Mac spoke to her, Melanie could see over his shoulder that the story of the girl's disappearance was the focus of the news show.

"You know Jory is autistic," the woman was saying. "You really can't put much faith into what he . . ."

"Are you a bird-watcher?" Melanie interjected once again. Mac was good—thorough—but he was rehashing the same old things, with the same tired approach. We need to go back over your statement. There seem to be some discrepancies between what you told us and what Jory Matthews did.

"Bird-watcher . . ." The woman was obviously upset by Mac's

appearance at her house, and though startled by the question, she answered: "Yes. Both I and my late husband were."

Melanie looked at an angry and positively black-eyed Mac Jackson and said, "Well, what would they talk about, Mac? The news? The weather? No, the birds! This guy is the *Bird Man.* He feeds the birds, for . . ." She paused to take a breath, went on: "And the children—or some of them anyhow—saw her talking with him, and because they trusted her—" She gave the woman a damning look. "—they trusted him. They had no reason not to."

"Well, I don't understand that at all." The woman was indignant.

"You talked to that man, didn't you?" Melanie demanded. "Jory saw you, and possibly the little girl who's missing did too."

For a moment the woman struggled to maintain her composure and her indignation. But it did no good. She may have been a pompous woman, but she was not an evil one. Neither was she stupid.

"No, I . . . well, I might have . . ." Suddenly she was wringing her hands. She looked from Mac to Melanie, then back again. With a long and difficult breath she said, "We try to teach the children to be wary, to be very careful . . ."

"But you're an adult, Mrs. Bexham," Melanie went on, "so you don't need to be so careful, do you? Not on a public beach. He was a harmless old man, right? Because that's what you thought he was—a harmless old man feeding the birds. You spoke to him once, twice? Or was it more than that?"

"Oh no," the woman said, but it was a whimper. She looked faint. Mac, quickly taking her arm, helped her sit down on the sofa. She made a final effort to be forthright: "We *spoke* to Jory. We *told* him . . ."

"Did you?" Mac suddenly took over and Melanie stepped away, almost as though this had been scripted. She walked toward the wall near the front door where the prints—of shorebirds and ducks for the most part—were framed and hung. "Did you speak to this man, Mrs. Bexham?" Mac repeated.

"I didn't think it was that important," Eleanor Bexham protested weakly. "We talked about . . ." She was finally breaking down. "Yes, birds, and . . . the weather, and trivial things, really. Oh, please, you aren't saying that I . . . that my familiarity with him . . ." She looked plaintively around for Melanie, but Melanie was studying the prints. ". . . might have misled some of the children?"

"I don't know what I am saying," Mac admitted. "But I do need for you to tell me if this man said anything—anything at all—about who he is, where he lives, his interests, hobbies, background. Anything that might help us."

"We talked about birds," Eleanor Bexham said, now frustrated, spreading her hands wide. "About his habit of feeding the gulls, the nasty gulls." She tried to smile, shook her head. "I scolded him for that.

They make such a mess. They won't leave you alone if you start feeding them. But he just laughed. He seemed so friendly, and so kind, hardly the type that would . . ."

"Did he ever mention feeding the birds anywhere else? His . . . favorite spots?" Mac was searching wildly now; Melanie could hear the anxiety and exasperation in his voice. Even if Eleanor Bexham hadn't been totally forthcoming before, this could still be yet another dead end. Yes, she might have created a situation in which the children, or at least some of them, did not view the Bird Man as a possible threat, but that had not been done with malicious intent, just terrible carelessness. Melanie heard the growing alarm in the woman's voice.

"What about this one?" Melanie asked, interrupting again, pointing to one of the prints on the wall. It showed a bird resembling a harlequin duck flying low across an inlet. Its name was written in dark script across the bottom. "What is it?"

Again, Mac's dark eyes met hers, but this time the anger in them was muted. Was he learning to trust her? Perhaps, but like her? Probably not in her lifetime.

"Oh, that . . . that's a very rare duck, around here, that is," Eleanor Bexham answered, surprised at the question. "We're lucky to see a few each year in Westfleet. It's a small diving duck called a bufflehead."

"And did you talk about bufflehead ducks with the Bird Man?" Melanie calmly asked, then she watched as Mac Jackson's full instincts kicked in.

He turned on the confused, frightened, and to some degree, culpable woman and demanded, "And where—in Westfleet—*can* you see them?"

If Melanie had put her hand on her chest, even through her shirt and sweater and the jacket she'd pulled on—one of Mac's, from the back seat of his car—she'd have felt her heart thumping through all her layers. Her face was simultaneously cold and warm; her head was starting to pound again, as Mac Jackson raced north, relaying information back to the station, and to his chief and the state trooper assisting them.

I'm being pulled under water. I can't breathe anymore. It's like I'm stuck in a marsh and the tide is coming in, but I'm motionless. I know why I'm cold now. It's the water, cold this time of year, cold with the Labrador Current that snakes down out of Canada. But it's more than that chill; it's the cold dread I feel realizing—despite what I told Mac earlier—that I can't imagine it. That's what hurts and scares me. All I can imagine is what I plan to do to this man . . . if we find him.

The Bird Man had claimed to have seen bufflehead ducks this winter, according to Eleanor Bexham. He hadn't said where he'd seen

them, but the only place she knew the ducks were sometimes sighted was in the Black Marsh section of town, near where Kerry's Convenience Mart was located.

Black Marsh was an area of protected coves, salt marshes, and white sand barrier beaches. It was a patchwork quilt of private and public lands, some owned by wildlife organizations, others by the state, and some by the town of Westfleet. Developers had been trying to build on what private property still existed in Black Marsh, but wildlife organizations had tied up building permits for years in court. It was one of the few places in Westfleet where the piping plover nested.

"Whole area is pretty inaccessible," Mac told her. "A lot of dirt roads still, some old farmland all grown up. Just sand, marsh, and water for the most part."

The radio crackled, and he lunged to grab the receiver. A clear, calm, professional voice on the other end identified himself, then said, "Mac, one of the staties found a local who's rented out a dock and duck shack to a fellow from out of town. Man doesn't match our description, but get this, our local says he had a small white dog. Guy also rented a boat, small fifteen footer. He said he wanted to do some painting: birds, waterfowl, that sort of thing. Gave his name as a one John Jones of Braintree. I'm doing a lookup on him right now."

"Give me the address of this dock and duck shack," Mac replied.

The man did and added, "We also got some info from forensics on that dog. The burs on him were nothing special, found all over town in grassy or brushy areas. But there were some small dried petals of a flower found stuck to one of the burs. The flower is a sea lavender: it grows wild all over the area where you're headed."

He parked at the end of a dirt trail that hardly merited being called a road, then told her to wait in the car. Even so, he must have known she was about to do no such thing.

"I've come this far," she said with determination. He looked back at her once, his eyes like anthracite coal, they were so hard and dark.

He hadn't been easy with Eleanor Bexham once he realized that what Jory had overheard—a reference to the bufflehead duck, which he had misinterpreted as "buffalohead"—linked her to the Bird Man. In fact, he'd been almost cruel to her. The woman had broken down in tears at the end, admitting that yes, she and the man had discussed the best places to see, among other things, the small and uncommon bufflehead duck.

"She meant no harm, Mac," Melanie had said to him, surprising even herself by the remark.

But his response, as they'd gotten into the car— "Unfortunately, we never intend half the harm we do"—chilled her. It was too personal,

and for a moment she got behind the facade that Mac Jackson presented to the world.

Now moving up the trail toward the beach and marsh from where a low cool wind was coming chilled her even more. There were tire tracks in the sandy soil from a small four-wheel-drive vehicle—a pickup, most likely. And then, over a pair of gray-tinted dunes covered with tufts of dune grass, appeared the roof of a tin shack, its roof and walls streaked with rust from the iron nails that held it together. Next to it was parked a small black pickup truck. Behind the shack was a dilapidated-looking dock leading out into a small cove. Everywhere else was marsh—in all directions, a flooded marsh. It was nearly high tide. A lone blue heron swept by overhead, and from somewhere far off was the sharp, plaintive cry of a harrier.

"Hunting shack, probably from the thirties or forties," Mac said softly as they approached. But the building was dark and silent when Mac knocked on the door.

Melanie walked around the small building. It was a wonder it had survived all these years. Some of the walls buckled inward; a small piece of gray pipe that served as a chimney stuck out of the top. The whole shack couldn't have been any more than twelve feet square. Just big enough for a hunter, or two, a place to camp out and hunt. Melanie walked over to the pickup and reached into the bed of the truck.

"Melanie . . ." he said, following her; he had something in his hand. It was a length of chain with a clip on its end, a dog lead.

She'd found something, too, and handed him the child's yellow parka she'd pulled out of the truck.

"Damn, Mel," he muttered. He stepped aside and used her cell phone to call in.

"We're so close," Melanie muttered to herself. She pulled up the collar of her jacket and looked across the marsh. The sun was sinking fast. "And the tide is still coming in."

And then she heard it, exactly as he did. He shut the phone down, took her arm, and pulled her behind the shack. It was the sound of a boat motor coming across the cove.

The next part happened so swiftly that in retrospect she felt like life itself had taken on the perspective of a badly developed photograph: all blurs and no detail. Mac didn't even wait for the boat to tie up: he was down on the dock without her. So he *had* felt the need for haste all along, hadn't been so encumbered by protocol and procedure as she had first thought. Because when Mac Jackson had to move . . .

Mac was already there at the end of the dock, confronting the man as he reached forward for a piling to loop his line around. She saw Mac show him his badge; she saw the surprised look on the man's face. She also saw the man grab a boat spar as he leaned forward, supposedly

trying to get a leg up on the dock. She saw him swing the spar and knock Mac down.

Surprise. That was always the problem, she would think later. It had been the same way in her old line of work. She had to be the person always on alert, never trusting anyone, even those closest to her. It had caused a nerve-wracking anxiety that brought headaches, digestive problems, and constant irritability. It's far easier to be the person who does the surprising than the one caught off guard.

Still, the man hadn't counted on her. He had no gun, else he probably would have used it on Mac. Instead, he looked down at Mac for a moment, spar in hand, and then he turned—and met Melanie as she ran forward, jumped, and side-kicked him in the head.

He didn't expect that, but who would? Even if he suspected her of being another cop, it would have been more reasonable to expect her to pull her gun. So the man was stunned for a moment, just long enough for Melanie to reach down for Mac, though she had no intention of asking for his gun . . .

So as the man rolled over, then pushed himself back to his feet, and came at her again, she let Mac go, and spinning around, deliberately aimed for and gave the man a roundhouse kick in the lower back. With a startled groan the man was flat on his stomach, yet still reaching for the boat spar.

"Don't move!" Mac shouted, rising slowly to his feet. In one hand he held a .38 caliber semiautomatic.

"This is police brutality!" the man screamed. "I swear to God, I'll sue."

"I'm not police," Melanie said, walking over to him and placing the heel of her right boot on the man's lower back.

"Melanie . . ." Mac warned, but he was still struggling to catch his breath; he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

"And if you don't tell us where she is right now—I'll explode your other kidney," she told the man.

Of course the man had muttered a lot of obscenities, a lot of threats, so Melanie had to press the heel of her boot down into his flesh. He was just forty, she figured, buzz-cut, full-faced, even somewhat fleshy looking, but with the help of a wig, a bag of bread, and a limp, had transformed himself quite easily into the harmless figure known as the Bird Man.

"Melanie, I've got to read this guy his rights . . ." Mac was saying, but he was still slightly stunned.

All right, she'd reason later, it might have been better to let Mac take over from here. But she could feel the water now, so high it was up past her eyes. She knew this was the right man; she felt it; and he had proven it by his reaction to Mac. So as Mac clutched his middle and sank down onto his knees on the dock, Melanie moved her foot

slowly up the prostate body and said, "I know how to break your neck, but not kill you. I know how to sever the nerves which . . ."

"I don't have her!" he cried. "She's . . . she's not with me. She's . . ."

Melanie reached down, quietly took Mac's pistol from his grip, met his eyes for a moment. They weren't so dark anymore, but they were watching her with something new. Not loathing or repugnance anymore. Perhaps all she could see in Mac Jackson's eyes was just shock.

"Bitch . . ." the man muttered, perhaps feeling the pressure of her foot lessen. "You wouldn't dare . . ."

On her knees, she pushed the barrel of the gun up under the fleshy rolls of the Bird Man's neck and said, "I can break both your arms, both your legs, and drop you in the marsh. Don't doubt it. I've done it before."

Then the man's eyes met hers and she gave him that look—the one which, unfortunately, had always come so easily to her. So Mac would have to see her like this? What did it matter? Because for a moment her black eyes met the man's black eyes and she saw herself mirrored in his face. The things she'd done, the things she was running from—were they so different than what this man had done, or was doing now?

Yes, she told herself. Very different. I never hurt a child. Not this way. Oh, I ruined parents, dozens and dozens of them, I caused heartache and ruin, breakdowns and divorce, and worse, much worse, but I never . . .

She shoved the gun deeper into the man's throat, until he groaned, then cried out: "She's okay! She's out on Crow's Island! I swear to God she's okay!"

"Coast Guard, harbor patrol . . ." Mac murmured as Melanie helped him into the boat. She'd taken some fishing line, wound it around the man's wrists and ankles, secured him to one of the dock pilings. Now she was set—under Mac Jackson's direction—to head out to Crow's Island. "We can wait for them, Mel . . ." Mac tried to hand her the cell phone.

But she grabbed it, shoved it inside her jacket, and said to him, "Tell me the bearings, Mac. It's almost high tide." Then giving the boat a push away from the dock, she turned the motor over.

Fog was moving in as they crossed the cove and entered Cape Cod Bay. They were plowing against the tide, but she remembered that not five hours earlier she'd felt this way, as though she were pushing against the tide and fighting the wind. Maybe it had been a premonition; maybe she simply felt like this so often it was just second nature to her. Because this was not the way to atone for the past, by rectifying the problems of the present. She only knew this: that if the girl were on Crow's Island, they would find her. They'd come this far.

"Where'd you learn to do all that?" he asked suddenly, standing at her side at the pilot's station. He was clutching his middle and she glanced down at him. Broken ribs perhaps, hopefully no internal bleeding. She wasn't about to lose one in rushing to save another. But then he straightened up some more and coughed into the palm of his hand.

With one hand on the wheel, she grabbed his hand with the other, and he opened his palm. No blood. She looked at him.

"Just self-defense, Mac," she said. "Something everybody should know."

"Over there . . ." Mac said then, indicating a heading to the northeast. "Crow's Island, just a breeding colony for gulls, no more than a spit really, hardly half a mile long, a few hundred feet wide. Little patch of pin oaks, pitch pines in the center. Floods over in big storms."

"If she's hurt," she told him, "I'm going to go back and kill him."

"No, you're not," he said, easing her aside to take the craft the final length of the way to the island.

Mac maneuvered into shallow water as carefully as he could, but without a place to tie up, he had to bump the shore to let Melanie climb up and over into thigh-deep water. It was cold, but strangely she didn't feel it. So, as Mac spoke to harbor patrol, state police, and his own station, she climbed onto the rocky beach. Nasty gulls, she thought, they littered the entire shoreline with white droppings. There wasn't a clean rock, or bit of driftwood . . .

Then she saw the patch of trees Mac had mentioned, and at the same time heard a snap, like a gunshot. Instinct told her to get down; reason told her what had really made the sound. Up ahead, on that one piece of high ground, just visible through the growing fog, was a patch of brush and scrub oaks, and under it a faded green shape. It was a tent, with its door flap open, whipping and snapping in the early evening wind.

A few minutes later she was carrying a frightened, exhausted, hungry child back down to the water's edge. The girl's face was wet against Melanie's neck, but then most of her was already wet, so what did it matter?

Yes, what does anything matter? Haven't I asked that—my whole life? But suddenly, this *does. I'm carrying a child I don't know, have never met, but it matters.*

Somewhere in the distance were more boats, the sounds of their motors purring like music against the still rising tide.

"Melanie?" Mac called out from the boat.

"She's alive," was all Melanie could think to say. "She's alive."

THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Peter Godfrey

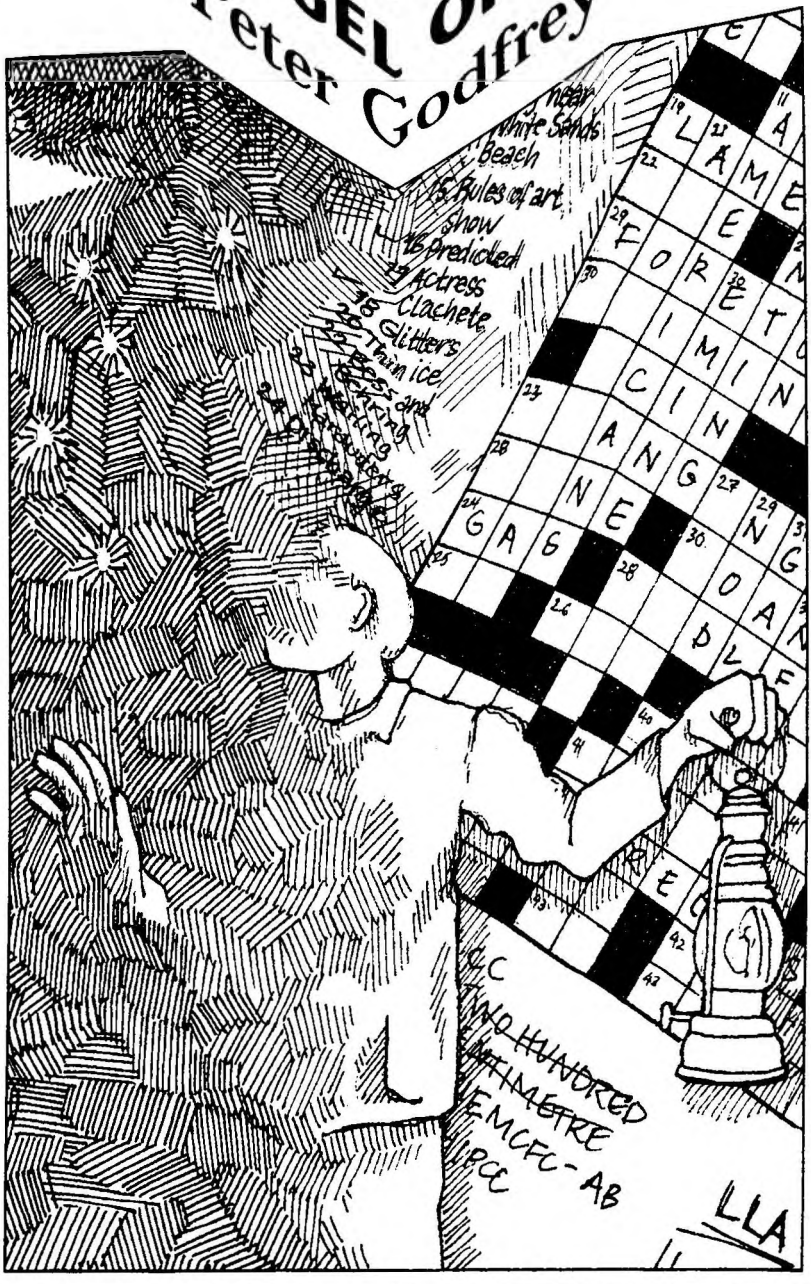


Illustration by Delynne Lorentzen

It was cold with an after-midnight clamminess, and only occasionally did the gaseous sponge of the mist swirl aside to let a tired star or two catch a momentary glimpse of the water in the Cape Town docks. Over on Mouille Point, the lost cow of the foghorn mooed forlornly. On the East Pier, the black bulk that was the *Smetterman* had somehow turned itself into the shadow of a shadow, and the water sighed and the moorings groaned, and these noises were echoes of echoes.

Elias Mafuta, the dock guard, crouched, almost embracing his brazier, and it was not alone the cold that made him shiver.

On the deck of the *Smetterman* there were movements where none should have been. There were two figures, one creeping, the other waiting, and death hovered . . .

The mist took the sound of the shot, wrapped it invisibly in grey cottonwool, and tried to smother it among the other night noises, but Elias heard. He drew another big shiver around himself like a blanket because he was reluctant to break his not-sleeping concentration on the glowing coals, and besides he was afraid. He shook himself to a new alertness. This was a good job; he had better go and see. He turned up the wick of his hurricane lamp, gripped his knobkierie and shuffled forward. The heat of the brazier prickled across his legs and the cold air thrust at his face and his chest with moist fingers, but he went on. On and up the rickety gangplank to the deck, holding his lantern out, peering around.

Some of the blackness detached itself, sprang at him, beat him to the boards with a jarring, raking impact of metal on his face, and then steps raced down the gangplank.

Elias scrabbled to his knees, groped in his pocket for his whistle, and sent blast after blast of sharp sound piercing the reluctant air. With grim satisfaction he visualised the men on duty at the dock gates hearing the whistle, stopping anyone from leaving the dock area until other instructions came. No, whatever had hit him would not get out of the docks tonight—not even if it was Tokoloshe himself.

He staggered to the lamp, which had rolled out of his hand into the scuppers, and turned to look for his stick. From the pier someone called: "Where are you, Elias? Was that your whistle?"

It was the guard from No. 7 Quay, and Elias knew him.

"Yes, it is me," he called back. "I am on this ship. Hurry now to the Port Offices and fetch the harbour police and bring them here. Bad things have been happening."

"Bad things? What bad things?"

"There was someone on this ship, and when I came up I was struck so my head is bleeding, and now I find there is a white baas

here, and he is dead. Do not waste time with questions—run for the police."

"The police are already coming, Elias. Listen. That is their putt-putt boat on the basin."

"Then call out to them, Mompara, so that they may know from where the whistle came."

In answer to the shouts, the police launch came up alongside the *Smetterman*, and a half-dozen uniformed figures, with powerful electric torches, swung up the gangplank.

Elias was waiting to tell his story. They listened patiently, putting a question or two to keep him from becoming over-loquacious, then turned their attention to the man lying on the deck. That he was dead they had seen from the first flash of their torches. He had been shot at close range with a large-calibre bullet.

They searched the body to find traces of identity. The constable who felt in the breast pocket came out with a wallet and in it he found a card. He flashed his torch on it and whistled, and handed it with an exclamation to the sergeant in charge.

They left two men on the *Smetterman*, and the rest went by launch to the Port Offices. The sergeant used the telephone.

Detective-Inspector Joubert, of the Cape Town C.I.D. was not unused to having his beauty-sleep disturbed, but on this occasion he was both annoyed and sarcastic.

"So you found a body on a ship," he said. "So what? It's in the harbour area, isn't it? And that's completely out of my jurisdiction, or haven't the Railways and Harbours police got round to telling their sergeants that yet? As far as I know, that regulation has only been in existence since 1910 . . ."

The sergeant was imperturbable. "It's not that, sir, I just thought that in the peculiar circumstances you would appreciate the opportunity to co-operate with us. In any event, we'd have to approach you for information later."

"Peculiar circumstances? What do you mean?"

"When we searched the body, sir, for purposes of identification, we found a warrant card that indicates the deceased was Detective-Constable Kelder of your department."

"Kelder! Good Lord! Thanks, Sergeant, I'll be up as quick as I can. Oh, wait a minute—I take it you've sealed off the area? Good. Who'll be in charge of things on your end?"

"Head-Constable Opperman, sir. He suggested I should phone you."

"Tell him thanks, Sergeant. I'll be bringing a couple of my men along, too. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, sir."

Now it was Joubert's turn to telephone. He got a grumbling Detective-Sergeant Johnson on the wire, explained the position briefly, and arranged a rendezvous. Then he dressed rapidly, climbed into his car, and made off. After a few blocks he stopped the car, reversed so that he could turn a corner, and eventually pulled up at a large boarding-house. He went round the side and rapped on the window.

Almost immediately a light went on, and the hirsute face of Rolf le Roux peered at him reprovingly.

"Something might interest you," explained Joubert. "One of my men has been murdered on a boat in the docks. You can come with me if you like, but don't be long."

"I will come with you," said Rolf, "not because I want to, but because at my age when a man is woken up, he cannot sleep again. Wait for me in the car."

Despite his casualness, he was sitting at Joubert's side in a remarkably short space of time.

"Come in, come in," said Opperman cheerfully and motioned to the steaming mugs on his desk. "Have some coffee—although you don't really deserve it. If you're going to have your men murdered, I wish you'd have it done at Caledon Square instead of bringing them down here to the docks. What was the man doing here, anyway?"

While they were shaking hands, Joubert said: "Tell him, Johnson."

"Kelder was supposed to be on duty tonight," said Johnson. "I'd give a lot to know myself what he was doing here. On top of it, his job was specific. He was giving protection to a Durban man called Bingle, who is staying at the Pearl Hotel."

The last words were lost as a sudden gust of wind threw a hissing shower of rain at the window. He repeated them.

"Perhaps he followed Bingle here?" suggested Opperman.

"Not on your life. If he had, he'd have handed over to one of your men at the dock gates, or at least have reported himself, and I take it from what I've heard that he did neither. In any case, Bingle was so dead scared when he came to see us about protection, that I'm darned sure that the only thing that would get him out of his hotel room after dark would be a man-eating tiger under his bed."

"This Bingle now—what was he afraid of?"

Joubert answered this time. "He didn't give us any reasons—just told us that his life was being threatened. From what I gathered, it was in connection with some business transaction in Durban. He'd floated a company which went bung, and someone had started sending him anonymous letters, which put the wind up him. He

didn't know himself whether it was one of the shareholders or even one of the trade creditors—all he knew was that someone was after his hide, and I assure you he didn't like it."

"And Kelder?" asked Opperman. "Is he the sort of chap who'd neglect his duty if he thought he wouldn't be found out?"

"Definitely not," said Johnson. "Kelder was a nice chap—ambitious—and rather a serious type. I can't imagine any circumstances which would make him neglect his work."

Joubert said: "It would have to be a darned strong motive to get him to leave a warm hotel for this." The gesture with his eyes pointed outside, where the fog and the cold waited like patient ghouls for the light and the warmth to die.

"And yet he came here," said Rolf. "Perhaps, after all, Bingle did go out, and he followed him. Why not telephone the Pearl Hotel and make sure?"

Opperman thumbed through the telephone book, held it open at the right page with one hand, while he clumsily dialed his number with the other. He spoke several seconds before he hung up. "That was the night porter," he said. "He knows Bingle well, and he is certain he has not left the hotel this evening. I told him not to worry about waking him at the moment."

"What about your side of it?" asked Joubert. "Did any of your men notice Kelder coming here?"

"Well, the chap on duty at the Kingsway entrance says someone who might have been Kelder came here about quarter to eleven. He seemed in a hurry and he looked at his watch as though he had an appointment to keep."

"And this same man didn't go out by any other gate?"

"Nobody answering to that description," said Opperman, a little grimly, "and nobody at all has left since almost the moment of the murder. The dock guard gave the alarm quickly, and the whole dock area was sealed off in a matter of minutes, I have a squad of men now rounding up the suspects. The murderer must be among them."

Rolf said suddenly: "The pockets," and then as the others looked at him, he explained: "It was probably Kelder who was seen at the dock gates, and he gave the impression that he was going to keep an appointment. If so, he may have had a note—"

Opperman opened a drawer. "This is what we found on him," he said.

There were five objects—a handkerchief, a bunch of keys, a fountain pen, propelling pencil, and a wallet. Rolf picked up the latter and looked through it. Kelder's warrant card was there, one or two personal papers, a banknote and several stamps. In the last

compartment, Rolf's exploring finger pulled out an oblong newspaper cutting. "What have we here?" he said.

"Only a crossword puzzle," said Johnson. "Here, let's have a look at it. Yes. It's from yesterday's paper, Kelder was always doing the things. Darned good at it, too. I could only get out about four words in this one, and yet he's finished the thing off."

"And do you also," asked Rolf, "usually carry a puzzle around with you after you have finished it?"

"Not me—I chuck it away. But Kelder may have collected them for all I know."

"Even so," said Rolf, "I would like to look closer at this puzzle. Perhaps there may be something in it that he used as a reminder, which may help us."

"Go ahead," said Joubert. "I don't see that we can do anything more until the suspects are rounded up."

Rolf and Johnson pored over the puzzle together. The rain paused for a moment, letting in other night noises, echoes, like the faint keening of an ambulance.

"You will notice," said the old man, "that he did not work out this puzzle easily. See, he had done the whole thing in pencil, and had only one word to get out—No. 7 down. He checked up on all his reasoning, filling over the pencil with a pen. And then, finally, at a later stage, he worked out 7 down, and entered the missing letters in pencil again."

"And what was this 7 down?" asked Joubert.

"The clue," said Johnson, "is A.B.s go on them. Clue number CC, and the answer is seven seas. Wait, I don't get that. Oh, yes, I do. A.B.s are sailors—sailors go on them. Right. Clue number? Of course—seven. And CC represents seas—a pun on the letters, seven seas. That's darned good—I'd never have worked out the solution from the clue alone. There's nothing particularly suspicious in that clue though, is there, Oom Rolf?"

"Not at first sight. But we haven't finished yet. What about these scratched out notes in the margin?"

"Let's see. Yes. That's how his mind worked around this 7 down. Look. He's tried to think out possible anagrams. The first one scratched out is the words TWO HUNDRED, which he thought might have been the interpretation of the double C, considering it a Roman numeral. Then he thought of CENTIMETRE in the same connection, and scratched it out, too. And then he put down ABTHEMCC—AB on THEM followed by CC. Also no good. He followed this with ABSHIPCC, the ship being what A.B.s go on. And finally he thought out the correct solution."

"What about those other notes?" asked Rolf. "You will see they have been written much more firmly, as though he knew the meaning and was not speculating. Look. LLA, heavily underlined, and then underneath 11 to 18."

"I can't see where LLA fits into the crossword at all," said Johnson, but what about the number? 18—18—there's no 18 across, but 18 down is NIGHT. That's it. That's your appointment—11 to 18—eleven tonight. That fits in with the time he was observed at the dock gates."

Joubert and Opperman came around to see.

"So it was an appointment," said Joubert. "Still, I don't see that helps much at this stage."

"Wait," said Rolf, and then to Johnson: "As far as I can see, these crossword puzzle clues seem full of double meaning."

"Yes."

"Then why must we assume that the only meaning of the clue is eleven o'clock tonight? What about the figure 11 too? Perhaps number 11 in the puzzle also has significance?"

"Eleven down," said Johnson, "AMERICANS. Possible. He may have been meeting some Americans at eleven last night. Eleven across—AZRAEL. That's some sort of angel, isn't it?"

Joubert said grimly: "The Angel of Death."

The last syllable hung in the air, and then suddenly fluttered in fear behind the foghorn. They looked at one another.

"It sounds prophetic," said Opperman. "Coincidence, of course, but it is rather queer. It is almost as though he knew he was going to be murdered."

"No," said Rolf. "You are wrong. Don't look at the solution—look at the clue. The angel you have to meet, now we know the sex of the person he had to meet—a woman whom he thought of as an angel, whom he had to meet at 11 o'clock last night."

"Isn't that a bit far-fetched?" asked Opperman. "Why shouldn't it be the Americans he was meeting?"

"No, Johnson has told you Kelder was young and conscientious. Such a man would not leave his duty to meet all the Americans in New York City, whatever the incentive. But ever since the days of Adam, upright men have neglected their obligations because of women. Yes, the angel Kelder had to meet tonight was a woman—and her initials are LLA."

"We should be able to narrow down the search," said Joubert. "That's much more cheerful."

But Rolf was still sombre. He shook his head. "I do not like it," he said. "A large-calibre revolver is not a woman's weapon. I think he

met the woman, because otherwise he would not have stayed so long on such a night, but a man fired the shot. Perhaps there was another reason for the appointment. Perhaps someone wanted Kelder out of the way."

Opperman said: "You mean, someone might have wanted to get at Bingle?"

"Perhaps. But in any case, Bingle may have been watching his watcher. Perhaps he noticed something about Kelder that may help us."

Opperman stretched out his hand again to the instrument on his desk.

"Don't phone," said Joubert. "Johnson, you'd better take my car and go up there yourself. Be tactful—you don't want to wake up the whole hotel unless there really is an emergency. Give me a ring from there."

"I think I would like to go with Johnson," said Rolf.

Bingle was asleep, and he was no longer afraid for his own safety. He was beyond fear, and from his sleep there could be no awakening. Although the powder-blackened hand-towels on the floor showed how a silencer had been improvised, it was surprising that no sound had been heard, because the wound in the gaping forehead showed the revolver must have been of large-calibre.

"I s-s-saw nothing," stuttered the white-faced night porter. "I don't know h-h-how it happened. And I was w-w-wide awake too."

They had their doubt about that point; he had been fast asleep when Johnson and Rolf had arrived.

More questions.

The man in the room next door who had heard a muffled shot at eleven P.M. Telephone calls. Joubert, Caledon Square, then Joubert again. The arrival of Detective-Sergeant Botha and a grumbling Doc McGregor. Then back into the car, with the mist and the rain, and gusts of wind panicking before the wings of the Angel.

"That ship," said Johnson. "The *Smetterman*—I've heard about it. It's a dead ship. It shouldn't be where it is now. It was sunk during the war, and lay at the bottom of the sea for two years before it was salvaged. Haunted, too, they say. One of the divers was hauled up to the salvage vessel raving mad, screaming about something he had seen in the wreck." He shivered. "Not the sort of place I would choose to meet a girl on a night like this."

"You forget," said Rolf, "it was probably the girl's idea, and the *Smetterman* was an ideal place just for the reasons you have mentioned. Nobody on board, easy to slip past the dock guard, a reputation for ghosts—what could be better? Besides, don't forget that Kelder was brought there to be killed."

"To be killed? I don't get that. It seems to be he was brought there to get him away from Bingle."

"And to get him killed," said Rolf. "He must have known the girl he met, and through her the murderer could be easily traced. There was never any intention of letting Kelder tell about that appointment."

"So what do you think happened tonight?"

"There is only one thing that could have happened. Kelder is lured to the *Smetterman* by this girl, this LLA, while her friend, probably a man, kills Bingle. Then the man follows to the docks, the girl makes an excuse to leave Kelder so she can meet her friend and show him exactly where Kelder is, and then the man fires his gun for the second time."

"And the man and the girl?"

"Are probably still in the docks. We will catch them. Kelder's note of her initials on the crossword puzzle will send them both to the gallows."

The car pulled up before the dock offices.

The dragnet had hauled in a small but mixed bag. Had the weather been fine, there would no doubt have been more people looking sullen or frightened or indignant in Opperman's office, but as it was there was only the merchant seaman reeking of liquor, the bedraggled woman whose age still showed through the streaked layer upon layer of makeup, the youngster with the mop of black hair and the shifty eyes, and the fresh-looking young man and the girl.

The sorting-out began. A young constable singled out the painted woman and the sailor, and reported he had found them together under a tarpaulin on No. 5 jetty.

"Names?"

"Edward Carrera," said the sailor. He explained that he was a member of the crew of a vessel docked in the Duncan basin.

The woman was not so accommodating. "My friends call me Lily," she said, in answer to the query, "but seeing as how you're no friend of mine, it's none of your business anyway."

"I want a name for my records," said Opperman, with threatening politeness. "Now are you going to give me one? Or would you rather tell the magistrate?"

"All right," said the woman. "You can put me down as Smith. No, on second thoughts, put me down as Mrs. Opperman, and when the Beak asks me what I was doing on the docks, I'll tell him I was looking for my bigamous husband, the head constable."

Opperman wrote down "Lily Smith" on the docket. He turned to the constable. "What were they doing under the tarpaulin?"

"Oh . . . ah . . . they . . ."

The constable was young, and he threw an agonised glance at the well-dressed girl, and back again at his Chief. He blushed.

"What do you think we were doing?" said the woman, Lily. "Picking strawberries?"

"All right," said Opperman. "Next."

The boy with the mop of hair and nervous eyes said sullenly: "Smith, James Smith."

Opperman said to Joubert: "Aren't they original? It's marvellous how many Smiths get picked up by the police."

"One big, handcuffed family," said Johnson.

Opperman asked the boy: "What were you doing at the docks?"

"Looking for a ship."

Joubert suddenly slapped himself on the thigh. "That's probably true. I recognise him now, Opperman. His name's Van Zender and he's wanted for a neat little stick-up robbery in Paarl yesterday afternoon. Where's your gun, Van Zender?"

"There never was a gun. I pulled a water pistol on the fellow, and he nearly passed out from fright. I chucked it away in some bushes just a few yards down the road."

"And the money?"

The eyes grew still and bright with cunning. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

Opperman said: "Lock him up." He turned his attention immediately to the young fellow and the girl. And what was in his attitude was reflected in the eyes of the others—the hard certainty that here stood the guilty pair—that what had passed before was duty, and therefore necessary, but the kernel of the matter had now been reached.

"My name is Sebastian," said the man, "Clement Sebastian, and I am a farmer from Hout Bay. My friend is Miss Chalmers, who stays at a hotel in Sea Point. Why are we being kept here?"

Johnson whispered in Rolf's ear: "Wrong initials," and the old man shook his head as though his vision was clouded.

Opperman had evidently the same idea. "Have you anything on you to prove your identity?" he asked.

Sebastian produced letters and a driving licence; the only document his companion could find was a hotel account addressed to Miss E. Chalmers.

"Do you know anyone with the initials LLA?" Joubert shot at them suddenly.

They pondered, then both answered, "No."

Sebastian repeated: "Why are we being held? What is all the trouble about?"

"A man was murdered here tonight," said Opperman, "and another

man was murdered in the city. The same person is guilty of both crimes. Because you were in the dock area at the relevant time, you are under suspicion."

Sebastian laughed: "Why us? Do we look the type who'd go around shooting people?"

Opperman pounced: "Who said anything about shooting?"

"Nobody."

After a slight wariness Sebastian was completely self-possessed. He motioned to Joubert. "This gentleman said something to the youngster about a pistol, and I simply put two and two together, that's all."

There was that in his attitude that made Joubert's hackles rise. "You don't look the type that makes a practice of sitting out in a storm either," he said. "What were you doing on the docks?"

It was the girl who answered.

"We came here because we wanted to be alone. For a very special reason. We've just . . . got engaged tonight."

"Really?" There was enough sarcasm in Joubert's query to sting her.

"Yes, really. And you needn't take only my word for it. There's the constable who found us. Ask him."

"I must say," said the constable in question, "that when I flashed my torch into their car, they seemed well, very affectionate."

"Not to you, I'll bet," said Johnson, and the constable grinned.

Opperman said: "Do you know a Durban financier called Bingle?" and the answer was surprising.

"Of course I do," said Sebastian. "I had shares once in a company of his that went bust, so he can hardly be called a friend of mine. In addition I had some personal matters against the man. But why do you ask?"

"Because Bingle was one of the men who was murdered tonight."

"Oh, I see. Well, that doesn't make any difference. In fact I'm pleased I mentioned it. You'd have found out some time that I disliked him, and it might have looked bad if I'd have kept silent."

Opperman showed his teeth. "So that is why you mentioned the matter?"

"No," Sebastian smiled almost sweetly. "I merely answered a question. I did not know Bingle was murdered until you told me so."

Joubert struck out in a new attack: "Have you got a revolver?"

"No."

"Have you fired a revolver lately?"

"No."

"Any sort of firearm?"

"No."

"Well then, Mr. Sebastian, we're going to test the truth of your statement. There is a very useful method of finding out whether or not a man has fired a gun recently."

Sebastian laughed. "I've read about it. The paraffin-wax test. Only you're wasting your time in my case."

"If the test is negative then I will apologise."

"No, don't misunderstand me. There will be a positive result—but you can't use it as evidence against me."

Joubert was a little flustered. "What do you mean?"

"The paraffin-wax test is designed to show the presence of gun powder on the skin of the man tested. But what you tend to forget is this—it is not alone a test for gunpowder, but for any nitrate, of which gunpowder is only one. Remember I told you I am a farmer? It is very easy for me to prove that any day—every day—I handle artificial fertilizer, and that artificial fertilizer is also a nitrate compound. Of course your test will be positive—as positive as it would be worthless as evidence in a court of law."

Joubert said: "You seem to have made a special study of all this," but he had shot his bolt, and he knew it.

"Criminology is a hobby of mine," said Sebastian, and then: "Look, are you or are you not going to charge us? If you are, then get it over with. If not, then I would like to take my fiancée home."

They looked at each other. Eventually Opperman said: "All right. Go home. But don't try and leave town, or you'll be sorry."

"Come, Elsa," said Sebastian.

They had just reached the door, when Rolf stood up in excitement. "No," he said, "wait. They are guilty those two. I can prove it."

Joubert asked: "How?"

"The crossword puzzle in Joubert's pocket. Look. Here it is. Remember the word he found so difficult—7 down? Seven Seas was the answer, and how was it worked out? By a pun. Look at the second part of the Clue: Clue number CC. The clue number was seven and the CC—the use of the letter C repeated—to provide a pun. C's—seas."

"We've gone over that before," said Johnson. "How does it help us now?"

"Can't you see? Put yourself in Kelder's place. He is fascinated with the use of a letter in the plural to form a pun. He is pleased he has worked out the trick. And at the same time he is thinking of a charming lady he is leaving his duty to meet. So he puts down the time of appointment, but above it he writes her name. And he writes it in the same form as the crossword clue, by duplicating letters to form a word of similar sound. Look, LLA—two L's and an A—L's—A—Elsa!"

There was a slight sound from Sebastian, a sort of incipient snarl, and the next second he and the girl were outside the door, wrapping themselves in fog, clattering themselves into nothingness.

Whistles shrilled. Three constables grabbed torches, ran out, and Opperman ran with them, but he was back in a few seconds. "They won't get away," he said. "The dock gates are still sealed."

"There are other ways of escape," said Rolf, significantly.

Outside, two shots were fired by the constables. The little group in the office came to peer through the door. There was another shot, and a second later the beam from a flashlight caught Sebastian. He was standing at the very edge of the dock. At his feet was the crumpled thing that had once been Elsa.

He looked around wildly, fiercely, and then he sprang sideways. There was the dull sound of a splash.

Men shouted. More torches flashed, beams of light criss-crossed the water. Eyes peered. They saw nothing but the oily swell feebly trying to shake off the cobweb of the mist.

Ears pricked, listening. They heard only the lazy amorous slap of water on the quayside, the light gurgle of pleasure and rejection. Suddenly the moo of the lost cow sounded very clear and near . . .

SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":

Edward O'Dell was the alumnus of Collett College who killed old Professor Bart Smart. He feared exposure of his unethical business dealings.

GRADUATION	NAME	GAVE	CHILDREN
January 1962	Angela Malone	$16,000	3
June 1962	Edward O'Dell	24,000	5
June 1963	Bertha Kilmer	20,000	1
January 1964	Cathy Lander	12,000	4
June 1964	Daniel Newman	8,000	2

BOOKED & PRINTED

Robert C. Hahn

Culinary mysteries have a long and impressive pedigree reaching back to the Golden Age of mysteries, for example, Dorothy Sayers's *Strong Poison* (1930) and Rex Stout's *Too Many Cooks* (1938). At present, culinary mysteries are enjoying a boom led by best-selling authors Diane Mott Davidson and her Goldy Bear mysteries and Nancy Pickard, who has deftly resumed the late Virginia Rich's Eugenia Potter series.

It is easy to rattle off a baker's dozen of current authors—Susan Wittig Albert, M. C. Beaton, Dorothy Cannell, Jill Churchill, Mary Daheim, Cathie John, Peter King, Janet Laurence, Katherine Hall Page—who have developed recipes for success using murderous ingredients. Here are three authors who take very different approaches—with characters ranging from professional cook to candymaker to gourmand—but still achieve tasty results.

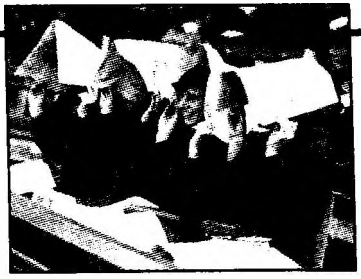
Claire M. Johnson's pastry chef, Mary Ryan, makes her second appearance in **Beat Until Stiff** (Poisoned Pen, $24.95). Although her specialty is desserts, there is nothing fluffy about Mary or the murders she becomes involved with. While most culinary mysteries tend toward the cozier end of the mystery scale, Johnson's feisty, sometimes testy, heroine is a professional cook earning her way in the cutthroat restaurant business of San Francisco.

Johnson comes by her knowledge of the restaurant business and San Francisco first-hand—she's a graduate of the California Culinary Academy's program for professional chefs and a former pastry chef. She uses her insider's advantage to excellent effect by filling her story with fascinating tidbits, as with Mary's comparison of the cooking community to the theater community: "Because our hours are so strange, the demands relentless, and the stress unforgiving, we share a strange world that glues us together."

Mary's world may be somewhat more deadly than that of the ordinary chef as she has a distressing tendency to find bodies in or near her kitchen. In this case, it is the body of one of her pastry assistants, beaten to death on the eve of a large and extravagant

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON



Hulton Archive

The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina. Honorable mentions go to Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; David Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; Bryan Steelman of Conover, North Carolina; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Russ Meyer of New Prague, Minnesota; Pam Clayburne James of Pipe Creek, Texas; Dennis Lewis of Owls Head, New York; Martha Jean Gable of Midland, Texas; and James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida.

A KICK IN THE TEETH by Jan Streilein

A day at the races can be fun for anyone, but the Barksdale Seniors' Activity Group was almost hysterical. This outing was special.

"It's much more enjoyable watching the race when you know you have a sure thing."

"I know what you mean, Gladys. I feel like screaming, I'm so giddy."

"Keep it down, you two. Do you want us to get caught?"

It seems the genteel ladies had taken a stroll around the stables and discreetly offered sugar cubes, laced with a mild sedative, to all but one of the entries in the third race. Bridget had the untainted treat, and smiled as Gourmet-de-Fodder nibbled it from her outstretched palm.

Rose and Sarah were the ones who came up with the scheme. Their gated community needed a shuffleboard court and they planned to win enough to have one installed. Each had put up an equal portion of their savings. While their bet was substantial, the winnings would not be so outlandish as to cause suspicion.

By the start of the third race, the all-day drizzle had soaked the track. They figured that would be a plus for the drug-free horse. He sprang from the gate like a gazelle. "Go, number seven," they shouted in unison. He started to pull away from the field on the second turn and held the lead until they headed home. That's where he lost his footing, his jockey, and the race.

Alas, de-Fodder was not a mudder.

(continued from page 140)

private party. Not only is Mary involved because she discovers the body, she also is the ex-wife of SFPD homicide detective Jim Ryan and it's Jim's old partner, O'Connor, who gets the call.

Inevitably, Mary takes a more active role in the investigation—uncovering scams and secrets, affairs and scandals, and revealing a good many secrets of the restaurant trade along the way. Mary Ryan is at once an assertive professional as a chef and a somewhat insecure but independent woman still recovering from an unexpected divorce. It should be intriguing to see what further adventures her creator will cook up for her.

While Johnson builds her mysteries around a fairly grim take on the restaurant business, the pseudonymous JoAnna Carl (a k a Eve K. Sandstrom, creator of the Sam and Nicky Titus mysteries) serves up a frothy confection of chocolate-covered murder and romance. **The Chocolate Bear Burglary** (Signet, $5.99) is her second Lee McKinney mystery (following *The Chocolate Cat Caper).* McKinney is a Texas gal transplanted to Warner Pier, Michigan, after her divorce from wealthy Rich Godfrey. Here she works with her Aunt Nettie TenHuis handling the business side of the family business, TenHuis Chocolade. McKinney is both surprised and concerned when her former stepson, Jeff Godfrey, shows up at her home in the resort town of Warner Pier—a long way from his Dallas home. She becomes even more concerned when she learns that Jeff has become alienated from both his parents at the same time. She grows thoroughly alarmed when the sulky teen is hailed a hero then a suspect in an attempted burglary and murder. Carl adorns her narrative with interesting bits of chocolate lore, including its manufacture and mouth-watering descriptions. She makes her murder mystery even more appetizing with a number of chapter breaks that offer descriptions of other culinary mysteries that utilize chocolate as a feature. Lee is an appealing heroine—impatient with the shy attentions of Joe Woodyard, flattered by the interest of a handsome congressional candidate, and determined to avoid the mistakes she made with her first marriage. Aunt Nettie provides a nice foil as Lee struggles to make sense of murder, theft, and her stepson's strange role in both.

Also taking a lighter approach is Nancy Bell with **Biggie and the Devil Diet** (St. Martin's, $22.95), the latest of a half-dozen mysteries featuring copious amounts of southern and southwestern cooking and folksy wisdom. The narrator is teenaged J. R., who lives with his grandmother, Biggie, in Job's Crossing, Texas. Since Biggie's full name is Fiona Wooten Weatherford, it's easy to see why the nickname has taken firm hold. Willie Mae and Rosebud, who reside in a small house in Biggie's backyard, are faithful retainers who provide companionship and guidance for J. R., who during the course of the

novel experiences the first joys and terrors of sexual attraction and discovers he has a grandfather he didn't know existed. He also is dragged along when Biggie goes to visit the old Barnwell ranch, which has been converted into a "fat farm" for teenage girls and rechristened the "Bar-LB" ("Bar pounds, get it?" a character asks.). When the proprietor, Rex Barnwell, is murdered, Biggie joins forces with the Texas Ranger in charge of the case, who is only too glad to defer to the determined and resourceful Biggie. While Biggie copes with the difficulties of figuring out whodunit and how, J. R. is wrestling with some pretty tough questions of his own regarding friendship, responsibility, and loyalty. Small town folks complete with small town gossip and history, a recurring cast of likable characters (in addition to the colorful suspects who might benefit from the victim's demise), and plenty of old-fashioned comfort food are the staple ingredients of Bell's series. A complete recipe for Willie Mae's King Ranch Casserole serves as an afterword. □

Seymour Shubin's twelfth novel, **A Matter of Fear** (Five Star, $24.95), is an intimate and satisfying story about a young man whose life is changed forever by the murder of a man he barely knew. After weathering a spell of unemployment and suffering the indignity of moving back to his hometown of Buffalo, twenty-eight-year-old Tom Loberg seems to be putting his life back together: he has a new job with the vanity division of a medical publishing house and he and his girlfriend are falling in love. But when the body of Tom's boss Sam Glennie is found in the river, the official explanation of suicide seems implausible to Sam's wife, and while attempting to console her, Tom begins to share her skepticism. In the process of taking over Sam's job, Tom discovers a number of unsettling connections between Sam, the large pharmaceutical firm Tom used to work for, and the author of a book being published by his current employer. Tom's informal investigation ultimately solves the puzzle of Sam Glennie's death, but with unfortunate consequences for all involved, including Tom himself. Tom narrates the book in an extended-flashback form, highlighting his identification with Sam Glennie and his determination not to repeat the older man's mistakes. Shubin captures the inherent excitement and uncertainty of youth while warning of the danger of knowing too much too fast. Shubin is the author of the Edgar-nominated *The Captain* (1982) and *Anyone's My Name,* a bestseller first published in 1953. In *A Matter of Fear,* he gives the reader a relaxed pace, an intriguing romantic subplot, and a compassionate look inside his main character. —*Jonas Eno-Van Fleet*

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