ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
Mystery
MAGAZINE
FEBRUARY 2002

TRUE COLORS

Walt and Sergeant Bolt go undercover—was there murder at the mansion?

B.K. STEVENS

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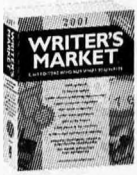

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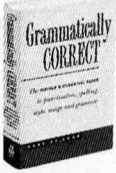

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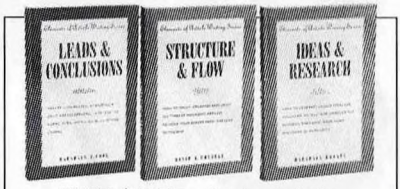

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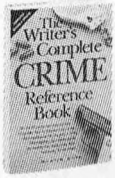

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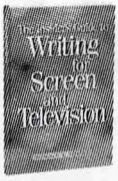

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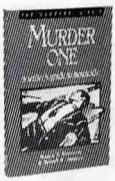

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Francis M. Nevins

Mr. Tutt and Mr. Train

Nowadays when we want a story of law, lawyers, lawyering, and justice, we tune in to *Law & Order*. Seventy and eighty years ago, when our grandparents wanted a tale with those ingredients, they bought the latest issue of *The Saturday Evening Post,* for generations America's most popular weekly fiction magazine, and flipped to the latest exploit of Mr. Tutt.

Ephraim Tutt starred in more than eighty short stories, most of them first published in the *Post* between 1919 and the end of World War II, then assembled into hardcover collections and reshuffled at intervals into large "Best of Mr. Tutt" volumes. Until the advent of Perry Mason he was America's premier lawyer character and his creator, Arthur Train (1875-1945), our foremost lawyer storyteller.

Train was born into a family of Boston Brahmins, graduated from Harvard Law School in 1899, and spent several years as an assistant district attorney in New York, trying hundreds of murder cases and using his off hours to write short stories, which soon began to sell to the *Post* and other magazines. In 1908 he resigned and set up his own civil practice, but in 1921, two years after creating Mr. Tutt, he quit lawyering for keeps and was a full-time writer from then on.

Train insisted that he didn't write mysteries and knew nothing about the genre, and by and large he was right. Most of the early Mr. Tutt tales are set in the Manhattan criminal court system; Ephraim's client is a poor man (usually from one of the immigrant groups that thronged into New York early in the twentieth century) who is charged with murder or some other serious offense. In some of the tales the entire legal system and its lackeys, the defendant (who is guilty and without moral justification) and his ethnic milieu, and

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even Mr. Tutt himself and his colleagues are portrayed with a genial, detached contempt worthy of H. L. Mencken. In others Train portrays the system as an obscene monster thirsting for the blood of the oppressed and Mr. Tutt and his associates as the righteous remnant, battling law to achieve justice.

It's unlikely that Train's audience cared much about, or even noticed, these discrepancies. Regardless of the role he plays in a particular story—defender of the underdog, amoral gun for hire, flimflam artist, mender of romantic destinies, amateur detective, or a blend of two or more of these parts —Ephraim's philosophy, rhetoric, and tactics remain consistent. The later stories deal with civil more than criminal law, and most of them fall into a common pattern, with a Shylock figure using some rule of law for a nefarious purpose until Mr. Tutt comes on the scene like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and trumps the bad guy with a kinder and gentler, and of course more arcane, rule of law.

Most of the Mr. Tutt stories are set in the environments that Train knew best—Manhattan, New England, and remote fishing villages of Canada and upstate New York. But in his later years he took vacation trips to distant corners of the United States and then offered Ephraim a legal adventure in the same venue, with lots of local color in case the IRS questioned the business purpose of his travels. This was the origin of such stories as "The King's Whiskers," which takes place on the Montana–Canada border, and the story in this issue, set on New Mexico's Cocas Pueblo reservation.

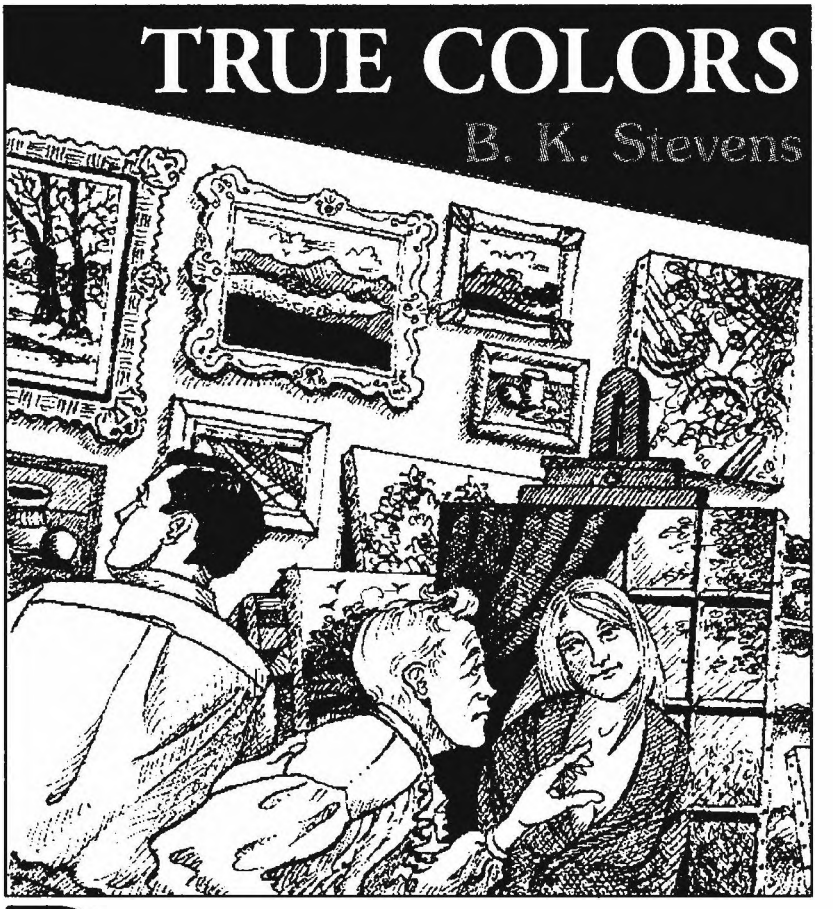
The title "And Lesser Breeds Without the Law" comes from a Kipling poem. The story was written around 1940 and collected in *Mr. Tutt Comes Home* (1941). It did not appear in the *Post* before its book publication—and for a curious reason. In the 1920's another magazine owned by the same publisher had serialized a Zane Grey novel that was not only sympathetic to what were then called American Indians but ended with the Navajo hero marrying the white woman he loved. So many benighted readers were so outraged that the publisher adopted a new policy: No positively portrayed redskins, ever. That policy was still in force at the *Post* when Train wrote the story you will read in this issue—one of a tiny handful of whodunits that anticipate the treatment of Native Americans that we tend to identify with Tony Hillerman.

If Mr. Tutt and Mr. Train intrigue you, please feel free to visit your local law library and pull down *Legal Studies Forum, Vol. XIX Number 1* (1995), where you'll find my essay "Mr. Tutt's Jurisprudential Journey: The Stories of Arthur Train." I promise not to sue if you make a photocopy.

NOTE: Edgar winner Francis M. Nevins is a professor at St. Louis University School of Law. His most recent book is *Night of Silken Snow and Other Stories* (Five Star).–ED.

TRUE COLORS

B. K. Stevens



Dear Mother,

You've got to help me. I spent six hours trying to reach you and Ellen, but *National Geographic* couldn't give me a number and the operators in Bora Bora didn't have a clue. Meanwhile, I'm worried maybe Ellen will hear about the Naughten case before I can explain, and maybe she'll take it wrong.

I mean, it's not like I think I'm a big deal, but the story's all over the news here and last night Larry King did a special and I figure even Bora Bora gets CNN. Now, I know you're thinking I should write to Ellen directly, but this is delicate. It'll be easier if I tell you and then you tell her. Anyhow, Mother, there's one point you gotta stress: *I didn't do anything wrong*.

The ironic part is that at first I figured this was one case that couldn't possibly go wrong, not possibly. Bolt and I were hanging around the station Friday, no pressing work to do—and no plans for

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

the weekend, not with Ellen helping you with the Bora Bora shoot and Kevin at Little League camp. We both felt at loose ends. (Bolt always gets droopy when you leave town—keep that in mind next time he proposes.) Anyway, we'd about given up on the movie ads when the captain called us into his office.

A man was perched in a chair near the desk. He looked familiar—not the face so much, but the clothes: white jacket, pink shirt, red tie, white slacks, pink socks, white shoes, white straw hat gripped in clammy hands. I knew I'd met him before but couldn't have said where. Bolt put it all together immediately.

"Mr. Thomas," he said, crossing the office to shake the man's hand. "You seem in good health, sir. And Mrs. Thomas?"

"Oh, very healthy." John Thomas twitched at the sound of her name. "Always very, very, extremely healthy. But not due for a parole hearing for another twenty years, thank God." He looked at the captain. "May I go? I'll cooperate—I'll leave town now, communicate with no one until Monday. Will that do?"

"Nicely," the captain said, and John Thomas smacked his hat on his head, obviously eager to get the hell out of there. He did pause for a moment, though, to grab my hand and squeeze it.

"Thank you," he whispered, and got the hell out.

"Nice guy," I observed, sitting in the chair Thomas had just vacated. "I send his wife to prison, and he's still polite."

"How typically modest of you, lieutenant," Bolt said, with his approving little smile. "Mr. Thomas's wife murdered his mistress and his best friend. Had it not been for your inspired detective work, Mr. Thomas might have been next. No wonder he's grateful. Does he still work at Creative Chromatics, captain?"

"He owns it now," the captain said. "And yesterday, Mrs. Kelly Naughten hired him to redecorate her mansion. You've heard of her husband, right? The painter guy? Naughten?"

I was lost already. "Naughten who?" I asked.

"Yes, Naughten, Hugh," Bolt said, nodding. "I greatly admired Hugh Naughten—those black and white paintings of his are dazzling. I was sorry to read that he passed away last week."

"The mayor's sorry, too," the captain said sourly. "He was Hugh Naughten's brother-in-law—the brother of his first wife, not his second. And the mayor thinks the whole deal's fishy."

"Fishy?" I said, puzzled. "How do you mean?"

The captain shrugged. "Oh, the same old story—eccentric millionaire artist holes up in his mansion for decades after his first wife dies, finally comes out of seclusion, elopes with an exotic dancer less than half his age, dies in a freak home accident six months later, leaves the dancer almost everything. Happens all the time. But the mayor's suspicious."

Sometimes even I'm surprised at how dense I can be. "Suspicious about what?" I asked.

The captain shrugged again.

"About whether it was really an accident or whether the dancer did him in to get his dough. Me, I'm not worried. The coroner says the death looked kosher, and she's damn good; if she says it's an accident, it is. And Kelly Naughten's the richest woman in town now—I don't wanna harass her. But I gotta get the mayor off our backs. So I suggested an undercover operation, and he went for it—as long as *you're* involved, Walt. He thinks the world of you—you know that."

I do know that. The mayor himself tells me that all the time, and it always makes me sweat. The mayor thinks I'm this brilliant detective—like the captain does, like Bolt does, like almost everybody does. But you and I know better, Mother. We know if it weren't for Bolt tagging after me like a puppy and hanging on my every word and misinterpreting every dumb thing I say and weaving all the misinterpretations into a dead-on solution, I'd never have cracked a single case. I'd still be walking a beat, and that's probably where I belong. I sure don't belong on an undercover job in some dead artist's mansion, trying to worm the truth out of a bereaved exotic dancer. Those exotic dancers can be pretty smart, Mother. They intimidate me.

My palms were sogging up already. "What kind of undercover operation you have in mind, captain?" I asked.

"It'll be easy," he assured me. "See, the mayor found out Mrs. Naughten had hired John Thomas. But she's never met him face to face. And she wants Thomas and his top decorator to spend the weekend at the mansion, sleep over, get a feel for the place. So you and Bolt will pose as Thomas and this decorator—"

"Hold it," I cut in. "We pose as interior *decorators?* Geez, captain. I don't want to. I don't know *how* to."

"Thomas isn't exactly a decorator," he said. "He's a color consultant. So all you gotta do is say pink looks nice with blue, purple goes good with green, like that. Bolt will pretend to be the decorator—and you've studied that stuff, haven't you, Bolt?"

"Oh well." Bolt spread his hands. "I've dabbled. A few community college courses in design, a bit of leisure reading—and I do hope your wife is happy with her sunroom, captain."

"She's nuts about it. She still raves about how those few remarks you made at the Christmas party taught her how to turn a dump into a showpiece. So Bolt will be the decorator, ramble on about eastern exposures and taking out walls. Meanwhile, you'll both ask casual-type questions, check out the sauna room."

The sauna part did sound nice. I've been tense lately—I could use a good steam. "Good idea," I said.

Bolt nodded soberly. "So that's where he died, captain? A sauna room? I'd wondered how it happened."

The captain took a stack of photos from his desk. "Naughten had a sauna built in the basement for his second wife—I guess now that she's not a dancer and doesn't wiggle as much she's gotta find other ways to

keep fit. But last Friday Hugh Naughten was the one who decided to take a steam after lunch."

He passed us the photos. It looked like a great sauna: cosy room, sparkling turquoise tile, bench attached to one wall. But I didn't feel like taking a steam any more—at least, not there.

A man lay on the bench—shortish, sixtyish, slight. He wore a fleecy red robe that went clear to his toes, and his shoulder-length blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail. It's Naughten, I thought—not just because long hair seemed right for an artist but because this guy was dead. That fits Naughten, I inferred. I noticed a red stain on the floor and pointed. "Blood?" I asked.

"Pinot noir," the captain said. "It was the Naughtens' six-month anniversary—the housekeeper was fixing a turkey dinner. Late afternoon the gardener goes to the wine cellar to get a bottle for dinner. On his way back he notices the sauna window's all steamed up and the control's turned too high."

The captain handed me a photo of the control dial. Yup, too high, but just barely—the needle thing was just past the green "safe" zone, just into the red "caution" zone.

"So the gardener opened the sauna door?" I asked. "It wasn't locked?"

"Nah, there's no lock on that door—who'd want one? They've just got big brass handles on the door, inside and out—see? The gardener speaks to Naughten, gets no response, freaks out, drops the pinot noir, yells for the housekeeper to call 911, tries CPR. No luck. Coroner says Naughten died long before he was found."

I nodded wisely. "Cause of death?"

"Heart attack," the captain said. "The coroner figures he fell asleep, got dehydrated, died in his sleep. He'd had a minor heart attack last year—he was real overweight then. That scared him, and he lost sixty pounds fast. He generally watched his diet real careful, but that day he and his wife went out for a big anniversary lunch; both ate and drank too much. When they got home, she felt tipsy and took a nap. He evidently decided to steam off some lunch. Poor guy must've felt so eager to look trim for his bride that he pushed the control up too high."

Well, these things happen. You remember how anxious I got about my waistline before my high school reunion, how I did so many situps one night I almost blacked out, how Ellen got mad and said she wouldn't go to the reunion at all unless I wised up and slowed down. Poor Naughten—dead before his wife could nag him into being sensible. "Why is the mayor suspicious?" I asked.

The captain let out a little deep-in-the-throat, I-think-this-is-dumb growl. "No good reason. The bracelet, mostly."

Bolt and I looked at each other. "The bracelet?" I said.

The captain handed us a photo of a knock-your-eyes-out bracelet—six huge rubies connected by squiggly gold links—nestled against the sauna door. "The wife has an exercise area in the basement—tread-

solve it. What time does Mrs. Naughten expect us?"

"Five o'clock," the captain said. "You'd better go pack."

Bolt arched an eyebrow. "We had better," he said, "go shop."

I didn't know what he meant by that until I saw the getup he had on when we met back at the station—silky yellow slacks, ruffly white shirt with puffy sleeves, waist-length crimson cape. He wore a raspberry beret, and his scarf—it was apricot.

Startled, I stumbled forward, treading on his deep azure, soft leather footwear. "Bolt!" I cried. "What's got into you?"

He looked hurt. "I am merely attempting to look the part. People in the interior decorating profession generally dress with a measure of flamboyance. With that in mind, sir, may I respectfully suggest that you reconsider your own ensemble?"

Now *I* felt hurt. "This is my best suit," I said. "I got it for my high school reunion. What's wrong with it?"

"It's just that you're so overwhelmingly *beige*, sir," he said, "except for the black socks. A color consultant wouldn't be so—well, so conservative. Just think of Mr. Thomas—"

"No," I cut in. "Pink shirts and—no. No way. Let's go."

When we got to the Naughten place, I wasn't impressed. I've seen lots of mansions—it's funny how many rich people get mixed up in murder—and this one didn't cut it. The house itself was okay—columns, balconies, all the basics. But the lawn is shaggy in some spots, scalped in others, yellow-brown all over. *My* yard looks better than that—and while we're on the subject, would you tell Ellen I finally got the hedge trimmed and it looks fine?

We had to ring the bell three times before Hugh Naughten's daughter Blanche opened the door. No matter what the papers say, she's just okay-looking—nothing special, nothing really wrong, just a little too pale, too thin, too wispy altogether. Her light brown hair was pinned back, and she wore a white wool dress and a thick white sweater, even though it was a hot day.

"Are you the decorators?" she asked. "Mr. Thomas and—"

"Bolt." He flipped his cape. Lucky guy—he could use his own name, I had to remember an alias. "Just Bolt. May we come in?"

She winced. "Yes, of course. But you've arrived at an unfortunate moment. Nora and Chet—oh goodness!" Something crashed, she shrieked, and we followed as she ran to the kitchen. A big, muscular, thirtyish guy was there, dressed in denim and scowling; a big, muscular, fiftyish woman was there, too, dressed in black and heaving pots. "Never touch things in kitchen!" she shouted. "How often must I tell you?"

He crossed his arms—his impressive arms, which matched the rest of his expertly sculpted body and set off his male-model face. "I just took the potatoes off the stove," he said. "They're mush already. How much longer were you planning to cook them?"

"Till they are *done*," she cried. Defiantly she lifted a huge, bub-

bling pot from the counter and plunked it on a burner. "Do not pretend you are helping! You are saboteur, thief! I caught you stealing heavy cream! I caught you stealing nutmeg!"

"I *borrowed* them." He seized a pepper shaker. "And maybe now I'll borrow your pepper. What do you think of *that?*"

"You would not dare!" the housekeeper screamed, hurling herself at him. But Blanche Naughten stepped into her path.

"Please," Blanche begged. "Kelly might hear. She might—"

"It's okay," a woman in a long green robe said, walking in. Personally I think exotic dancers should be more voluptuous—don't tell Ellen I said that—but Kelly Naughten had a great figure, slim and trim and tight. Her platinum hair clung to her neck, her skin shimmered, and those eyes! Such a deep, pure, magic green, the sort that bring out the poet in a guy."

She turned to the housekeeper. "What's wrong, Nora?"

"*He* is wrong." Nora pointed at the gardener. "I set potatoes to boil, I am preparing to serve tuna *au jus avec pommes de terre* for you and these artistic gentlemen, and I return to kitchen and find this—this less-than-gardener, this *bouncer* has turned off burner, has removed pot, has ruined *everything!*"

"Well, you just fire up that burner again," Kelly said soothingly. "Boil those potatoes as long as you like. Chet, never mind about dinner. The decorators are here! They'll turn this house into a place where people come to enjoy good talk and good food—*really* good food, Chet. Won't that be wonderful?"

He looked Bolt over in grudging approval, then looked at me and recoiled. "That guy's a *decorator?* Who's kidding who?"

"Mr. Thomas," Bolt put in, "is a color consultant. When he takes on a delicate assignment, he restricts himself to beige so the hues of his own clothing—normally wildly but tastefully variegated—will not distract him. Thus, this dismal suit."

The gardener thought it over, then shrugged.

"Makes sense," he said. "There's no other reason a guy would dress like that."

"There, you see?" Kelly said, beaming. "Everything's fine. Now, I'll show you gentlemen to your room and—"

"No," Nora said. "*I* am housekeeper. I show them to room. Come, men. Pick up suitcases. I will lead way." I couldn't tell if she was German or Russian or what. She sounded sort of husky and European, but it wasn't anything I could place. Maybe she had an accent or maybe she just didn't like contractions and possessive pronouns and definite articles.

We followed her through a crypt-like living room, up a dark staircase, down a dingy hallway. You know I never pay attention to how places look, Mother. You remember how mad Ellen got when she redecorated my den as a birthday surprise and I never noticed. But this place gave even me the creeps. Lots of black, plenty of brown, generous doses of dirty yellow-white, eighty-seven shades of grey. Wall-

paper was faded, paint peeled, floors creaked, dingy windows rebelled against the light. Well, I thought. once Bolt and I leave, I hope they get real decorators.

The housekeeper threw open the door to the chilly, musty room Bolt and I would share. "Here," she said. "Big room. Two beds. I sewed quilts. Window gives nice view of back. Unpack; ten minutes, come down. I serve cocktails, hors d'oeuvres."

The last bit was a low growl that didn't sound anything like French. We unpacked quickly, averting our eyes from mud-brown quilts and time-streaked walls. Within nine and a half minutes we were downstairs seated on the black-grey living room couch.

Chet mixed first-rate cocktails, not flinching when I said I like my martinis stirred, not shaken. As for the hors d'oeuvres, I wolfed down three grapeleaf-roll things before noticing they were stuffed with peanut butter. After that I slowed down.

I was on my second martini when Kelly Naughten joined us. She wore a lime-green silk dress with a slit up the side that went high enough to be interesting but stopped short of getting embarrassing; her hair shone; her emerald-and-squiggly-gold earrings matched her bracelet precisely, and her eyes sparkled so brightly they'd turn St. Patrick green with envy. She was sweet —getting Blanche to trade her milk for chablis, making Chet and Nora sit down, expertly mixing her own daiquiri before perching on a moss-colored armchair and smiling at me.

"It's good of you to spend the weekend with us, Mr. Thomas," she said. "Or may I call you John? I feel so guilty about stealing you away from your family. Was your wife upset?"

"She—no." I wished I'd given more thought to my cover story. Should I tell her about Mrs. Thomas doing twenty-five to life for homicide? Maybe not, since I was here to find out if Kelly was a murderer, too. "We're separated. *Really* separated." That was true. The state pen is a damn effective separator.

"I'm so sorry you're getting a divorce," Kelly said. She didn't look sorry, though: her eyes sparkled more than ever as she turned to her stepdaughter. "Blanche, did I thank you for advising Chet about the petunias? You *must* come see the petunias, John. Blanche has a genius for flowers—she's *very* artistic."

"I'm sure she is," I said, and shot Blanche a warm smile.

She looked down, hunching her shoulders up even tighter and lapping at her chablis. "I didn't want you to have to fuss with petunias, Kelly," she said in a mumbly near-whisper. "You're under so much stress already, because of the—the—you know."

"Yes, *she* knows," the housekeeper said darkly, taking a slug of anisette. "At least *someone* in this house knows, knows all."

Chet plunked his beer down. "I'm sick of these hints you keep dropping, Nora. Come out with it. What are you saying?"

She stood up majestically. "I am saying, is time for dinner. Come. Do not let potatoes cook too much."

They had cooked too much maybe two hours ago. Then they had collapsed, and then they had congealed into indistinguishable goo pasting together the undrained canned tuna in Nora's tuna *au jus avec pommes de terre*. I forced down a second bite only because you raised me so well I know you have to take two bites of anything a hostess serves. The cucumber soufflé was worse, and the rutabaga *au lait*—dear God. Blanche and Nora ate heartily; the rest of us mashed things up so they'd look smaller, lifting near-empty forks to our mouths and making insincere yum sounds. Mid-dinner, Nora sprang up, seized the chablis, and made the rounds. I held my glass out. I was already lightheaded, I needed solid food and not more booze, but at that point I'd take calories in any form. Bolt covered his glass with his hand. "I prefer burgundy," he said. "Would you mind terribly?"

Nora leapt back. "Not in this house!" she declared. "With tuna *au jus avec pommes de terre,* with any fish, with any poultry, we serve white wine! Where were you raised? In barn?"

"Chablis is fine," I said, ashamed Bolt had started a fuss, "especially when it's so nice and icy. So, Mrs. Naughten—"

"Kelly," she cut in. "Please, just Kelly."

I nodded, liking her even more. "So, Kelly. What do you have in mind for the house? For the redecorating, I mean."

She waved a hand, displaying lime-tinted fingernails. "Just make it pretty and cheerful—light, airy, open. That's what Hugh wanted. He hadn't entertained since Blanche's mother died, but he wanted to start again. He wanted to transform the house into a place where bright, lively, young people would want to come."

Nora snorted. "He never wanted that till *you* came here. He said nothing of it till night before he died, at dinner."

"No," Kelly said. "But we'd talked it over between the two of us for *months,* and of course I'll honor his wishes. As soon as the place is fixed up, I'll throw *big* parties, fill the house with talk and laughter. Doesn't that sound like fun, Blanche?"

Blanche's head ducked in a half nod. "I don't think you're up to it, Kelly. You're so emotionally fragile these days, so—"

"You're sweet to worry," Kelly said, "but I'm fine. John, at our very first party, you and Bolt will be guests of honor."

I felt shocked. A brand-new widow, talking about throwing parties and bragging about how good she feels! Whether she'd loved Hugh Naughten or not, whether she'd killed him or not, she ought to at least *act* bereaved. "I was sorry to hear about your husband's death," I said. "You hadn't been married long, right?"

She sighed. "Six months—and we met just three days before we got married, at a Christmas party at City Hall. Hugh hadn't gone out in ages, but he'd been restless and when the mayor invited him to the party, it just felt right. When Hugh and I met, that just felt right, too. I was waitressing—dancers don't

make much, we all moonlight—and Hugh and I got to talking. He called me the next morning, we spent the day together, and—"

"Kelly, don't." Blanche reached over to squeeze her hand. "Those memories must torture you now."

"Well, I miss him," Kelly said simply. "And he loved you *very* much, Blanche. He wanted you to finally get to live your dreams. Like law school. I bet there's *still* time—"

Blanche shook her head decisively. "Not for this fall. I couldn't leave you so soon. He wouldn't want me to."

Nora snorted again, plunked down her glass, and stood up. "All this talk about what Hugh Naughten wanted! He wanted this, he wanted that, he would not want other. When he was alive, people did not always care so much about what he wanted."

"That's enough." It was the gardener. He stood, matching Nora inch for inch if not pound for pound. "If you're implying—"

"Let it go," Kelly said, placing a hand on his arm. "Nora's just upset about Hugh's death. We all are. Please sit down."

Glaring, he obeyed. Kelly turned to us. "Chet's so used to protecting me. He was the bouncer at the club where I worked and had to fight off drunks who—not that you're like a drunk, Nora, not at all. Well, I'm stuffed! Don't fuss with dessert."

"I have already fussed," the housekeeper said, scowling. "Dessert is made. I serve, you eat. It is *jamblon chocolat.*"

I had to work hard to take that second bite. The party broke up right away; we all went to our rooms, and I was plenty glad to try to sleep off the memory of that dinner. Three hours later my eyes popped open suddenly, and I saw Bolt pacing.

He sighed with relief. "Good evening, sir," he said. "It is just short of midnight. Did you rest well? Are you hungry?"

"Starving," I said. "Maybe we could raid the refrigerator."

"I made bold to survey the refrigerator an hour ago," he confessed. "Genuine edibles are in short supply. I did, however, secure the number of a pizza parlor that delivers till one, and I located a secluded phone. If it would not jeopardize our cover—"

"Damn our cover," I said fervently. "Call. Make mine a double-cheese with anchovies."

Bolt executed the mission. "In ten minutes," he said, "I will go down to await delivery. Well! What did you think of dinner?"

I was about to start complaining but stopped myself. You always tell me it's useless to carry on about stuff that's in the past and can't be helped. I shook my head. "No point in talking about it," I said. "It'd be nothing but whine, whine, whine."

"No point discussing it at all, sir," Bolt agreed. "As you say, it's just wine, wine, wine. Probably I needn't have tested Nora by requesting burgundy with tuna. But I wanted to be sure she followed the standard practice of serving white wine with fish or poultry. So the bottle of pinot noir broken in the sauna is indeed odd. Why, on the day Mr. Naughten died, did Chet fetch red

wine from the cellar, when Nora was serving turkey?"

I hadn't thought pinot noir with turkey was odd. You know me, Mother. I always think red wine goes good with anything—only beer goes better. But now it hit me. For gourmet-type folks, it wasn't a good combination. "Not very cool," I agreed.

"Not very cool at all," Bolt said. "White wine should be refrigerated for hours before being served. Why did Chet wait so long to fetch it from the cellar? An intriguing question—to which, I am sure, you will find an intriguing answer."

Not feeling so sure about that I wandered to the window, gazed down, saw the petunias Kelly had talked about—and also saw Kelly sprinting past the petunias to the gardener's cottage.

So. Chet and Kelly—big surprise. He was young and goodlooking, he'd been the bouncer at her club, and she got her husband to hire him even though, judging from the lawn, Chet didn't know diddly about gardening. I motioned Bolt to the window. "Look," I said. "Kelly sneaking to Chet's cottage. How much you wanna bet there's something cooking in *there?*"

He nodded. "That," he said, "is too safe to call a bet—it is a certainty. It confirms what we witnessed in the kitchen."

It took me less than a minute to figure that one out. Oh, sure—Kelly calming Chet down by talking about the parties she'd throw. She wouldn't talk that way if he expected to be a mere bartender at those parties. He knew he'd be a guest—or the host. That gave them both a tidy motive for killing her husband. All we had to do was figure out which one had actually done it.

"Come on, Bolt," I said. "I wanna know what's going on in that cottage. Maybe we can peek in a window, listen at a door."

He hesitated. "We have no warrant. Fourth Amendment issues come to mind. Any evidence we secure could be inadmissible if—"

"We're undercover," I said. "The judge'll cut us some slack. Let's go."

Stealthily we sneaked out of the house, crept past yellowed grass and wilted petunias, made it to the cottage, crouched low in shrubs under a conveniently open window, and listened.

"I defrosted the beef Wellington," Chet was saying. "We should eat it. It's been a full week. Time to move ahead."

Even with the night winds blowing you could hear Kelly sigh. "I suppose," she said. "But, oh, Chet, I never—"

"Time to move ahead with other things, too," Chet persisted. "You made me a promise. With the old guy gone, why wait any longer? Why can't I have what I want?"

"I want it, too," she said. "But so soon after his death—it wouldn't look right. It wouldn't *be* right."

"Is it right that I have to keep living a lie?" he demanded. "Six months of pretending to be something I'm not, of hiding what I really feel—how much longer do you think I can stand it?"

"Just a little while," she begged. "Will you—for *my* sake?"

I wanted to hear his answer. And

we would have if I hadn't glanced down just then and seen the centipede slither across my hand. But I saw it, I yelped, and talk in the cottage stopped. Bolt flicked off the centipede, grabbed my wrist, and led the run back toward the mansion. By the time Chet reached the cottage door we'd flattened ourselves against a toolshed. Chet shone his flashlight around, shrugged, and went back inside.

"I trust he didn't see us," Bolt said. "Now, hurry or all will be lost! We must intercept the pizza person!"

We caught up with him at the end of the drive and sneaked back to the mansion with our treasure. But as soon as we started up to our room, Nora appeared at the top of the stairs wrapped in a long black bathrobe, holding aloft a tarnished candelabrum.

"So!" she said. "I hear noises, I investigate—and I find you, awake when you should be asleep, out when you should be in, and carrying—what? What is in boxes?"

"I don't know." Don't ask why she terrified me so much; she just did. My only instinct was to lie. "We heard noises, too, so we came down and found these on the porch. Are they yours?"

Majestically she came down the stairs, flipped open the lid on an oh-so-warm-and-fragrant carton, and sniffed in disdain. "Pizza! In *this* house! Who had such refuse brought *here?*"

"Not us," I said. "That's for sure. Maybe it was delivered by mistake. Look, I'll just throw it out in the kitchen—"

She took both cartons from us. "I am housekeeper. I throw out. And in case delivery was not mistake, remember: in *this* house, three proper meals, every day, served at proper times. In *this* house only wholesome food. In *this* house—no snacks!"

Watching her stalk off with the pizza about broke our hearts. Hungry and sad, we trudged upstairs to make whispered plans for the morning. We'd say we wanted to wander around, get a feel for the place. And we'd find ways to learn more about the day Naughten died. Glumly we got in bed, tried to snore loud enough to drown out our stomach rumbles, and dreamt of breakfast.

Breakfast brought no relief. I like scrambled eggs and I don't mind stewed plums, unless you mix them together and serve them while the eggs are still runny and the plums still clammy. I chickened out after one and a half bites, then gnawed on blackened biscuits while telling Kelly our plans. She agreed, saying she'd be out by the pool—we could come see her whenever.

Not wanting to seem obvious, we postponed the sauna and climbed two flights of stairs to Naughten's studio. It takes up the whole third floor, and the walls are a regular gallery, hung thickly with paintings and photographs. I gazed at a painting of a hazy street scene — Paris, maybe, or Newark.

"What gives, Bolt?" I said. "You said Naughten painted in black and white, but this picture has lots of colors."

"It's an early work," Bolt said. "In

his twenties Naughten used color in conventional ways, having not yet discovered his distinctive means of expression. He traveled widely, his first wife always at his side. See this photograph?"

It was simple but striking—young Hugh Naughten at an easel set up at a cafe, his wife just inches from him pointing at something while she held a baby who must be Blanche. It made my throat ache with sympathy. "How did she die, Bolt?" I asked.

"Cancer," he said. "A long, cruel illness. Blanche must have been five or six when her mother succumbed. For several years Hugh Naughten painted nothing at all. Then he began painting the black and white works that brought him his true fame."

We examined the paintings on the opposite wall. These were still lifes and portraits, some so starkly realistic they looked like photographs, some so abstract I couldn't tell if he'd painted a person or a pastry. They weren't gloomy, exactly, but an emptiness hung over them—backgrounds left bare, lines angular and harsh. "Why'd he switch to black and white?" I asked.

"To express his grief, most critics say," Bolt replied. "A reflection of how all color drained from his life when his wife died. I wonder what he was working on just prior to his demise."

We walked to the easel near the skylight and peered at a full-length portrait of Kelly in the robe she'd worn yesterday, sitting by a window, tilting her head to the side and smiling. The lines in this one were softer than in the others, and despite the lack of color it had a calm, peaceful glow. He'd nearly finished it—just a little more work to do on the eyes.

I looked at a table near the easel. A fresh palette, a new brush, unopened tubes of paint. I picked the tubes up. Blues and yellows—Naughten didn't use those. Someone must've messed with his stuff, planning to take over his studio after killing him. "Look," I said. "Something shady going on, wouldn't you say?"

Bolt looked at the paint and sighed. "Very shady. He must have wanted to get the shade of his wife's green eyes just right. Undoubtedly, he planned to finish the portrait on the night he died, as an anniversary gift. It was to be his first touch of color in decades, to signal the end of his bleak loneliness. And his rediscovered joy was to be reflected in his new wife's eyes—but he did not live to paint the last strokes. How poignant!"

We headed to the second floor. Obviously the master bedroom had been redone, and redone by Kelly. Everything was shiny and frilly, about halfway between classy and way too much. We peeked in the closets—hers bulging with gorgeous stuff, his containing mostly workclothes plus a few new suits she'd probably talked him into buying—and moved on to Blanche's room.

Blanche, wearing a longsleeved navy dress and a thick grey sweater, sat at a computer playing solitaire. When we knocked on her half-open door, she gave a little

jump, then pulled the sweater around her more closely. She didn't seem enthusiastic when we said we'd come to get ideas about how to redo her room.

"My room doesn't need redoing," she said. "It's fine."

"It's very nice," I agreed, but didn't mean it. All the furniture was heavy and dark and old fashioned—probably older than she was. Thick brown curtains were closed tight against the sun; a matching spread was pulled tight across the bed. And it was cluttered: bureaus covered with dusty doodads, stacks of old magazines on the desk, covered baskets stuck in every corner. The only bright spots were the travel posters lining the walls.

"Let's see," I said, gazing at the posters. "Paris, Venice, Istanbul, Sydney, Tokyo—wow. You've been to all these places?"

"Not since Mother died." Blanche gazed at the thick brown carpet. "I always dreamed of going back on my own. But Father needed me. He was so dependent on me—I *couldn't* leave him."

Sweet kid. My eyes misting up, I noticed an orange and blue pennant on the wall. "You went to State, here in town?"

"Yes," she said. "And I lived at home. Father didn't want me to live in a dormitory. That was all right. I understood."

"But things are different now," I said. "I mean, not to be crude, but now that he's gone, you can travel."

"Or go to law school," she agreed. "That's my other dream—to argue a case before the Supreme Court. Now I can do both—and I will, but for now I have to look after Kelly. She's—well, I adore her, but she's not a smart person. She can be so reckless, so impulsive. She needs a stable person around to guide her."

That sounded okay except I wasn't sure Blanche was all that stable. She extracted a photo album from a teetering pile and slowly flipped pages. In old fading photos with both parents, the father was always painting, the mother was always holding Blanche in her arms. Later photos looked sadder—Hugh waving as Blanche left for kindergarten, giving her a tiny cake on her tenth birthday, welcoming her when she came home from her college graduation. She'd given up all kinds of chances for him, and he'd never once broken his isolation for her sake—never driven her to school or thrown her a real birthday party or gone to a graduation. Then Kelly comes along, and suddenly Hugh's buying new suits and going to restaurants for anniversary lunches.

She must've felt bitter, like he'd adopted a new daughter—a younger one—and lavished on her everything she'd missed. Maybe Blanche had finally snapped and blocked him in the sauna to let him know how trapped she'd felt all those years. Now, she might feel sorry, might feel she had to make it up to him by taking care of Kelly the way she'd always taken care of her dad.

It gave me the creeps. "We gotta move on, Blanche," I said. "If you do decide to redo your room, we have creative ideas."

For the first time, she looked at me straight. "Like what?"

Damn. I hadn't thought she'd call me on that one. "You'll see," I faltered. "We'll tell you real soon—right, Bolt?"

He nodded promptly. "We shall develop an integrated concept for the house—a holistic vision—and unveil it all at once."

"Smart move, Bolt," I whispered as we went downstairs. Now we didn't have to try to sound like decorators. If anyone asked about our plans, we'd say we were holding back till this holistic deal was ready. "The holding-back part—that was *really* smart."

"I agree," Bolt said. "Blanche's implication that her father held her back all these years—that *was* a smart move on her part. Well, sir! Are we ready to visit the kitchen?"

Nora was stooped over the stove, sweating, swearing, boiling livers. She smiled at us, lifting lid after lid from pot after steaming pot. "Here is lunch," she said. "Here is cow liver, turkey liver, pig liver. I boil, I chop together, I add leftover eggs and plums, I broil all just so—voilà! Liver potpourri!"

I fought a gag. "It doesn't seem fair," I said, "you cooking every meal. Couldn't someone else make dinner? Maybe Blanche—"

"Blanche! That one!" She snatched pimentos from the fridge. "That one does not cook. Since she was little girl, I try to get her to help. No. She is busy, she says—busy with what? With computer, magazines, television. All day she is busy in room."

It sounded grim but not as grim as hanging out in the kitchen with Nora. "I see," I said. "Now Kelly wants to redo the entire house. What changes do you want in the kitchen?"

"None." Stolidly she tossed more cloves into the turkey-liver pot. "None changes. For thirty years, more, I cook for Mr. Naughten in this kitchen, all is fine. Now all of sudden he has hotsy-totsy wife, now is talk of changes—but now he is dead. You see connection? Maybe. You are smart, artistic gentlemen. Me, I am simple cook who just boil livers, chop livers."

I'm not used to having witnesses beg to be interrogated—but she didn't know this was an interrogation. That made my job easy. I could get used to this undercover bit. "Yeah, it was a shame about Mr. Naughten," I said. "Too bad no one spotted him in time. Kelly was napping all afternoon? Does she take naps often?"

Nora snorted. "Never. Six months she lives here, never takes nap. Always after lunch she spends hours jumping up and down, pedaling on bike that goes nowhere. That one day she goes upstairs, does not come down." Nora's bushy eyebrows did a slow, heavy wiggle. "At least she *says* she did not. From kitchen I cannot see stairs. I cannot see who goes up, who comes down."

This was getting interesting. "Poor Mr. Naughten," I said, leaning on the stove casual-like. "Dying so soon after he started really living again, after he found a wife he loved so much—"

Scowling, Nora seized a sponge and swatted me away from the stove. "What did Mr. Naughten need with skinny wife who jump up

and down all day? For thirty years, more, I keep him happy. I cook, run house, do everything. I do not need help—I take care of Mr. Naughten—*I* do it, *I*. Not skinny wife, not lazy daughter, not stupid gardener who does not know seed from stick—humph!"

Ah yes—the gardener. Nora was right: from the kitchen, she *couldn't* see the stairs. If she'd been stooped over the stove all afternoon, Chet could've sneaked down to the basement, trapped Hugh, waited an hour or so, sauntered to the kitchen, and asked, innocent-like, if he should get the wine. He could've unjammed the door, dropped the bottle to make it look like he was shocked to find the body. It could've have happened like that.

Frankly, I hoped it had. I didn't want to think Kelly had done it. I liked her. Don't get me wrong. I just liked her because she was nice, I didn't like her in a bad way, and those stories about what happened in her room Saturday night are plain ridiculous. But when it came to wanting to suspect her versus wanting to suspect Chet—hell. He'd been surly, he'd made fun of my best suit, he's four inches taller than me and obviously works out more. Who *wouldn't* want to suspect him of murder?

But that was unfair, I realized. I made myself take a hard look at my motives for suspecting Chet. I sighed. "Jealousy," I confessed to Bolt as we headed for the basement. "It can be real powerful. It can lead to big mistakes."

"Indeed, sir," he said, nodding, "and this house is full of jealousy. We've just seen fresh evidence of that."

I had to readjust my thinking fast. Well, sure. Nora. All those years cooking for Naughten, running his house, maybe secretly loving him. Then he brings this dancer home, and Nora has to wait on the woman who took the place she'd always wanted. That'd sure lead to jealousy. Maybe it also led to revenge.

From the kitchen Nora couldn't see what others were doing—that meant *they* couldn't see what *she* was doing. So Hugh comes back from lunch acting lovey-dovey with his wife, turning Nora's stomach. Kelly goes up to nap, Hugh goes down to steam, and Nora's left in the kitchen, her jealousy boiling as fiercely as her cow livers and turkey livers and pig livers. She traps Hugh in the sauna, maybe just to scare him, but waits too long before going back to set him free. He's dead. She unjams the door, figures she'd better let the sauna cool off before sending Chet for the wine. No wonder she waited until late afternoon.

That made sense—and if there was anyone I wanted to suspect more than Chet, it was Nora. He'd just been rude; she'd cooked the worst meals I'd ever eaten. But Kelly still made the best suspect: she'd napped after lunch, something she'd never done before. "A break in pattern," I remarked. "That can mean a lot."

"It can, sir," Bolt said readily. "I am grateful to the housekeeper for making us aware of it. Well! Here we are!"

Kelly's exercise area was loaded with state-of-the-art equipment, all bright green—custom-made, no doubt. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors covered three walls; smack in the middle of the fourth wall was the door to the sauna. I strolled over, looked through the steamed-up window, and nearly fell over.

It was like the photos the captain had shown us—a robed figure stretched out on the bench. Lord! I thought. Naughten's ghost! But no. His ghost wouldn't be this tall, this built—and it wouldn't wear a robe so short it barely covered the essentials.

I turned to Bolt, embarrassed about the ghost bit. "It's Chet," I said. "No matter how steamed-up the window is, there's no mistaking that body, that robe."

"Indeed," Bolt said. "No mistake is possible in this case."

I knocked politely. Chet turned over, scowled, got up and opened the door. "Why are you down *here?*" he demanded, pleasant as ever. "This floor doesn't need redecorating."

"Oh, probably not," I agreed. "But we're working on this visionary whole-type deal, and we gotta integrate our concepts, and—well. We gotta see the whole house. Have a nice steam?"

"It was okay." He toweled his hair. "Since her husband died, Kelly hasn't used the sauna at all. I might as well."

"You bet," I said. "And this exercise room shouldn't go unused—it's so big. Does it take up the whole basement?"

"No, there's the laundry, the furnace room, and a storeroom." He paused. "And the wine cellar."

"That's right—the wine cellar. Maybe we'll do something conceptual and creative with that. Could you show us around?"

He looked skeptical but led us through a storeroom full of cardboard boxes to a small room lined with wooden racks. I switched on the light, and Bolt peered at bottles.

"Fine vintages," he said. "Didn't you find Mr. Naughten when fetching wine for dinner? What was the selection that evening?"

Chet stared at him. "Champagne, not that it's any of your business. Kelly loves it, and Nora wanted white for the turkey."

So how did a smashed bottle of pinot noir end up on the sauna floor? What was this gardener up to? "That must've been a shock," I remarked. "Finding Mr. Naughten's body, I mean."

"Yeah, it was a bummer. He was an all-right guy." Chet yawned. "Well, guess I should go fertilize a tree or something."

After Bolt and I searched the sauna, I leaned against the treadmill and looked around. A real nice room—and Kelly had had it to herself every afternoon, with a wine cellar right next door. Maybe she hadn't jumped up and down as much as Nora thought. Maybe she'd sampled champagne from time to time.

I looked at Bolt significantly. "This would be a real good place to tie one on," I remarked.

Bolt nodded sharply. "An excellent observation, sir."

I thought so, too. After all, Kelly

had worked in nightclubs for years—heavy drinking practically came with the job. Maybe she'd picked up other bad habits, too—like cocaine. Maybe she hid her stuff here and sneaked down to—well, you know, sniff it, or snuff it, or snorkel it, or whatever that slang term is.

"And the storeroom—it's perfect for a stash," I said, still groping for the right word. "You could—well, you know, nose around plenty in there, and no one the wiser."

This time, Bolt didn't nod. He saluted. "I shall carry out your order at the earliest opportunity, sir."

Had I given an order? I must've missed that part. The point was, Bolt thought I was on the right track—and that track led to Kelly. If she'd needed drug money, no wonder she married a rich old guy—and no wonder she killed him once he made out his will. I could dream up motives for the others, but Kelly was the one who inherited bigtime when he died, the one who shed a husband over twice her age and moved on to a live-in boyfriend. I'd been shutting my eyes to the truth. I sighed as we walked to the pool. Sometimes I don't see the truth because I'm just too stupid; this time I hadn't seen it because I just hadn't wanted to.

"There's more than one kind of blindness," I confessed.

He gasped and stopped short. "Indeed, sir! Well! It's all falling into place, isn't it? Shall we approach Mrs. Naughten?"

Murderer or not, Kelly Naughten was a pleasure to approach. She sat in a deck chair, her long green robe loose around her shoulders. "Hello!" she said, pointing us to chairs on either side of her. "So, you've looked around? Do you have plans?"

"Lots." I squinted artistically. "We'll tell you after we integrate the vision, like, and conceptualize the whole."

It didn't sound as smooth as when Bolt had said it. But she bought it. "Oh, lovely. Hugh would be so pleased." She put on oversized sunglasses. "I miss Hugh. You know, I loved him more on the day he died than I did on the day I married him."

It sounded sweet, but I wasn't going to be blind any more. "Loved him more on the day he died than on the day you married him, huh?" I said skeptically. "That's really something."

She shrugged. "Not really. On the day I married him, I didn't love him at all."

That one got me. "You didn't? Why'd you marry him, then?"

She took off the sunglasses and looked at me, her eyes as verdant as dewy lawn clippings in a biodegradable bag. "Why, for the money. Why did you think?" She sighed. "Oh, I *liked* him. He was kind, and I enjoyed listening to him—I think art's interesting, don't you? So when he asked me to marry him, I said, 'Well, Hugh, I'd be a fool not to—but I don't love you.' "

I swallowed hard. "And he still wanted to marry you?"

"Of course. He didn't love me, either. But we got along, and he thought I'd liven the place up. So I said, 'Fine. As long as we under-

stand each other, let's get married. We'll have fun, I'll liven up the house, and I can use the security.' Exotic dancing isn't much of a life. I like this better."

"Who wouldn't?" I said. "And it looks like Mr. Naughten was real generous. That was some bracelet you had on last night."

She nodded. "Hugh gave me one just like it as a wedding present, only with rubies. But it wasn't right for me. He noticed I didn't wear it much and asked about it, and I admitted I like emeralds more. He rushed right out and got the emerald bracelet. So sweet." She sighed. "All I could afford for a wedding present was matching robes—red for him, green for me. Christmas colors, you know, since we met at a Christmas party."

It sounded genuine. Maybe she *hadn't* killed him. "It's rough," I said. "You'd counted on spending your life with him—"

"Not my *whole* life," she cut in. "I mean, he was older, and he had a bad heart—it would've been dumb to count on spending my *whole* life with him. And being a rich widow in ten, fifteen years, when I'm still young enough to have a whole *second* life with someone else—I could've handled that. But after we got married and I got to like him more—well, I wish we'd had more time together. *You* know how hard it is to lose a spouse, John."

"I do," I said fervently, thinking of Ellen in Bora Bora, of how cold this Saturday night would be. (That's honestly what I was thinking, Mother—be sure to tell Ellen that.) "Nothing beats being with someone you love. Once you find out how good that feels, it's hard to be alone again. It—well, it hurts."

She gave me a big smile. "But the hurt doesn't have to go on forever. Hugh found someone new—I bet you and I will, too."

She left to dress for lunch. How improper, I thought—a brand-new widow talking about finding someone new. And Kelly had *already* found someone new, found him before her husband died. That wasn't just improper. That was wrong. Of course she didn't realize Bolt and I knew about Chet, didn't realize that pretty soon everyone would know because it'd be in our report. "People think they can keep secrets forever," I said to Bolt. "But secrets don't keep that long. Sooner or later the truth comes out."

"It does," he agreed. "And it's odd how people labor to keep secrets even from those they love, even when their secrets aren't at all shameful. Well, sir! Shall we go in for lunch?"

I don't know what shocked me more—Bolt's idea that there's nothing shameful about adultery or his willingness to face that lunch. For the first time I wondered if he might not make such a great husband for you after all.

But this wasn't the time to confront him about it. We went in and saw Kelly forcing a purse into the arms of a head-shaking, downward-gazing Blanche.

"I had a *great* idea, John." Kelly beamed at me so brightly I eventually remembered I was supposed to be John. "You and Blanche can go to town and pick up—oh, carpet

samples, paint chips, like that. While you're out, you can have lunch—I'll treat. There's a new place called The Lamplight, and I hear it's divine."

The thick stench of liver potpourri permeated the room, clung to the curtains, deepened the grime on the windows. I wasn't nuts about trying to keep up a conversation with Blanche for hours. But I'd do anything to escape that liver.

"Terrific idea," I said, and cast one pitying glance at Bolt, condemned to liver potpourri while I got off easy. But he smiled smugly, almost like this were part of some plan.

It was a rough afternoon. When we went to paint stores and carpet stores, Blanche barely glanced at stuff, never said more than "I guess." I had to decide which samples to take, and I'm lousy at that. As for lunch, The Lamplight is fancy and romantic, dusky even at noon—I can't wait to take Ellen—and the food's flat-out fantastic. But I couldn't get anything but mumbles out of Blanche; I had to lean clear across the table to hear her.

The worst moment came during dessert. Mid-mumble, I looked up to see Freddy Barnes, the desk sergeant, standing not two feet away, gaping. He started to come over, but I made a frantic go-away gesture—I couldn't have him calling me Walt, blowing my cover. His eyebrows twitched first, then his mouth, then his shoulders, then his whole spine. He turned and walked away.

Rats, I thought. Freddy Barnes, the fastest gossip on the force—why'd he have to see me having what looked like an intimate lunch with a woman he knew damn well wasn't my wife? Well, I'd have a lot of counter-gossip to do come Monday.

By the time Blanche and I got back to the house, the liver fumes had cleared. We found Kelly and Bolt in the living room, him sketching and her bouncing.

"Blanche, John, come here!" Kelly cried. "Bolt has amazing ideas! I asked what to do about this yucky carpet, and he said rip it out—but don't buy a new one. Instead, buy thousands of tiny, shiny tiles. He's going to turn the floor into a huge *mosaic*—giant sunflowers, enormous butterflies! And the whole west wall will be a built-in aquarium with sweet little fishes, and he'll replace the east wall with *humongous* picture windows! The room will look like an absolute *meadow!* Isn't that fabulous?"

"It's okay," I said, a little hurt Bolt had conceptualized without me. "But we picked out all these carpet samples—"

"Oh, we'll carpet other rooms," she said graciously, looking through the samples. I'd picked out lots of pinks, figuring she's a girl, she'd like pink. She put the samples down. "Or maybe we'll tile everything. Shall we get dressed for dinner?"

"I can report progress, sir," Bolt whispered, slipping into lavender slacks. "Mrs. Naughten swam all afternoon, Nora cooked, Chet pruned—I had no difficulty carrying out your orders. All was just as you thought. And with a camera

from Mr. Naughten's studio, I secured documentary evidence. What is our next step?"

How the hell should I know? I didn't have a clue about what steps he'd already taken. And I felt miffed that he'd practically redesigned the house without asking my opinion and that Kelly didn't like my samples. "You don't need *me* to tell you the next step," I said, pouting. "I mean, maybe *some* people thought you'd wait before talking about ripping out the old and bringing in the new, but you just plunged ahead. I bet you could come back first thing Monday, do the whole job single-handed. Why not tell Kelly that? And me—I'll stand by and watch, not say a word."

I'd laid it on pretty thick; I expected him to apologize. He chuckled. "That *should* stir things up. And you'll stand by and watch—brilliant. We may well conclude this case tonight." That didn't make sense—and neither, if you ask me, did turning a living room wall into an aquarium. But I just shrugged Bolt off, shrugged my beige jacket on, and led the way down.

Dinner was a parade of horrors, from the romaine *au gratin* to the mocha pasta *flambé* to the *boeuf jerky bourguignon*. When Nora served the *escargot à la mode*, Bolt made his announcement.

"Mr. Thomas and I had a talk." He winked at me, prying charred pasta from between his teeth. "He says we can begin work Monday morning. We'll need room for our paints and such—perhaps the storeroom in the basement. May we clear that out tomorrow?"

"Perfect," Kelly agreed. "Chet can carry the boxes up. I'll love the chance to sort through them. I've got *crates* of old costumes—*perfect* for Goodwill. Nora and Blanche have lots of junk down there, too—won't it feel good to unload some, Nora?"

Nora glared at her. "I own no junk. I own only good stuff. I unload nothing. No one must touch my boxes!"

"Fine," Kelly said hastily. "But Blanche and I will have fun going through *our* stuff. Well! Time for bed?"

As soon as we got upstairs, Bolt turned to me with an eager whisper. "Now for the next part of your plan—standing by, watching, not saying a word. Do you prefer up or down?"

Up or down what? Well, you always told me to be optimistic. "Up?" I guessed.

"Then I shall go down," he said, "and take the camera with me. If I may make a suggestion, I noticed a large linen closet across from Mrs. Naughten's room. Till we meet again, sir!"

He sped off, not dropping even one more hint about what I was supposed to do. He'd mentioned watching, he'd mentioned the closet—should I hide in the closet, wait to see what Kelly would do? Hell, we knew what she'd do—we saw her sneak out to Chet's cottage last night. But if Bolt wanted me to see it again, fine. I slid into the closet, keeping the door open a crack.

Maybe two hours later Kelly's door creaked open. Wrapped in her long green robe, she paused in the

doorway, glanced around, then headed for the stairs. I counted to ten and sneaked after her. Generally I sneak well; I would've done fine if it hadn't been for the carpet bump on the last step. But the bump rammed my big toe, and I fell hard, landing facedown.

"Ouch," I admitted. Kelly, halfway to the dining room, turned around, spotted me, and smiled.

"I know what *you* want," she said, her voice deep and tender. "I want it, too. Come, John. We'll go to Chet's cottage. I promise you won't be disappointed. Chet does it *just* right."

I've been a cop a long time. I don't shock easy. But that shocked me from the top of my spinning head to the tip of my still-stinging big toe. I tried to get up, made it to my knees, and sagged. How far did this undercover bit oblige a cop to go?

Just then Chet appeared at the far end of the living room. "You're late," he said. "And what's *he* doing here?"

"I invited him to join us," Kelly said. "After all, you've got *plenty* to go around. And I'd like to have John on our side."

Before I could faint, the place was flooded with light from above. I shifted on my knees and looked up to see Nora standing at the top of the stairs, her hand on the light switch.

"At last!" she cried. "For long time I suspect, I know, but I have no proof. Now, degenerate people, I catch you in act!"

That's when Blanche also appeared at the top of the stairs. "What's going on?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. "I was sound asleep, I heard shouting, and—oh, my! What *is* all this?"

Damned if I could tell her. Bolt, though—Bolt could always explain things. And he was down—he'd said he was going down. Still on my knees I gazed at the floor. "Bolt!" I bellowed.

But Bolt wasn't down. He was up, behind Nora and Blanche, looking grim but satisfied. "I have it, sir," he said, holding up the camera. "All is just as you suspected. Is it time to reveal our identities—to show our true colors, so to speak?"

Well, after he'd said that much, there wasn't any point in being coy. I made it to my feet and looked straight at Kelly. "We aren't decorators, Mrs. Naughten," I said. "We're cops. We came in undercover to investigate your husband's death."

Those gorgeous green eyes opened as wide as sliced kiwis. "But it's already *been* investigated. It was an accident."

"Evidently not," Bolt said, flatly. "Evidently, it was murder. Would you like them all to gather in Mrs. Naughten's room, lieutenant, so you can unveil your deductions?"

What deductions? At such moments, I've found, there's just one thing to do. Stall. "Sure," I said. "Let's go to her room."

It took some persuading to get them all up there—Kelly perched on the edge of her bed, Blanche half hidden behind tall plants in a corner, Chet standing by the window with arms folded, Nora standing by the closet across from him with chin stuck out. I glanced at Bolt,

hoping he'd start things off. He just winked.

I cleared my throat. "Well, Kelly —Mrs. Naughten—we're here to find out if someone trapped your husband in the sauna—"

"How?" Chet demanded. "That door doesn't even have a lock, just a handle. How could you trap anyone in there?"

Frankly, I'd never given it any hard thought—I'd just more or less assumed it could be done. When you got down to how, it did seem unlikely. "It's a stretch," I admitted.

"A stretch of precisely eight feet, four inches," Bolt supplied. "That's the distance from the door to the treadmill. As the lieutenant observed while leaning against that heavy piece of equipment this morning, it is a perfect place to 'tie one on.' Affix one end of a stout rope to the door handle, the other end to the treadmill, stretch it taut, and Mr. Naughten could not pull the door in to open it. But the rope was not tied. It was hooked—even better for speedy execution, speedy escape. Look."

He pointed to Kelly's chartreuse laundry hamper, and I opened the ruffled lid. There it was, coiled like a metal-mouthed snake—a long, thick rope with heavy, latched chain hooks tied to both ends. Slowly I lifted the thing up.

Kelly gasped. "I've never seen that rope before! *You* put it there! You're trying to frame me!"

"Better call a lawyer before you say more," I said sadly. "We know you sneaked out to Chet's cottage at night. There was something going on between you two—"

"Or as the lieutenant so aptly put it," Bolt cut in, "there was 'something cooking' in that cottage. Was there not?"

"There *was!*" Nora said, purpling. "*Gardener* was cooking! Tonight is first time I catch them, but for long time I know he was cooking. And she was sneaking to meet him—for snacks!"

Talk about naive, I thought, smiling. If Nora honestly thought that was why Kelly went to that cottage—

"It's true," Kelly sobbed. "I did it. Night after night Chet and I did it together. Tonight, when John came downstairs, I thought he wanted to do it with us. I thought he wanted to—to snack with us. I never meant to hurt you, Nora, but—"

"But your cooking stinks," Chet said matter-of-factly. "That's why Kelly brought me in."

Sure that's why, I thought. "So you're a master cook, huh?" I said sarcastically. "I thought you were a bouncer."

"He's both," Kelly said. "Chet cooked at the club whenever the chef got beat up—it happened lots. The chef was a lousy cook, too; customers didn't like him. Hugh wanted to entertain and Chet wanted to cook professionally, so I hired Chet as gardener, promising he'd be our cook soon. But Hugh was so loyal to Nora that I couldn't tell him right away. Chet had to live a lie."

Bolt nodded. I staggered. Was he actually buying this? "He lived a lie, indeed," Bolt said. "Making token gestures at gardening, stealing nutmeg, preparing your midnight snacks on the sly. But the

deception was to end, was it not, on the night of your six-month anniversary? Hence the beef Wellington in the cottage freezer, the broken bottle of pinot noir in the sauna."

Kelly nodded. "Chet makes beef Wellington to die for. And Nora's turkey tartare, her pretzel-and-gherkin stuffing—we knew Hugh would be hungry. So I planned to take him to Chet's cottage for midnight dinner, and we'd get him to make Chet his cook. It's not that I don't like you, Nora. I mean, I don't, but the point is we needed a good cook to do what Hugh wanted to do —throw big parties, bring lots of young people to the house."

Sure. That's what all older husbands want to do—bring young people into their homes to make passes at their wives. Maybe Naughten agreed to parties—Nora had said he'd talked about it the night before he died—but Kelly must've bullied him into it. Maybe he'd changed his mind later, and that's why she killed him.

"A change can be hard to take," I said. "You think things will be one way, you find out they'll be another way—the thought of it can make you sick." I imagined how mad Kelly must've been when Hugh reversed his decision. "And if Hugh's resolution—"

Bolt tapped my shoulder. "I believe the wording is 'Thus the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.' An apt allusion to *Hamlet*. Change *is* hard to take. Thus, as the melancholy Dane observes, we 'rather bear those ills we have/Than fly to others that we know not of.' Many cling to the life they know—however empty it may be—rather than risk change. For them, talk of change creates jealousy—and that, as you said this morning, can be powerful, can lead to mistakes. No wonder Mr. Naughten's talk of making changes led to his death."

I blinked. If Naughten's talk of changes led to his death, not a later reversal—wow. But we'd found the rope in Kelly's laundry hamper; that made her the killer. I hated to embarrass Bolt by reminding him. "Hamper," I whispered. "Important."

"Indeed," he said. "There *have* been important attempts to hamper the investigation, from the bracelet planted by the sauna door to the rope hidden in the storeroom. That room is, as you said, perfect for a stash—why risk carrying an eight foot rope upstairs, when it could be stashed in a storage box? So, acting on your orders, I nosed around, found the rope, photographed it, then said I'd clear out the storeroom tomorrow. As you foresaw, that made the murderer move the rope. And since you decided we'd stand by and watch tonight, you can testify that Mrs. Naughten stayed innocently in her room until she went to meet Chet. And I, down by the storeroom, captured all the murderer's actions on film. Did you want to say a bit more about motive now?"

Good idea except that I didn't know more about motive, not a bit. What had Bolt said? Something about not wanting change even when your life is empty, something

about jealousy. Of course—Nora. Her life was plenty empty—no family, no house of her own, cooking food nobody wanted to eat—but it was all she had. And if she figured Naughten would want a better cook for his parties, she'd feel plenty jealous. I've got it, I thought. Sometimes you just know you can't be wrong. I looked at Bolt smugly.

"Sometimes," I said, "mistakes just aren't possible."

"I remember, sir," he said. "You said that when you looked through the sauna window and saw Chet—'there's no mistaking that body, that robe.' At other times, however, mistakes are possible. Thus the murderer looked through the sauna window last Friday, mistook Mr. Naughten for his wife, and killed the wrong person."

Mistake an old man for a voluptuous young woman? How? But wait a minute. Kelly wasn't voluptuous. She was slender; Hugh was slim. They were about the same height, they both had shoulder-length fair hair—and Kelly always took a steam after lunch. Hugh never did till that day. Someone who expected to see Kelly in the sauna and glanced through a steamed-up window *might* make a fatal mistake.

No. Wait another minute. "There's no mistaking *that* body, *that* robe"—that's what I'd said. Maybe you *could* mistake Hugh Naughten's body for Kelly's. But mistake his robe for hers? No way. "His robe was red," I said. "Hers is green. You couldn't make a mistake about that—not unless you were blind."

"Indeed not, sir," Bolt said, nodding. "And as you remarked this morning, there's more than one kind of blindness."

Yeah, I'd said that; I was talking about how I'd tried to blind myself to Kelly's guilt. Was Bolt being blind now? The basic facts were simple—old husband, young wife, sexy gardener. "This is a pretty black and white case," I told Bolt severely.

He winked. "And red and green. Well put. The colorful compositions Naughten painted when his first wife was alive, the black and white pieces after her death, his decision to return to color now that he had a new wife to guide him—how clear it is! Yet how hard he worked to hide his secret though there was nothing shameful about it. I think of your remark, sir, about how people can't keep their secrets forever. Mr. Naughten couldn't have kept his much longer. He'd already made mistakes—such as buying that ruby bracelet."

"I never said the bracelet was a mistake," Kelly said, confused. "It's pretty, but red makes me look washed out."

"With your coloring, of course it does," Bolt agreed. "Did you never ask yourself, Mrs. Naughten, how your husband could fail to notice your obvious preference for green?"

She had an obvious preference? I thought of the pink carpet samples I brought her, of how quickly she pushed them aside. "I guess some people can't see the obvious," I said, blushing.

"No, they can't," Bolt said, smiling. "Not if they're color-blind. More

than one kind of blindness,' indeed! How quickly, how surely, you found out Mr. Naughten's long-kept secret!"

What? Hugh Naughten, color-blind? I felt like gasping.

Kelly *did* gasp. She's not supposed to be a brilliant detective—she can afford to gasp. "Hugh was color-blind?" she said. "I don't believe it. Why didn't he ever tell me?"

"Misplaced pride," Bolt said. "How painful for an artist to admit that he relied on his first wife to advise him on color, that his turn to black and white after her death was dictated by necessity, not creative choice! But he might not have been wholly color-blind. He might simply have been unable to distinguish between red and green—the most common form of color blindness. His longtime housekeeper should be able to tell us."

It was a shock to see Nora get so shy so suddenly. She stared at her large, bunny-slippered feet. "Mr. Naughten said nothing of that to *me*. And it was not my place to question. When he spread mint jelly on peanut butter sandwiches, when he ate grape jelly with lamb —I do not ask. I just take notes, create new recipes."

So Naughten had been partly to blame for Nora's cooking. But who killed him? We were almost out of suspects—but not quite. I looked at Blanche, shrinking deeper into the corner.

Could she have killed her own father? Maybe. Maybe she'd never really felt close to anyone except her mother. I thought of the photos of Naughten and his first wife. He'd always been focused on painting; it was the mother who'd always held Blanche in her arms. "The mother was the carrier," I remarked to Bolt.

"She must have been," Bolt agreed. "Color blindness is a recessive trait, carried on the X chromosome, and thus far more common among boys than among girls. If a boy's one X chromosome is defective, there is no normal gene on his poor Y chromosome to counteract it. A girl cannot be color-blind unless both X chromosomes are defective—unless, that is, her father is color-blind, and her mother is either color-blind or a carrier. But your mother was not color-blind, was she, Miss Naughten?"

Blanche shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about. Nobody in our family was—is—color-blind."

Deliberately Bolt picked up the rope and held out one of the latched chain hooks. It bore a bright green mark—paint from Kelly's custom-made treadmill, no doubt. It must have scraped off when Hugh Naughten was tugging desperately on the sauna door.

"What could this mark be, Miss Naughten?" Bolt asked.

She squinted, panic clear in her eyes. "Blood?"

Now I caught on. "Not unless the victim was Mr. Spock," I said. "Blood is red, Blanche—that mark is green. You can't see the difference—you're color-blind like your father. That's why you killed him. You looked through the sauna window, you saw a thin figure in a robe, you had no way of knowing the robe was red. But when you went to get

the rope and make it look like an accident, you saw your mistake. You turned down the controls—"

"But not far enough," Bolt cut in, "since you couldn't see the boundary between the green 'safe' zone and the red 'caution' zone. Then, to frame your stepmother, you ran to her room and took what you thought was her favorite bracelet. You can't distinguish between rubies and emeralds, can you?"

"I can," Blanche insisted. "And I never went near the sauna that day. I was in the kitchen, helping Nora fix dinner."

Bolt looked at me. "A break in pattern—as you said, that can mean a lot. Nora said Blanche never helped in the kitchen—until the day she needed an alibi. Little short of murder could have pried her from her room. She felt safest there, with her magazines and computer games, her old photos and faded posters. No wonder her father's talk of parties made her panic, made her resolve to kill the woman behind the changes he planned."

Tears welled up in Kelly's eyes, like raindrops oozing out of limpid pools of lime jello. "The changes were for *your* sake, Blanche. That's the main reason Hugh married me—to liven the house up for you, get you to meet people. He'd realized how his seclusion had hurt you, kept you from realizing your dreams—"

"That's the impression she created," Bolt agreed. "As the lieutenant said, it was smart of her to imply her father had held her back. But it was your fear of life that held you back, Miss Naughten, your fear of men—fear visible whenever your stepmother tried to get you to look at the lieutenant. As for your dreams of solitary travel, of arguing before the Supreme Court—who could imagine you could do such things, or *want* to do them?"

"I *could* have done them." Suddenly Blanche stepped out of her corner. "But Daddy needed me. He didn't always know it—he'd say, 'Go to college out of town, Blanche. Meet boys'—but I knew he needed me. I took *care* of him, I *sacrificed*—until *she* wiggled into his heart, and ruined my life, and—oh! I can't *stand* it!" She bounced twice on the emerald-ruffled bed, landed squarely on top of Kelly. I charged after her, tripped on a ruffle, hit my head on a canopy post, blacked out, and woke to find myself lying on the bed next to Kelly, who'd been half strangled before Bolt pried Blanche's fingers from her throat.

Bolt had put us both on the bed while Nora held Blanche down and Chet called 911. That rat from the *Tattler* learned about the call even before the paramedics—he must've paid off someone on the force—and burst in with his camera just as Kelly started to come to, draped an arm around me, and said, "Hugh?"

So that's how those pictures of us in bed ended up in the tabloids. Kelly was only trying to help when she told reporters she wasn't in love with me, she'd just been in bed with me that night; in fact, I'd said I was separated from my wife, so she was trying to match me up with her stepdaughter. And when that idiot sergeant, Freddy Barnes, told the *Tattler* about my lunch with

Blanche, it all escalated. Those headlines—TWO-TIMING DETECTIVE CAUGHT IN REAL FAMILY AFFAIR, MARRIED COP GOES DEEP UNDERCOVER WITH BOTH KILLER AND STEPMOM—I can imagine what Ellen thinks.

Anyway, Kelly hired a squad of lawyers, but Blanche sent them away, saying she'd argue her own case, take it to the Supreme Court. As for Chet, the cooking channel went nuts for the whole culinary aspect of the case, gave him his own show. He made Nora his co-star, calls the show *If I Can Teach* Her *to Cook, I Can Teach You*—not concise, but catchy.

I went to rehearsal today, and Chet and I had a talk over lunch—he does make beef Wellington to die for. He said he and Kelly are just pals: she's a straight arrow, never messes around. Besides, he said, he prefers a woman who looks substantial enough to prove she appreciates his cooking—and with that he cast a lusty glance at Nora. There couldn't be anything between those two, could there? I mean, it wouldn't make sense—would it?

So tell Ellen that no matter what the papers say, I never had a thing for either the killer or the stepmom. As far as I'm concerned, Ellen's prettier than Kelly, a better cook than Chet. Of course I wouldn't mind if she caught his show, learned to make beef Wellington—you might slide that suggestion in while you're assuring Ellen she has the undying, undivided devotion of

Your loving son,
Walt

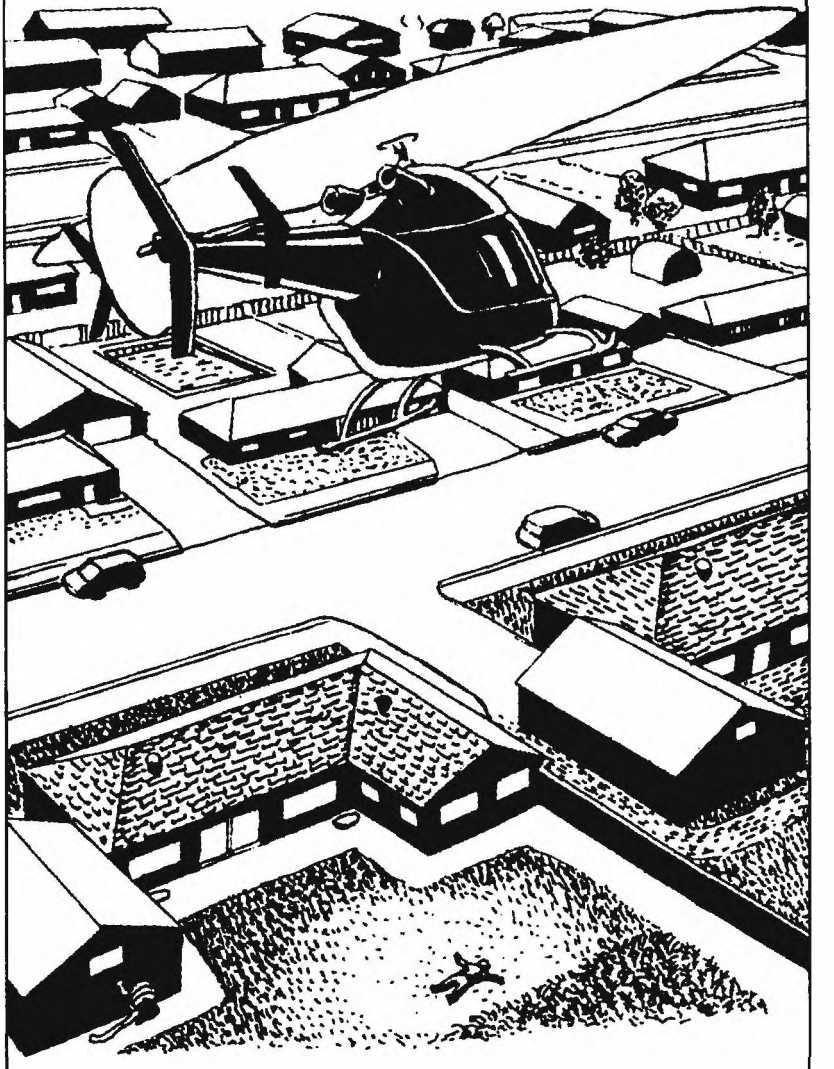
Dear Walt,

We heard the story long ago—Bora Bora *does* get CNN—and the only thing that worried Ellen was your collision with the canopy post: She saw you on TV, thought you sounded incoherent, and was afraid you'd had a concussion. Once I'd convinced her you weren't any more incoherent than usual, she was fine. She never doubted your love—or Mrs. Naughten's love for her husband. Ellen says sometimes there's no explaining a wife's love for her husband. Sometimes, she says, it doesn't seem to make sense, but when you get down to it, love always makes sense. The thing that really doesn't make sense, she says, is being too scared or selfish to risk love at all. She says not caring about anyone but yourself might seem safest—but really, it's the riskiest thing you can do.

Our work here is almost finished. We can't wait to get home. And please, the next time you see Sergeant Bolt, give him the kindest regards—the very, *very* kindest regards—from

Your loving,
Mother

RED ON YELLOW, DEADLY FELLOW



William Hallstead

Illustration by David Fielding

"Malabar Four, are you on the east end of the island?"

"Ten four, Dispatch."

"We have a report of a man down in the back yard at 936 Kudzu Lane. Check it out, Collins."

"Will do."

All of that Malabar Island Detective Kat Curtci picked up on her radio as she drove toward the east end's Sporty Sand Dollar shop. A little morning-off browsing was not likely now.

"Curtci also responding," she said into the two-way radio she always carried with her—and always had on. Couldn't break the habit even on a day off. Thus, two side streets later, she swung her five-year-old Pontiac onto Kudzu. First on the scene, she noted with satisfaction. Corporal Carleton Collins—"Three Cees" to everyone on the force—was nowhere in sight.

Kat trotted to the rear lawn and crouched to take a prelim scan of the supine figure that was indeed back here. And alone. Not another soul in sight.

Male Caucasian, probably in his sixties, stocky build, balding. And flat on his back. Khaki slacks, white golf shirt, thong sandals, no socks. No pulse, either.

She heard a car pull into the gravel drive out front. A long moment later, Three Cees pounded around the end of the one story ground-level stucco house and stood behind her, not even breathing hard.

"Yo, Kat." Beneath his tailored uniform shirt, his abs rippled. "What've we got?"

"What you see is what we got. Not another soul around. Who called this in?"

"Dispatch says it came from the medevac 'copter on its way to a problem on the beach. Happened to spot this guy as they flew over."

"Heard you chiming at the front door. Nobody home?"

"Nobody answered." Three Cees bent over the body. "Heart attack?"

"Seems likely. He got a wallet?"

"Yep." He lifted the body enough to extract a slim fake alligator-hide billfold. "Harold Wharton," he read from the driver's license. "This address."

"Any medical emergency card?"

"Nope. Couple of credit cards, and forty bucks' cash."

Kat surveyed the stand of ferns between the lawn and the scarlet blaze of bougainvillea hedge along the back lot line and halfway down the sides. No wonder no one at ground level saw him back here.

"Weeder." Three Cees pointed at a pronged hand tool just inside the ferns. "So here he was, out in the Southwest Florida sun, no hat on that bald head, and down he went."

Three Cees stood beside her, impressive chest thrust out, shoulders in a near-military brace. As tall as he could manage, Kat noticed. But he still came up inches shorter than her five eleven.

"All that shrubbery." She peered at the body again. "What's that?" She hunkered back down to study the splayed feet. "Check this, Three Cees." The twin punctures were just below the left ankle joint about a quarter inch apart.

"Fire ants?" Three Cees said.

"More like a snakebite."

"I don't want to hear that." Three Cees scanned the ferns like a man besieged. "I hate—yiii!"

Kat sprang to her feet. "What in the world—"

"Snake! Snake!" Three Cees leaped backward from the ferns, thrusting out a shaky finger. "In there!"

Kat peered into the fronds. Sure enough, a snake, a pretty one. Banded in red, yellow, and black.

Red on yellow, deadly fellow. And the thing had a black nose.

"Coral snake, Three Cees. But it's dead. Looks like its head's been stepped on."

"So it's not a heart attack. Poor bastard is doing some weeding, the snake nails his bare ankle, and down he goes."

"A possibility."

"A possibility? The evidence is staring right at you, detective."

She glanced at Three Cees, who wore a little grin. So, okay, he'd said that tongue-in-cheek. She was touchy about challenges to her status and had verbally flattened a couple of the department's macho-mouths.

"Since it could be an accidental death instead of natural causes, the medical examiner gets in on it. Put in a call to Doc Hewlett, Three Cees, while I do a neighborhood check. Then stay with the body."

A glance along the street told Kat that almost all the neighbors were winter residents, and this was summer. The piling house directly across the street had its hurricane shutters in place as did the ground levels on either side of 936. Diagonally across to the right, though, the windows were naked, and the garage door was up, the rear of a car visible inside. Taking her badge and I.D. card out of her handbag, she strode across the hot macadam.

As she crunched into the gravel drive, she heard the clang of a hood slamming down. Seconds later a middle-aged Charlton Heston type emerged in grimy T-shirt and khakis, wiping his hands on a yellow polka dot rag. He was wonderfully tall . . .

"Good morning, sir." Kat held up her badge. "Detective Curtci."

"You're here about the swimming pool truck—" He peered at the cars in the driveway at 936; her red Pontiac and Three Cees' patrol unit. "What's the problem over there?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Wharton's had an accident. No one answers the door. I wondered if you might—"

"Harry? What happened to Harry? Can I help?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. . . ."

"Palmer. Ed Palmer."

"Mr. Wharton is dead, sir. In his back yard."

"Dead?" Palmer was visibly stunned. "What the hell happened?"

"It might have been his heart. He lived with his wife?"

"Yes. Thelma. She and Essie—that's my wife—are out shopping. Left a couple of hours ago. They should be—Lord, now what!"

Siren screeching, an orange and white EMS ambulance rocked into Kudzu Lane and scruffed to a stop at 936.

"I'd better get over there, Mr. Palmer. Here's my card. Please

have Mrs. Wharton call me as soon as she and your wife get back." Halfway down the drive she turned back. "What was that about a swimming pool truck?"

"Oh, a pool maintenance truck was parked for a while at the Kirshners', right across the street. Around seven. I thought that was rather odd, so I called the police."

"Well, I do see a pool enclosure behind the house."

"There was a pool there, but last year Si Kirshner filled it in after their daughter nearly drowned in it. Now it's a jumbo-sized planter. Anyway, the guy left just after I called you people."

"Apparently that call got lost in the excitement. Thanks for your help, and make sure Mrs. Wharton calls me."

She loped over to 936, thumbed back a stray lock of raven hair, and tore into Three Cees.

"You were supposed to call the M.E., not the paramedics. They've got more to do than check out bodies. That's a job for—"

"He didn't call us, ma'am," said a youthful voice behind her. "The medevac pilot did. Might as well take a look while we're here."

"Don't you disturb anything," Kat warned.

The young paramedic—were they taking them right out of high school now?—eyed her badge.

"Wouldn't think of it, ma'am."

"Detective Curtci."

"Oh, sure. Heard you solved that so-called suicide a couple of months ago. Good show."

Well, maybe he wasn't such a green kid.

"You on the case here?" he asked.

"I'm not sure it *is* a case—" she peered at his nametag "—Richard. You'll have to excuse me. I've still got some checking to do."

The other nearby neighbors still in residence—the Syzmanskis, two doors down from the Palmers, and the Markesons, two houses up on the Whartons' side—had heard or seen nothing at all.

"Oh, except," said iron-haired and pillowy Anna Markeson, "I heard a car or truck go by just after I woke up. Around seven. On this dead-end street this time of year there's never any traffic that early."

That by itself was no lead at all, but there was the matter of the truck at number 938. Dispatch might've forgotten it but she hadn't. She strode back across the street.

"Sorry to bother you again, Mr. Palmer, but could you describe that pool maintenance truck?"

Ed Palmer, having once more emerged from his garage mopping his greasy hands with his polka dot rag, squinted down his Hestonlike nose at her. He had to be six four at least. Some women have all the luck.

"Consider this the response to your truck call, Mr. Palmer. Can you describe it?" She realized she was here maybe sixty percent because of the truck and forty percent because . . . because Charlton Palmer here had really blue eyes? God, how unprofessional!

"It was white, more like an SUV than a truck now that I think about it. Had the name of a pool maintenance company on the door."

"License number?"

"Sorry. Probably Florida or I might have noticed."

"And it was there in the driveway for how long?"

"I don't know. Essie and I were having breakfast. I just happened to look out when I heard the door slam."

"Did you see anybody walking around over there?"

Palmer flicked his rag at a curious yellow jacket. "Not when I was watching. It just pulled out and left."

"Did you see the driver?"

"A man."

"That's it?"

"I'm afraid so, detective. Now that I've been questioned, I realize how dumb it was to report it. Or try to. A new pool man lost and just using the drive to turn around. Or one given the wrong address."

No reasonable way to linger with the compelling Mr. Palmer-Heston. "If you think of anything more, please give me a call," she said in resignation. And she left, chiding herself for conduct unbecoming a detective. A really tall one who was dateless a lot more than dated. Oh, get a grip, Curtci. The man was married. Probably loved his damned car more than Essie.

"Don't you have something better to do?" Sergeant Ellis "Moby" Duckworth twitted her when she walked into the squad room. He hunched forward in his squeaky swivel chair, plunked his elbows on his desk, and rested his chin on tented fingers. "This is supposed to be your day off."

"Tell me about coral snakes, Moby."

"You taking up nature study?"

Closing in on retirement, Moby had given up on his waistline. He had slowed down to mostly deskwork—which he detested. Rode as a partner with Kat when he could get away from paper-pushing, but he let her take the wheel and the initiative. She could never quite decide whether he had lost his edge or was slyly helping her develop hers. What he did constantly hone was an encyclopedic knowledge of Malabar Island.

"I'm taking up coral snakes short-term. Found one near this morning's body, which had what looked like a fang wound on the left ankle."

"Well now." Moby sank back in his chair. "Prettiest snake there is, with those red, black, and yellow bands. Confused a lot with the scarlet king snake and the Florida scarlet. But your coral has a black nose and 'red on yellow—' "

" '—deadly fellow.' "

"Yep. He's in the cobra family. Same kind of venom. Not much of it, though. Your corals usually aren't more'n two, two and a half feet long. Odd thing is, they don't seem to know the punch they've got. Usually come out at night, and without much of a temper. I watched a guy over at the Snaketorium pick one up and play with it for ten minutes, no gloves, no problem. Your guy must have really agitated the one that got him."

"Could have. He was working with a weeder."

"Maybe dug the coral out of a sound sleep."

"How long does it take for the venom to act?"

"It's not right away. Can take up to an hour."

She pondered. "Something's wrong. Why didn't he go for help?"

"Maybe he didn't know he was snakebit. Fangs aren't more'n pinpricks. Could've thought it was a fire ant and shrugged it off."

"But the snake was dead. Its head was crushed."

Moby shrugged. "Stepped on it after it got him?"

"Then he stayed there, knowing he'd been bitten? Come on, Mobe."

"Stepped on it by mistake?"

"Huh!"

"You're trying too hard, lady."

"Don't call me that. I hate it!"

Moby grinned. "You're trying to make a case against a dead snake, Kat. Let it lie."

Kat's response was cut off by her phone. Thelma Wharton.

"Ed Palmer told me to call you. Oh God, this is just awful! Terrible! I can't believe it!" She choked back a sob. "To get home to find poor Harry gone. Ed told me it was a heart attack. Nobody called 911? Why didn't somebody call—"

"Mrs. Wharton—"

"Why didn't anybody—"

"Mrs. Wharton, listen to me. No one could see him back there—not until the medevac helicopter flew over. They did what they could. Notified us, called the EMS people. We all got there as soon as we could. But I'm afraid he was already gone."

A long sigh at the other end. "Well, I guess it was going to happen sooner or later."

"Is there someone there to, uh, be with you, Mrs. Wharton?"

"There's Essie Palmer and Ed, of course. They're here now. The medical examiner took him. Does that mean an . . . an autopsy?"

"What might have been an accidental death requires an autopsy, Mrs. Wharton. We found a coral snake nearby, a dead one. And what looked like fang marks on your husband's ankle."

"Oh my stars! I knew there were snakes in our ferns, but I never dreamed there might be poisonous snakes back there. How dreadful!"

"It could have been a heart attack, Mrs. Wharton." As if that would make the poor woman feel better about it. "We're just being thorough."

"Well, I hate to think of poor Harry all . . . I just hate to think of it. Harry wanted to be cremated. When might I be able to—"

"That's up to the medical examiner. If you don't hear from him soon, I can follow up for you."

"That's very considerate of you, detective. Thank you."

Kat hung up and turned to Moby. "In three minutes Thelma Wharton went from near hysteria to calm courtesy, Mobe."

"Quit looking for an answer when we already have one. Four little words."

"Four little words?"

"The snake did it."

The next morning before she had a chance to stir her squad room coffee, Doc Hewlett called. "Toss-up," he told her. "Could have been the venom, but it's kind of unusual for a coral snake to drop an adult on the spot."

"If he knew he was bitten."

"A coral snake attack isn't like a rattlesnake jab, Kat. Your coral hangs on and chomps for a while."

"Well, he certainly would have felt *that.*"

"Yeah, except that he'd had a pretty stiff dose of barbiturate. Enough, I estimate, to discourage weeding in the hot sun."

"Barbiturate?" Her brain shifted into high. "Enough to knock him down?"

"I'd say so."

"How long was he dead before we found him?"

Hewlett snorted. "Body temp is no help in ninety degree sunlight. But the pooling of his blood—the lividity—makes four, five hours a fair guess."

That would put Harry Wharton down around seven or so.

"The lividity was consistent with the position we found him in?"

"On his back, yes. And that wraps up my prelim. I'll be in touch if anything else—oh, almost forgot. Quite a coincidence. A coral snake nailed your guy yesterday, and yesterday morning another guy shows up at Healthcenter with a coral-snake bite. They're pretty rare, but there were two of them the same day."

She heard a clatter in the background. "Oops, there's an incoming," Hewlett said. "Gotta go. See you soon."

Oh, I hope not, she muttered to herself. Two coral-snake bites yesterday morning?

"Moby, I'm off across the causeway to Healthcenter."

"You sick?"

"I think I've got fang fever."

"Take an aspirin," he muttered without looking up. "I'm telling you, the snake did it."

"Ronald Gilroy was kept overnight for observation, then discharged this morning." The vastly overweight E.R. receptionist looked up from her computer. "It was a snakebite on the wrist, but apparently he didn't get much venom."

"Did Gilroy say how he happened to be bitten?" Kat asked.

"No record in the computer."

"Address?"

"Four forty-one East Ibis. That's here in Fort Bristol."

It was indeed, in a little residential development a block east of U.S. 41, wedged between a used car dealer's vast, balloon-festooned lot and a cramped industrial park. The houses were identical one story stucco ranches with single-car garages. Today was Saturday, but number 441 looked closed up tight. Kat pulled into the short concrete driveway, radioed Malabar Dispatch where she was, and crunched along the gravel walk to the door. The plastic doorbell button had yellowed with age. Its chime was standard ding-dong.

Footsteps. Then the door creaked open on an irritated man in his fifties built heavy with short-cropped dark hair. He wore rumpled olive slacks and a sweatstained green tank top.

"Ronald Gilroy?"

"Yeah." His little eyes squinted against the sun's glare. "Who're you?"

"Detective Curtci, Malabar Island Police." She offered her badge.

If that shook him, she couldn't see any change behind his leathery tan.

"Kinda out of your jurisdiction, aren't you?"

"I'm investigating an incident that took place on the island."

"An incident?"

"You live alone here?"

"Just me and my problems."

"What happened to your wrist, Mr. Gilroy?" She nodded at the Band-Aid.

"Little gardening accident."

"A snakebite."

His mouth tightened in disapproval. "You been checking up on me?"

"A coral snake, I'm told. How did that happen?"

"I don't have to talk to you, detective."

"That's correct, Mr. Gilroy, especially if you have a reason not to."

He stood eye-to-eye with her, unblinking. Then he muttered, "In the garden out back. I was doing some weeding, and zap, he got me. I drove straight to Healthcenter."

"Did you save the snake?"

"Save it?"

"To help the doctors determine the proper antivenin."

"Hell, lady, I knew it was a coral snake. Anyway, it got away. Look, I got things to do. Saturday's my day to keep this place glued together."

"What kind of work do you do, Mr. Gilroy?"

Solidly entrenched in the doorway, he thrust a hefty arm against the door jamb. A reflex, she thought, signaling how much he resented this intrusion.

"I work for a fencing company. County Fencers up in North Fort Bristol."

"Yet you were weeding your garden yesterday. On Friday?"

"Before I went to work, but I didn't get to work. Had to call in from the hospital. You can check on that."

"What I'd like to check is your garage, if you don't mind."

"Jeez, lady, you got a real bug up your—" He shrugged. "Well, okay. Wait here. I'll open it from inside."

She walked over to the garage and waited for long seconds. Had a vision of him loping away across the back lot. Then the door creaked slowly upward. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom in there. An SUV.

Gilroy appeared through a connecting door. "Look, lady, I need to get into town. You got any more questions?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then I'll see ya." He stepped into the SUV, and it flapped into life.

Dark blue. Damn.

Behind her a man's voice said, "Sounds smooth enough to—" His words were lost in the snorting of the vehicle as Gilroy gunned it, then backed out.

The man behind her, smiling, trim, in his brush-cut blond forties, jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Live across the street. Name's Arnold. Arnie, to everybody but the tax man. Who might you be?"

A man on the make. She could tell from the toothy smile.

"Detective Curtci, Malabar Police, Arnie." She watched him wither.

"Uh-huh. Well, I just came over to say hello to Ron. Nice meeting you."

She drove back to 41 in gnawing

frustration. She could hear Moby now: "Told you, Kat. You're letting yourself get snakebit over a freak accident."

But two coral-snake bites in the same morning when there normally wasn't even one a year in all of Southwest Florida?

She and Officer Three Cees had found Harry Wharton not four feet from the dead snake. Doc Hewlett told her coral-snake venom has a delayed reaction. But barbiturates don't. No other record of a coral-snake bite on Malabar. Ever. She'd checked.

Instead of turning south on 41 toward the island, Kat turned north.

The blindingly white limestone Snaketorium hulked behind its macadam parking area among the as-yet-undeveloped fields six miles north of Fort Bristol.

The front door with its brass cobra handle opened into the chilly, air-conditioned gift shop and ticket counter—the tickets to admit gawkers into the open-air snakepits and wire cages out back. Kat had been here several times, entertaining her mother from Baltimore, then her uncle and his wife from Scranton.

"Hi," Kat said to the gum-smacking teenage clerk behind the counter, wondering how the girl managed that with a silver ball thing piercing her tongue. "Cal around?"

"You wanna see Cal, he's upstairs."

Kat climbed the metal staircase in the corner and emerged in a short hallway. She knocked at a door with a hand-lettered file card taped at eye level: C. TALBOTT, FANGMEISTER.

"Yo! Come on in!"

Behind a worktable littered with papers, Priority Mail cartons, and a rack of test tubes, a scrawny old man in a stained labcoat peered over his half-glasses.

"Well, if it isn't Malabar's finest. How are you, Kat? And your delightful mother and her, well, not so effusive brother?"

"I'm fine, Mom's fine, and I apologize for Uncle Fritz. He just plain hates snakes, but Aunt Karen couldn't wait to get here."

"Sorry for the mess." He waved an arm at the table. "Today is venom shipping day to the medical lab in Miami. So, what can I do for you?"

"I'm here on a case, Cal. Well, maybe a case."

"Ah, the coral-snake bite on Malabar. Heard about that."

"Did you also hear about the one in Fort Bristol?"

"When was that?"

"Yesterday. Same morning. That victim was a fence worker. Told me he was bitten in his back yard, drove himself to the E.R. It wasn't much of a bite, apparently. I just talked to him back at his house."

"Corals can be tricky. Deliver a lethal dose, or maybe not. A lot of factors involved."

"Can anybody buy one?"

Cal placed both hands flat on the table and leaned toward her. "What, dear girl, are you thinking? Yes, you can buy one. You just have to know where. Certain hobbyists love the idea of owning something that can kill them."

"You can buy one locally?"

"About ten miles east on Route 80. Little place called the SerPenthouse. Tell Mort Mortenson I sent you." He grimaced. "That sounded like a used snake dealer's pitch."

"Sweet," Kat said. She tore her eyes from the bright yellow sign above the tiered cages behind him: IF YOU DON'T LOVE ME, THEN KISS MY ASP. "You are Mr. Mortenson?"

The froglike man behind the counter nodded, agitating several chins. "Morton Mortenson. Call me Mort. What can I do for you?"

"I'm told you sell coral snakes."

"Coral snakes? I don't deal in venomous—"

"Cal Talbott said you might. And I've got this." She smiled and showed her badge. "I'm after information only, Mort."

"Oh, sh—lithering serpents." All three hundred pounds of him undulated in what she interpreted as distress. Then he leaned on the counter and peeked up at her like a schoolboy trying to turn on the charm. "Why coral snakes, dear lady?"

"Oh, come on, Mort. You read the paper this morning, or saw it on TV." The stringer who haunted police HQ had salivated over this one.

"Jeez, detective, all I did was sell a snake. What happened after that isn't my problem. And how do you know it was my snake that was involved?"

"I don't think we've got a sudden invasion, Mort. I'd like you to describe your customer."

"Am I in trouble?"

"Only if you want to be."

"Gotcha. Heavyset. Dark hair cut short. Squinty eyes.

"Name?"

"Paid cash. I didn't need a name."

"Well, that would have tied it up neatly, but I know who he is."

" 'He'? She was a woman."

Kat left Mort's SerPenthouse in a state of fuddle—until just a mile westward she realized that she had never actually seen Thelma Wharton. So it was possible that heavy, shorthaired Ron Gilroy's coralsnake encounter was a coincidence.

Back on the island forty-five minutes later she rang the Whartons'—well, now the Wharton, singular—doorbell. "Thelma Wharton?" she asked the blonde, wavy-haired, noticeably slight woman who answered. Hope not, hope not. Maybe the cleaning woman?

"Yes. And you are?"

"I'm Detective Curtci," Kat managed. "Just passing by to see how you're doing."

"Why, how considerate." Thelma's blue eyes sparkled. "I'm doing just fine, thank you."

"By the way, what medications was your husband taking?"

"Medications? Only Hytrin for his blood pressure, and he had headaches. He took phenobarb for those."

"Every day?"

"Whenever he had a headache. Like yesterday morning."

Innocent, or a coverup?

"If there's anything else you can think of, Mrs. Wharton, please give me a call."

Thelma frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It's just that a coral-snake bite isn't an everyday occurrence."

"Certainly not for me, either." That with a bit of snap.

"I'm convinced I have most of the pieces," she told Moby back at HQ, "but some don't fit and some are still missing."

Moby shook his head. "Tried to tell you, Kat, you can't *make* a case. There's has to *be* a case."

"There *is* a case here, Mobe. I feel it."

"Uh-oh, that's the worst case."

"Listen to me, Mobe. We've got a bite from one of the world's most placid snakes."

"A placid venomous snake."

"The victim giddy or supine with phenobarbital. Another coral bite, but that vic had the wrong SUV. And whoever bought a coral snake was neither the second bitee nor the wife of the first. Maybe too many pieces, Mobe."

Duckworth heaved his bulk back from his desk and stood up surprisingly fast for such an overweight sergeant. Kat thought he was going to walk out in exasperation.

But he said, "Know what I think? I think it's time to visit Corporal McCase."

In his own little cubicle Willard McCase the computer ace looked not like a cyberspace nerd but like Hulk Hogan without hair. McCase had two interests in life: pumping iron in weekly tonnages and paradoxically clicking computer keys with a near-magic touch.

In remarkably few minutes he had unearthed two pertinent financial facts. "One, Harry Wharton had only an unexciting twenty-five thousand dollar life insurance policy with Great American."

"Damn," Kat muttered.

"And two, Thelma Wharton had no policies on Harry, but she does have her own trust fund set up by her father, Jonas Gilroy of Athens, Ohio."

"Nothing there, Kat," Moby said grumpily. "*Kat?*"

She was already out the door. Maiden name: Gilroy!

On East Ibis she turned not into Ronald Gilroy's drive but into the driveway across the street. On Sunday chances were good that he was home. And he was. The door chime was answered by the same man she had so blithely neglected to consider yesterday. Full treatment today. Badge, smile, extended hand.

"Detective Katherine Curtci again, Mr.—"

"Majeski. Arnie Majeski." Ah, that toothy grin. Majeski was back in form today. "What can I do for you, sweetheart?"

Cripes. Worse than "lady."

"You said something yesterday about Mr. Gilroy's SUV sounding fine. What was that about?"

"He'd had some engine trouble Friday. Had something to deliver and asked to borrow mine."

"May I look in your garage?"

"I don't get the point, but sure."

Majeski's SUV was white. She walked in, checked the dusty front doors. "Thank you very much, Mr. Majeski."

"What's going on?"

"Routine investigation." Lull, don't intimidate.

Back at her desk she went to work on yellow pages listings for makers of magnetic signs. Scored a pool service sign hit on the third call.

One last loose end. And a hunch, Moby, no matter what you think of hunches.

Essie Palmer answered the door, a big woman—with cropped blue-black hair, squinty little eyes. Time, Detective Curtci, for some serious grilling.

"It didn't take long," Kat told Moby after the warrants had been served. "The two women hated Harry. Thelma, because he had become a brutal husband, adept at whacking her where it didn't show. Essie, because he had attempted to rape her. Both of them were terrorized, afraid to tell anyone at all about Harry."

"Nice retired old geezer. But you lost me back there in all those snake coils."

"One more time. Essie bought the snake, gave it to Ronald Gilroy."

"Thelma's brother."

"Right. His motive, in addition to relieving his sister of an onerous husband, was to be the twenty-five thou from Harry's life insurance. Afraid his SUV might be noticed, Gilroy borrowed Majeski's—the white SUV indeed spotted by Ed Palmer, who had nothing to do with any of this."

"Except for giving you that hot lead."

"Well, true. So Gilroy arrives early Friday with the snake, in the borrowed SUV with magnetic pool service signs on its doors. Harry's already down, from the phenobarb Thelma put in his coffee. Gilroy puts on gloves, takes the snake from its box, and applies it to Harry's ankle. When he finally pulls it loose, it's in a foul humor and gives him a shot just above the glove. Not much venom left, though. Gilroy mashes the snake as planned, then panics and heads for the E.R."

"So now Essie Palmer comes over as planned, and the two lethal ladies go on a shopping trip while stupefied Harry dies out of sight in his back yard," Moby chimed in. "Woulda worked if it weren't for that autopsy they didn't figure on—and that second snakebite."

"I don't think it would have, Mobe. Too complicated, too many people involved."

"And one other thing," Duckworth said impishly. "A tall, persistent lady named Curtci."

"Mobe, you know I hate that."

"Tall?"

"No, I mean that 'lady' business."

"Right. You're no lady. You're a cop."

"That's more like it."

"Absolutely." He grinned. ". . . Sweetheart."

"Moby, for Pete's sake—"

GEORGI PORGIE

Gary Alexander

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

"The diesel, yes, it cost you less. Is nice Foxtrot-class submarine, but does not have long range," Georgi Porgie told the Vietnamese. "You have to buy oiler, too, then surface somewhere in Pacific to fill 'er up. *Nyet,* I say. Not good."

Mr. Nguyen asked, "You have access to the nuclear?"

They were standing on a breezy downtown Seattle pier, huddled in jackets. A couple of duffers were fishing off the end. By mutual consent they'd chosen the pier for the wind and water noise, and the privacy. It would be hard to listen in, and you could see anybody coming. Despite those conditions, Mr. Nguyen could smell the man's cologne.

The man who called himself Georgi Porgie grinned. "I do. This is nice Yankee I class. Twenty-seven knots, stay submerged forever. Nice irony, yes, this NATO designation, to couple of old comrades like ourselves?"

"You are selling?" asked an unamused Mr. Nguyen.

"I sell you the diesel, yes. Outright. Give you pink slip, as it were. The nuke, *nyet*. It is—how you say? —a lease situation. They keep closer track of nuclear boats. There are no weapons, but the reactor is issue."

"Twice as much money," Mr. Nguyen reminded him.

"To pay ten times as many people to look other way." He raised his hands in a flourish. "Hundreds, maybe."

"Thirty million dollars," Mr. Nguyen said, leaving the figure hanging.

Georgi Porgie stared sincerely into the Golden Triangle druglord's eyes. "The boat is in Pacific Fleet, rotting in Vladivostok drydock. Not in mint condition, okay, but cost millions and millions new. We tune up, pay crew, and for you, sir, it is—how you say?—turnkey. They come to you, maybe little island in South China Sea. Top-notch customer service, it is expensive."

"Mr. Porgie, how do I know you can deliver?"

"Not *por-gee*. It is *por-jee*. *Yor-ghee por-jee*. Am connected from Brighton Beach to St. Petersburg. All the way up ladder. They call us Russian Mafia. No like that word, but there it is. I know my Motherland, and I know who to buy."

Mr. Nguyen said nothing.

Inscrutable little guy, Georgi thought. Whoever he was. He was aware that Nguyen was as common as Jones or Smith to Vietnamese.

"Yankee I is big big boat. Maybe whole year's supply of your product can go in one load," he said, pushing to close. "Park offshore out of territorial limit. Customers come to you like boutique. By the time DEA and Coast Guard catch on, everybody on merry way."

"I will consult my people and be back in touch," Mr. Nguyen said.

Georgi Porgie gave him his cell phone number and took his hand. "You do that. One small matter. Must have operating capital up front. As they say in America, seed money."

"How much?"

"Only ten percent," Georgi said, shaking Nguyen's hand vigorously.

"Hardly anything in great scheme of things."

Lorna Cobb had never seen the private detective take a drink, but he always smelled like a distillery. She was in his dingy office now. Her report was ready, and judging by his bleak expression, it wasn't going to be good news.

"His real name isn't Bud Smith," Brick Bates said. "I suppose you guessed that."

Lorna sat on the other side of Bricklin Bates's scarred wooden desk, on the edge of her chair. "I did. Yes."

Bates was sad because she was sad, such a nice sad lady. His clients did not seek his services because of a happy incident, but Lorna's sadness seemed imprinted. The subject was a total scumbag. He'd hurt her with a capital H. "I won't pull any punches," he said softly. "You're paying me for information, regardless."

Lorna Cobb nodded.

"Your Bud Smith is Jimmy Pogue Senior. Mr. Pogue's longest period of legitimate employment that I could verify was six weeks, selling encyclopedias door to door. He's forty-nine years old and has lived by his wits most of his life, mostly con games, every one you can think of and some you can't."

Bates paused. He couldn't bear to add that Pogue specialized in female victims, vulnerable women, some of whom remained too smitten to testify. "Pogue knows what the inside of a jail cell looks like, but he's never done any hard time. His longest stretch was a month in the county lockup for check kiting."

Lorna Cobb was a thirty-three-year-old data-entry supervisor. Her Bud Smith had said he was forty-one and looked not a day older. White teeth, thick hair, gorgeous tan. "Jimmy Pogue *Senior?* He has a family?"

"He's the absent patriarch of several dysfunctional ex-families. His ex-wives and ex-kids would be twice as messed up if he'd had more of an influence on them. His last trip to jail was several months ago, for a back child-support beef. He was in three or four days, then signed promissory papers he never followed through on. There's an outstanding warrant on him, and his whereabouts are unknown."

Lorna assumed there was a Jimmy Pogue Junior. She wondered about the wives, too. What were they like? How many of them were there, for goodness sake? She resisted asking.

"Lorna, you never quite specified why you were trying to locate him," Bates continued. "Other than that he owed you a great deal of money."

"Bud—this Pogue individual—claimed to be a day trader. He made large profits on his own holdings and offered to do the same with mine. I don't have much. I lived with my mother, and she passed away recently. She left me a small inheritance. I invested that and some of my own savings. The last time I saw him was the day I gave him the check."

Brick Bates scribbled notes. "Did he work at a day trading house? They have those setups where you rent space and a computer."

"Well, I'm not sure."

"At home?"

Lorna blushed fiercely. "I don't recall seeing a computer."

Brick Bates dropped that line of questioning like the cliched overheated potato and put his pencil down. "Lorna, I don't know how long I can keep the meter running and be fair to you. I'm at a dead end."

Bud Smith had deflowered Lorna Cobb. This is how she thought of it. That word. Deflower. The few people who knew of her nonexistent love life looked at her as if she were an exotic plant, rare if not extinct. Not that she wasn't ready. Overdue to be swept off her feet. But why did he have to say he loved her? She could almost forgive everything else he had stolen from her.

Lorna's eyes glazed. Brick thought she was attractive without being flashy, a helluva lot better than a piece of guano like Pogue deserved. She was in obvious distress, and this angered him further.

"Lorna, excuse me, do you want me to continue?"

"I'm sorry. What?"

"Continue looking for Pogue. It's getting expensive."

"Do you think he's still in town?"

Brick Bates shrugged. "He has a history of drifting, usually within this general area."

Lorna wanted him to bring her Bud Smith close, although not too close. "Oh, that's all right. I think you've done what you can, and money *is* a consideration."

Brick handed her his full written report. "I wish you'd report this to the cops."

"Could they get my money back?"

"Probably not. I have to ask you this. If you do find him, you're not going to—"

"Goodness, no. If I do, I'll notify the police. I want to see the look on his face when they arrest him. I want him to see me at that exact moment."

Sweet revenge, thought Brick Bates. He could think of worse scenarios. "Promise?"

"The ending paragraph, Brick," she asked, turning through the report. "I don't quite understand."

"I don't either," Bates said. "Did he ever mention an interest in Russia?"

"No."

"Under his real name, Pogue enrolled in a Russian 101 night class at the community college. He attended classes for a couple of weeks and dropped out. That's the final blip on my screen."

Mr. Nguyen's name was Nguyen. While he was no druglord, he had committed crimes on behalf of both sides during what Vietnam referred to as the American War. It was during the war that he had made tenuous Golden Triangle connections.

On the first pay telephone he spotted after leaving the pier, he renewed an old relationship. Only a landline would do. The topic was too sensitive for a cellular phone, spewing words into midair, free to be plucked.

"This man is who he says he is?"

The voice was scratchy, in an echo chamber. Originating in Vientiane? Chiang Mai?

Nguyen said, "I am in the process of substantiating his credentials. I am inclined to believe yes."

"A fascinating proposition. Potentially efficient and expensive and hazardous."

"A single crossing," Nguyen reminded him. "As opposed to the hundreds of expenses and risks doing it the standard way, piecemeal."

"A single opportunity to lose a year's work. To lose everything because of a mistake or bad luck."

Nguyen knew this man to be trusted by Song Le himself. Careful now. "The uncle whose umbrella I am presently under, his eyes are not all-seeing. Instances of good luck occur oftener than bad."

"For that we are thankful. Your individual, he is genuine?"

The second time he had asked, a promising sign. "I shall make every effort to validate him."

"He can deliver?"

"Yes, he is confident he can—if the financial arrangements can be met."

"It is a large investment to base primarily on faith."

"Nothing ventured, as they say."

"I cannot make the decision."

"Of course not."

"Contact me the same time tomorrow."

The line went dead. Nguyen replaced the receiver with a trembling, perspiring hand.

Before Nguyen left Vietnam—he was hopelessly unsuited to life in a socialist paradise—he had known many Russians. There was an unaffectionate Vietnamese term for them that translated into Americans Without Dollars.

Georgi Porgie was no Russian. Even if he had not researched Jimmy Pogue Senior, modestly successful gigolo and swindler, the false ethnicity was apparent in an instant. Song Le and his people had no known contact with Russians. Nguyen might be able to sell this Porgie and his bogus accent.

Mr. Nguyen got into his car, hoping for the best, hoping for luck, too. He was fifty-nine years old. He had lived by his wits, straddling fences, for sale to the highest bidder, and lately to any bidder.

He drove away, twenty-four hours of pins and needles ahead of him. He was getting too old for these games. He desperately craved retirement, and Mr. Georgi Porgie was his annuity.

A minor traffic violation, doing fifty in a twenty-five zone, started the whole shebang. The cop took Jimmy Pogue Senior's driver's license to his cruiser. Jimmy actually heard him say "bingo."

Headed to the station, Jimmy tried to explain. The last check he wrote Trixi went into her chest, for implants. The kids didn't see a dime. Well, asked the cop, how long ago did you write that check? The question left Jimmy Pogue Senior in an unusual state of speechlessness.

They locked him in an overcrowded holding tank. Among the customary assortment of drunks and shoplifters were a couple of Ripugnante wise guys. The Ripugnante family had a grubby paw in every illegal pie in three states.

The two goons hogged the only

bunks, and nobody objected. They were boozy and scuffed up a bit. Jimmy figured they'd been in a barroom scuffle. They were loud, too, and Jimmy sidled to within earshot.

The Ripugnante soldiers were complaining about competition. They bitched about the Latinos and Asians, although they had different words for them. If the racial slurs offended the Latinos and Asians in the tank, they did not protest.

The louder of the two had the biggest feet and lowest hairline of anything Jimmy had seen outside a zoo. He suggested that the Asians were moving so much smack they oughtta go and buy a submarine, they had so much to ship. His buddy laughed and agreed: yeah, buy an atomic sub off them Russkis, they got a ton of them tied up at the dock on account of they ain't got no money to put gas in 'em.

Jimmy recognized Loudmouth now. Jimmy (Feet) Brutto. He was the Ripugnante underboss, a very influential guy on the street.

Jimmy Pogue Senior went through life acting on impulses. At that instant he became Georgi Porgie, a name that popped into his skull. He interrupted their conversation, babbling in a goofy accent he'd gleaned from movies that he was Russian Mafia and could sell them a sub. Helicopters, too, rocket launchers, anything they wanted. He had pull all the way to the top.

His raving and boasting initially amused them. They soon grew bored, short attention spans that they had. They told him to shut his bleeping mouth and get his bleeping bleep the bleep outa here. The new Georgi Porgie skulked off, knowing they'd repeat their funny jailhouse story.

For his part, Georgi Porgie barhopped, obnoxiously boasting, spreading the word at the right places. Georgi, the crazy Russki, had no genuine Russian mob to challenge his authenticity. The Eastern Bloc criminals thereabouts contented themselves by running chop shops and flimflamming their own kind. Georgi relied on his best friend, greed, and that brought Mr. Nguyen to him.

Georgi Porgie shakily raised a shot of bourbon to his lips in a bar at which he was unknown. He knew that dealing with drug bandits was like playing with proverbial fire. Georgi didn't feel he had an alternative. His last score from that mousy little gal whose mother had croaked was nearly tapped out. Too bad. She wouldn't've been bad looking if she'd done something with her hair and worn clothes that showed what she had.

A gal once told Jimmy Pogue Senior he looked like a Marlboro man who dressed sharp. That was way back when. Gravity was taking its toll. On his gut, his chin. He wouldn't be able to skate on charm and great looks much longer.

He had done his homework on this venture. He had taken night school Russian just long enough to get the hang of the accent. He'd picked a class with a genuine Russian teacher, a big uppity chick who wouldn't give him the time of day, her loss. Probably a frigid commie anyhow.

He had gone to the library and researched submarines, tearing out pages from *Jane's* and other reference books. For once, he'd dived into something with more than a superficial commitment.

Georgi Porgie downed the shot, chased it with beer, and shuddered.

He hoped he was toasting himself in celebration. He'd know in twenty-four hours whether he was having a party or holding a wake.

Lorna Cobb waited outside the classroom until the break. Students filed out for a drink of water or a smoke. When the instructor, Irina Larionov, was alone, Lorna went in and said, "Can you help? I'm trying to locate someone. Jimmy Pogue, who was taking this course."

"Yes, Jim Pogue. I remember Jim. He came to three or four classes. We have dropped him from the rolls."

Irina Larionov was a handsome, buxom woman somewhat taller than Lorna. She wondered if Irina was more his type. She said, "It's very important that I reach him, and I don't have a current address."

"I am sorry. The school is not allowed to give out that information."

"I'm his sister," Lorna said.

Irina smiled. "No, you are not. I see how your face lights up and your eyes do not. You love him, you hate him. I imagine he was gorgeous when he was younger, don't you think?"

Lorna Cobb didn't reply.

"Oh, come on."

Irina led Lorna along the corridor and downstairs. She asked her to wait outside the registrar's office. She returned and handed Lorna a folded slip of paper. "You must not say where you got this."

"No, no I won't. Thank you so much."

Irina glanced at her watch. "That man, Jim, the final class he attended, he took me out for a drink afterward on the pretext of learning about Russia. We had more than one drink. He thought my accent was cute. He said other things, too. He made a pass at me and tried to borrow money." Irina Larionov held a thumb and forefinger a fraction of an inch apart. "I was this close to saying yes to both. You be careful of that man."

"I will," Lorna Cobb said. "I will."

After Mr. Nguyen completed his telephone call the next day, he called Georgi Porgie and told the Russian to meet him at the airport in ninety minutes. Georgi burst out of his apartment with a change of skivvies and a binder he had put together.

They flew first-class to Honolulu on a stolen credit card that had come into Mr. Nguyen's possession. Georgi hit on the young, blonde stew and thought he was making progress. He told Mr. Nguyen that he was going to ask her on a night on the town and did he want her to fix him up, too.

Mr. Nguyen replied no thank you, we have business, in such a manner that the cabin temperature fell ten degrees. Okay, fine, thought Georgi Porgie. Maybe the stew was reacting favorably to him strictly on the basis of his riding up front.

A chunk of the bread coming in,

he'd have some maintenance done —eyelids, chin, love handles. Be more diligent, too, in the tanning parlor. Lay off the sauce.

Not that he'd need to, being retired. Nice to be able to keep scoring the young dollies, though, while he had the time and the bucks to enjoy. The prospect of dating older gals, in their forties and *fifties,* for other than their money, made his skin crawl.

Mr. Nguyen was a man who economized his words. All he'd divulged was that they were meeting the direct link to the mother lode. He slept most of the trip. When Georgi wasn't concentrating on the sweet young thing refilling his champagne glass, he fidgeted and worried.

What if Nguyen's druglord contact spoke to Georgi in Russian, to test him? What the hell would he do then? He'd be up guano creek without a paddle. The only possibility that came to mind was to plead laryngitis, but that was lame.

Georgi Porgie managed to catnap. He awakened as the plane descended over Pearl Harbor. If you were into omens, that wasn't a dandy one. If he made the teensiest misstep, he'd be fish food.

Insanity, he thought. No way could this crackpot scheme work! Nguyen wasn't stupid. Georgi was out of his comfort zone of lovesick spinsters and widows. His old pal, greed, forestalled utter panic. Especially his clients' and how much moola they'd make shipping a mountain of skag in one fell swoop. When you had your sights on a fortune, it was as if a bag had been thrown over your head, smothering your vital senses.

The wheels and flaps came down. Georgi Porgie was far, far past the point of no return.

Mr. Nguyen directed a taxi to Chinatown. When they got out, the Vietnamese seemed to know where they were going. The streets were narrow, the open markets smelled bad to Georgi, and the Lord only knew some of the languages they were jabbering at each other in.

They stopped in front of a building that in spite of the pagodalike tile roof was fairly crummy looking, some combination of offices, shops, and apartments.

"The gentleman's name is Mr. Trung. He came a long way on short notice, much farther than we did," Nguyen said crisply. "He deserves respect. I will speak for us. He may ask you questions through me. You respond in English, and I shall translate."

Well, la-di-da. Georgi was both relieved and insulted. Respect. The word reminded him of the Ripugnante apes in the holding tank. It was amazing what people demanded.

Nguyen knocked on a door. A withered old Chinese woman gave him a key. They walked up creaking stairs to the third floor, where Nguyen used the key to enter a room. It was bare except for a wooden table and chairs and didn't smell any nicer to Georgi than the rest of the building. They sat and waited, Nguyen like a statue.

"I can tell you're still breathing when you look at your watch," Georgi said. "Are we early, or is he late?"

it, ma'am. You need to squeeze off a box of rounds, develop a feel for the piece."

"I hope I'll never have to fire it."

He laughed. "All the freaks out there, don't count on it."

Calling the kettle black, Lorna thought. She said, "I'll pay the three hundred if you supply the number of bullets that go inside the thingie that goes into the gun."

"A clip," Orville Logan said, wincing. "It's called a clip."

As far as instruction went, how much expertise did you need to fire one shot point-blank? "I'll arrange my own lessons."

He smiled. "You got a deal, lady. Fill out the permit paperwork, and I'll ramrod it through. Come back at the end of the day for the weapon. If you meet a creep in a dark alley, you should be as tough and hardnosed as you are with me. He won't stand a chance."

Bricklin Bates, slouched behind the wheel, shifted his numb posterior and his aching back. His eyes did not waver from Daniel Cofflin's back yard. The church parking lot cattycorner on the alley afforded a perfect viewpoint. The chainlink fence was likewise ideal.

He hefted the plump claims file on the seat beside him. Daniel Cofflin was a worker's compensation scofflaw drawing monthly stipends because he'd injured his back too badly to return to work. Brick Bates resituated himself for the umpteenth time. He could tell Cofflin sore back stories.

Coffin had a quarter-acre yard overdue for mowing. He had a toolshed and driveway gridlocked with junker cars and pickup trucks. From this angle Brick could see the nose of an old Camaro up on blocks. Mr. Cofflin definitely had a full plate of projects.

Four afternoons and evenings of the past five, armed with a video camera and a long lens, Brick had waited for Cofflin to get cracking. Forcing a mower through an ankle-high tangle of grass and weeds. Lifting a manifold from beneath a rusting hood. Just one good tape of him grunting and pushing and hefting with that crippled back, there'd be a bonus on top of his hourly rate.

But zilch. Nada. Nothing happening at the Cofflin castle except the flickering glow of the boob tube in curtains. Evidently Daniel was a man of good intentions and no action. Brick opened his thermos and enjoyed the slightest taste of Jack Daniel's on the rocks.

Last night he had gone to the community college. The Russian 101 teacher smirked and asked him if he were Jim Pogue's brother. Brick asked her why she thought he was. She said his sister had also been hunting for him. Brick asked her to describe the sister. She refused, saying she'd already broken rules that could cost her job.

On a hunch, Brick described Lorna. The teacher, a Miss Larionov, asked who he was to her. Brick said he wished to prevent Jimmy Pogue Senior from causing her additional pain. Larionov hesitated, then said, "Oh, come on."

Bricklin Bates had memorized the address on the slip of paper Iri-

pling up to the light to check for polymer strips. He wouldn't put it past a drug kingpin to foist funny money on him. You couldn't trust anybody these days.

The bills were genuine. There just weren't enough of them. Georgi could take the ten grand and skip. Or he could figure how to entice more cash out of them. Three million was out of the question, but ten thou was a humongous letdown, considering the potential.

Georgi Porgie felt like a gameshow contestant. He'd won a few bucks in the first round. He could either walk or chance everything at the next level. He slumped on the toilet and sighed.

Meanwhile Mr. Nguyen gazed distractedly at airplanes taking off and landing. Georgi Porgie's performance pleased him. Trung was not easily deceived, and his life depended on exercising care with Song Le's capital. The confidence artist had impressed him enough to invest thirty thousand dollars. Song Le was greedy, Nguyen knew. No fortune could satisfy him, and he'd risk small change for the potential of eliminating middlemen from the profits.

Of course, nobody was going to Vladivostok. If Georgi were smart he'd disappear with his ten thousand. If he were greedier than he was intelligent, he might devise a prolonging scheme that would net them a subsequent payment.

Mr. Nguyen would wait and see, though not indefinitely. If the ersatz Russian disappeared, so would he, reluctantly, twenty thousand dollars richer.

Lorna Cobb killed the rabbit the same morning she bought the gun. She selected Orville Logan Guns, a shop on the old highway in a neighborhood of pawnshops, massage parlors, and gas stations. The windows were barred, and the man behind the counter was intimidating. The ambiance was right for a gun purchase.

"I got something perfect for your needs and budget," he said, reaching into the glass case.

Orville Logan, the proprietor, Lorna assumed. He had a ponytail, a beer gut, and a collection of tattoos obscured by arm hair. The gun fit entirely inside his beefy palm. It was silver and pearl-handled, cute, bordering on precious. "Twenty-five caliber Browning automatic," he said. "Carry it around in your purse for protection. Since it's secondhand and you're a nice little lady, I'll let it go for three fifty."

Above Mr. Logan on the wall was a framed needlepoint copy of the Second Amendment, flanked by photographs of two actors, Charlton Heston and Ronald Reagan. She believed philosophically in gun control.

Lorna had set a three hundred dollar limit. She said, "Well, I didn't want to spend that much."

"Tell ya what, I'll throw in a box of shells and give you a coupon that'll get you a discount on lessons."

"Can you show me the basics of how to load and fire the gun?"

"Have you ever shot?"

"No."

"Then a briefing ain't gonna cut

closer examination of the living room, kitchen, bath, and bedroom, she altered that view. There was a television and ample furniture. There were no gaps where property had been carted off.

She recognized the clothes. She didn't recognize the furniture. Bud Smith/Jimmy Pogue Senior/G. Porgie probably rented everything he didn't wear, man on the move that he was.

Lorna deduced that the mess was the product of a hasty departure. He was in such a rush he hadn't bothered to lock the door.

She cleared a spot on the sofa and sat down. If somebody were in hot pursuit, chances were he'd never return. In which case, locking the door was irrelevant. She'd wait awhile anyway. Just sit and think. She stood and turned off the light. She thought better in the dark.

The news at the clinic still hadn't sunk in. It shouldn't've been a shock. The nights she had spent at his place, the nights he had spent at hers. They'd lain in bed talking of the future, their future together. He'd told her he'd had a vasectomy, and she'd not given precautions another thought.

His return was not an impossibility, Lorna knew. He'd come for his clothes. He was always a smart dresser.

They could talk. She'd tell him her news. It might be the jolt he needed to finally grow up. He'd come to his senses and beg her forgiveness. He'd do the right thing.

This assuming he was immature rather than evil. Then she recalled Brick Bates's remark about Jimmy Pogue's discarded families.

Lorna Cobb moved her purse onto her lap. It felt solid, and the little gun didn't even make a bulge.

Upon further rumination, Mr. Nguyen decided that twenty thousand dollars was an unsatisfactory consolation prize. In his car, parked at the apartment complex, Mr. Nguyen mulled the disadvantages of trusting no one. Extreme prudence compelled him to assemble fragments of information.

This much was indisputable fact: Georgi Porgie did not fly to Vladivostok yesterday. He had, however, vanished. He hadn't returned home and his car had not been moved from the airport garage. Therefore, Jimmy Pogue Senior had dematerialized somewhere in the airport terminal.

A sociopathic man-child possessing a sudden windfall. Mr. Nguyen speculated about the likely destinations. He narrowed the choices to sun and pleasure, and dispensed bribes. As yet, no results.

As if prompted by Mr. Nguyen's will, his cell phone rang. He listened and thanked the caller, saying that he could expect a premium for his good work.

Las Vegas, Nevada, was no surprise. If fact, Vegas was Mr. Nguyen's preference. Unless the nigh impossible occurred and Lady Luck transformed a lifelong loser into a winner, Georgi Porgie would be required to continue the charade.

Mr. Nguyen gauged one week as the ideal interim before recontacting Porgie. Playing stupid, he would

na Larionov provided him after a visit to the college office. He was not getting any younger, and he wondered who was lonelier, Lorna Cobb or himself.

His motives confused him. Was he being protective, or did his emotions not stop there? Whichever, he'd continue working for her off the clock. He'd love to pack it in here and pursue Pogue, the lousy sonofabitch. Brick Bates was a pretty fair bloodhound.

Unfortunately he had expenses, bills, needs. Paying the rent wasn't necessarily a sure thing. This insurer was his best account. So he waited.

Not ten minutes later an argument spilled out of the Cofflin household. Daniel emerged, hands covering his ears. A stout woman in a housecoat followed at his heels. Brick heard her loud and clear.

The dispute concerned garbage. Daniel Cofflin, unemployable shut-in, lugged one Santa Claus-sized plastic bag of trash after another to the back fence and tossed them over for pickup. Brick Bates zoomed in and taped the scene.

He couldn't believe his luck. He started the car deciding it must be an omen, a call to mount his white horse and serve Lorna Cobb.

Georgi Porgie awoke dead. At least that's how he'd felt. He hadn't immediately gone to Vladivostok as he'd promised Nguyen, he'd gone to Las Vegas.

Georgi sat up in bed. *¡Ay, caramba!* His body throbbed and his mouth tasted like an army was bivouacked in it. He could smell himself. Everything since the airplane and the complimentary booze in first class was blank. That wad of cash burning a hole in his pocket, it must've seemed the thing to do. Painfully, he focused on his watch. Nine o'clock. Morning or night? He cracked the drapes. Dark.

Next question, which day? In greater pain he squinted at the watch's date feature. It was tomorrow. He'd been in Vegas for a day and a half. There were bills and coins and slot machine slugs in every pocket. He counted. The tally: six hundred ninety-four dollars and twenty-five cents.

Georgi Porgie groaned. Seven hundred remaining of ten grand. He hoped he'd had a good time.

The apartment complex resembled Bud Smith's—multiple buildings, moderately priced. According to the college records, Jimmy Pogue lived in Building H, Unit 103. Lorna Cobb stopped at the mailbox kiosk to check the address and found that G. Porgie occupied H-103.

How strange. Georgie Porgie? A new alias? "Georgie Porgie, pudding and pie, kissed the girls and made them cry."

She knew one girl he'd made cry.

Lorna knocked. If the address were erroneous, she could apologize. No answer. She looked around and twisted the knob. The door opened, and she slipped inside.

She turned on a light and stared at a tornado aftermath of clothing and TV dinner cartons. Her initial impression was burglary. Upon

closer examination of the living room, kitchen, bath, and bedroom, she altered that view. There was a television and ample furniture. There were no gaps where property had been carted off.

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attentively listen to Porgie's Vladivostok lies and, if they were not convincing, refine them for Trung's consumption.

The woman he observed entering Porgie's apartment evidently had a key. A female mystery player compounded his headache. A visit to Nguyen earlier today from two thugs added unwanted complexity. One, who possessed the largest feet he had ever seen, announced that if the "submarine stuff was legit, you got yourself a partner."

Mr. Nguyen wondered how loudly and how often Georgi Porgie had trumpeted his submarine madness.

By the time he reached McCarran International Airport, Georgi Porgie felt almost human again. He'd had several belts out of the room's minibar and skipped on his hotel bill.

Luckily, he'd bought a round-trip ticket. The airline clerk changed it from next week to tonight. Georgi hadn't realized how short his visit was destined to be.

He'd passed a duty-free shop earlier and had an idea. He'd give it, say, a week, then get in touch with the Vietnamese. In the meantime he'd load up on the most expensive caviar and vodka money could by. He'd say Vladivostok went incredibly well, so well his Russian cronies had showered him with gifts for himself and his partners.

There was the usual glitch—cash on the barrelhead. The seven hundred in his pocket plus what he had in the bank barely covered living expenses. He was a month behind in his rent, and the building manager was behaving like a jerk about the situation.

The little gal Lora or Loretta, no, Lorna, she might come through if he played his cards right. He'd fallen off the face of her map, so she was bound to be pissed. He'd cook up a story that *his* mother had gotten sick and needed her only son right away. There'd be automatic simpatico.

Taking care of Mom, he'd completely lost track of time. Not to mention a younger sister who'd gone to pieces. Hours turning into days and so forth. And, oh yeah, he didn't want to burden her after her own tragic loss.

He'd clean up and phone her, saying the funeral had been this afternoon. He'd turn on the waterworks, too, if he had to. He could do that, demonstrating how sensitive he was. Once he set his mind to it, Georgi Porgie was capable of melting the bitterest broad in the world into a pile of putty.

If she went off on a tangent regarding her nest egg, he'd assure her that her balances showed zip because he'd transferred her money into a stabler performer within an hour of the call from his dying mom, a fund that didn't require his expertise and constant hands on. Blah blah blah.

While she wasn't stupid, Georgi felt, she'd flipped for him harder than most. Maybe love didn't conquer all, but it usually lined his pockets.

Brick Bates saw a quivering object before he could make out what

it was. His eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness and to Lorna Cobb unsteadily aiming a tiny pistol at him.

She lowered it. "Brick?"

"Lorna, is that loaded?"

"Yes. I inserted a full, um—"

"Clip."

"Yes."

Brick sat beside her on the couch and held out his hand. "May I?"

She nodded and placed the gun in it. "The safety's on," he said, removing the clip. Then he jacked the slide. "No round in the chamber. If you were gonna blow him away, not that I blame you, it wouldn't have worked out."

"I don't know what I intended to do. My craziest idea was to shoot him and myself. I couldn't take an innocent life."

Innocent life? Then it struck him. "Oh Jesus."

Brick looked at her streaming tears. He held her, and she held him. He held her tighter, rocking slightly.

Lorna sniffled and said, "Sorry. I have to blow my nose."

"Why don't you take care of that while I have a look around."

He switched on lights and made a quick search. Aside from expensive duds and more cologne bottles than he'd seen outside a drugstore, Jimmy Pogue Senior owned little of value.

He told her that and said, "The jackpot'd be fake I.D.'s and various and sundry incriminating documents we could give the cops. On the other hand, if you want to be technical, we're burglars."

Lorna managed a smile. "That makes two of us who aren't thinking clearly."

"We should vamoose, and we should talk, Lorna. Buy you a drink, cup of coffee?"

"I can't afford you, Brick. My new responsibility—"

Her voice trailed off. He said, "Yeah, you can. I'm on the case—what's that lawyer word?—pro bono."

"I won't take charity."

"It isn't charity. You're satisfying my curiosity. We'll talk. Guns, Russian language studies, whatever pops into the conversation."

She agreed and said she'd make coffee at her place. He followed her home to a compact and tidy apartment. He would've preferred a drink to java but was just happy to be with her. Lorna filled the coffeepot, noticed the blinking telephone light, and replayed a message.

A blubbering, barely understandable Bud Smith poured out a deluge of excuses and misery about a terminally ill mother, a sister's nervous breakdown, and profound apologies. He was at his most coherent when he said her money was safe, merely moved to a solider investment base during his absence.

Brick put his arms around her and said, "Be strong."

"I will. I owe him—no, not him—I owe myself a return call."

"What if Bud Smith who isn't Bud Smith wants to see you?"

"Do I have any chance of recovering my money?"

"No."

"Did you locate his mother in your investigation, Brick?"

"She tends bar in Sheboygan and disowned him eons ago. Are you going to tell him you're pregnant?"

"I think he has a right to know. I can't decide. I'll decide when and if."

"Here?"

"No. In a public place."

"Good." Brick Bates laid the tiny pistol on a table. "We can leave this little guy at home."

Mr. Nguyen could not inject logic into the procession. An unknown woman arriving. An unknown man arriving. Departing together. A disheveled Georgi Porgie arriving. Georgi Porgie departing, dressed like a magazine advertisement, suitcase in hand.

This was not a Las Vegas junket repetition. The counterfeit Russian was fleeing. Nguyen started his car. If he lost sight of his taillights, he could track the scent of his cologne.

Georgi was paranoid, and that wasn't just his hangover whispering schizoid nothings in his ear. Yeah, he vaguely remembered zooming out the door through his usual mess. He came home to worse. He'd been tossed, trashed. Somebody had been looking for something.

Nguyen and his wacko Oriental dope buddies. Were they setting him up? Then again, any number of skeletons could've tumbled out of his closet. Jimmy Pogue Senior did not suffer the delusion that he lacked enemies.

The little cookie, though, that might work out. Lorna, bless her love-starved heart, he'd weaseled back into her good graces although she wouldn't invite him over. If she hadn't been a little wary, he'd've suspected an ambush. Bummer, though. If he did say so himself, he was still a miracle man in the sack.

It was working out for the best, he thought, pulling onto the freeway. She'd suggested a neutral site and didn't argue about his choice of the airport. When they rendezvoused, he'd have his face buried in a hankie. Just after her call, word had come from the family. Mom had gone to Heaven. And him not at her bedside.

There'd be funeral expenses on top of Sis, who really came off her spool and would have to be looked after. And him with his assets tied up in the market, none of them liquid.

The airport was a twofer, Georgi Porgie thought. A permanent exit out of town. And they had plenty of ATM's.

Lorna Cobb and Bud Smith sat in molded plastic chairs in the main terminal. They'd hugged, Lorna had given him a facial tissue and said, please, no apologies necessary.

"You could have called sooner, Bud."

"I should've. I can be inconsiderate. No excuses."

"I could've gone to you."

"I guess my subconscious was telling me, don't call Lorna or, loving unselfish person that she is, she'll come arunning and sacrifice job and vacation time and so forth."

Lorna pursed her lips, ashamed that she would have. Would have done anything for this man. Anything.

"The airport, Lorna, you and me,

now, it's a mixed blessing situation. I mean, not five minutes after you called me—" He paused and expelled a heavy sigh. "She's gone."

"I feared that when I saw your suitcase. I am so sorry, Bud."

Georgi Porgie sniffled. He had to remind himself he was Bud Smith and not to let the Russian accent intrude. "Uncle Stan says Sis is a basket case. We have to take her in for observation. I'm praying that she doesn't have to be institutionalized long term."

"Oh dear."

Bud Smith stared at the ticket counters and shook his head. "Funeral homes and loony bins, they're sharks. If you don't have insurance, you're screwed. They'll skin you alive, but hey, what can you do?"

"You don't have insurance?"

"No. Money isn't an issue. Access to it is." Bud Smith threw up his hands. "Sharks. They demand cash up front."

"How much cash?"

"Probably a minimum of five, a maximum of ten grand."

"Could I help?"

Bud Smith squeezed her hand and pecked her cheek. "I guess that's why I love you so much, kiddo. We haven't time to raise this kind of moola."

"I have my bank card."

"Might work," Bud said as if it had just dawned on him. "You'll have to scoot. There's a plane I can get out on in an hour."

Lorna Cobb got up, aware of what she had to do. She returned with a gift basket. "Perhaps this will cheer your sister up. There's something inside for you."

Georgi Porgie smiled broadly to disguise his distaste for the jams and jellies and crap inside the stupid thing. "A wonderful choice, darling. Sis will learn to love you as much as I do."

Mr. Nguyen observed Georgi Porgie and the woman separate after a kiss neither seemed to particularly relish. So as not to be spotted by Porgie, he was situated at a distance, behind a machine that vended flight death insurance. The lady walked around the corner and retrieved the man from a cocktail bar.

The man, Nguyen discerned in the harsh lighting, was a weary, homely, sad individual, not unlike several species of dog. The woman clung to his arm as they walked to the parking garage. Her words seemed to illuminate him, and he nearly smiled. This man cared for the woman exponentially more than Porgie did.

Porgie stood until she left and went in the opposite direction, as if her path had determined his. He impatiently bought a ticket. At random, Nguyen sensed.

He trailed Porgie to the security point and the concourse beyond. The submarine scam was dissolving into futility and unacceptable risk. He planned to find out where Porgie was bound in the improbable event the operation could be salvaged.

Mr. Nguyen witnessed a bizarre skirmish. Georgi Porgie passed inside the metal detector, and his belongings traveled along the conveyor. Uniformed officials took a

frenzied interest in the gift basket and its owner.

Porgie resisted. Additional officials swarmed. Porgie, panicking, screamed obscenities in perfect English as they wrestled him to the floor and plucked from the basket a shiny miniature pistol. From a distance it appeared to be either a child's toy or a woman's fashion accessory.

Nguyen walked toward the terminal exit, certain that it was neither. His patience was exhausted, and so was he. Jimmy Pogue Senior would be unable to finagle a Vladivostok submarine from an American federal prison. Factoring in the mastodon with the outsized feet and Song Le's long tentacles, Nguyen concluded that the time was correct to seek a new home.

There would be another day, another game. Another submarine perhaps.

Lorna Cobb and Brick Bates watched the thwarted skyjacking on the late news. They were at her apartment, having their coffee. Lorna had been kind enough to sweeten his with a taste of Jim Beam.

They viewed the suspect being stuffed into the rear of a U.S. Marshal's Office sedan. Lorna asked, "That *is* him, isn't it?"

Brick sipped and smiled. "Yep."

"The reporter said he had five different driver's licenses on him."

"They'll sort it out," Brick said. "Did you tell him?"

"I was going to until he sweet-talked me for money. My child is not going to know that a man like that is his or her father."

"Skyjacking, huh? Jimmy doesn't seem the type. I wonder what he was really up to. Whether that Russian 101 class was part of his latest scam."

"You never really know a person," Lorna said. "I'll vouch for that."

"How does that old saying go?" Brick said. "Beware of data-entry supervisors bearing gifts?"

She leaned against his shoulder, and he put an arm around her. "Should I report it missing?"

"We'll report it stolen."

"When?"

"Later," Brick Bates said.

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FICTION

The Affair of the Assistants

Ann Woodward

Illustration by Meredith Lightbourn

"Today I had the fright of my life," the Combmaker said to Aoi. Behind a hanging curtain Aoi smiled. More dramatics. She would humor him. It was a hot and stifling day, yet this open space at the end of the house drew some coolness from the garden just beyond the verandah, and she had very few duties these days. The princess whom she served as lady-in-waiting had gone with her husband to his mountain villa in a rare attempt at bringing their spirits into some sort of agreement. Because such an attempt would surely cause scenes of fire and temperament, Aoi had been asked to remain in the city. Mountain cedars and mountain servants would hear the cries and sobs of a proud and neglected wife. Mountain insects would blend nighttime sighs of pleasure and murmurs of sweet talking into their woven mat of sound.

It was not often that Aoi had a chance to live alone for even a few weeks. She had thought she craved such solitude, that her essential being would expand as binding obligation relaxed, that she would recover some truth of her character that had been blurred in coping with the princess and her anxieties. Instead she had drawn tight, nervous and adrift with so much freedom. The princess's steward visited each morning and settled the day's requirements, which he knew better than she but he was a man of habit and he asked as a matter of form. The kitchen functioned on its own; O-hana managed Aoi's personal service as she always had; the floors were polished and every item of decoration was wiped clean, every blind brushed as the day began. Though ordinarily she considered her life too busy to allow satisfying time to be spent with all the medical scrolls and books of poems she loved, now she put them aside after only a few glances, feeling that she should be engaging her mind with more practical matters. The only way Aoi could think of to involve herself in the running of the house was to tell the gardener to pull some garlic while it was still green so the chopped stalks could be added to her early morning noodles that swam in iced water. In a very short time Aoi was bored.

And so she had agreed to see the Combmaker, who was looking into the disappearance of Taira no Kunimori. The request had come from Aoi's friend the Minister of the Right, who was also the princess's father.

"Since my daughter has gone off on this almost secret meeting with her husband, you will be feeling lonely," he had said. "Why don't you come here and we can discuss this puzzling problem together?"

Aoi had said no to the invitation. She was afraid of letting herself become used to his presence, afraid she would not be able to leave when the time came. Affection between Aoi and the princess's father was of long standing, yet few knew of it and Aoi guarded the secret, more for his sake than for any personal concern. He was the most powerful figure in the government; though by custom the Minister of the Left was the one everyone looked to, the present man in that position was vain and neglectful of his duties, spending his time dressing up for one ceremony or dedication after another. Powerful men usually have powerful enemies. Aoi

knew that there were some who resented or feared his ascendancy, as some resented and feared her knowledge of medicines and healing, and she was careful to avoid putting herself forward in any way lest she be used somehow against him.

In this case she had agreed to do her best to find out, with the help of the Combmaker, what had happened to one of the Taira family's best-known men. The Combmaker, enemy of priests, drunkard, mimic, changeling soul, was a poor man whose wife and child had been killed during a fight between the rowdy acolytes of rival temples. Since then, he said, he had not been able to muster the precision and steady hand needed for carving wooden combs. No one knew how he lived, but he was often called on to help with delicate problems of the aristocracy, and there was always concrete gratitude afterwards.

He had entered groveling. Today's performance had been as usual: sliding along the gleaming floorboards on his knees, knocking his head in exaggerated humility, allowing one wandering eye to look off at an extreme angle, lisping grossly servile greetings.

"Thith worthleth man of the threeths—suh-threeths—she reeths—market-ths cannot raithe hith eyeth to regard even your curtain, lady."

Aoi, who had arranged a slight gap in the panels of silk so she could watch him, saw the usual flow of filthy rags with which he changed his figure when he wanted invisibility; she smelled the dust and cooking oil and fish and sweat that wafted from them; she marveled as always at his controlled and limber sprawling; she waited until his posture drew together, as she knew it would, into a very proper bow, eyes focused, knees together, hands spread along his thighs, neck angled respectfully to allow a sideways glance. The voice became that of a man of the court, mellow and cultured; the remark was outrageously familiar:

"I don't know why you are concealing yourself, lady. Have you forgotten how I brought you here as a pregnant fishwife that time we escaped from the ship?"

Aoi smiled but did not disturb the curtain. "There are certain proprieties," she said. "But have you found him?"

It was then that the Combmaker said that he had been frightened.

"First we went to his house," he said, meaning that he had sent some of his helpers to hang around the kitchen door of Kunimori's mansion, offering to run errands or to fetch supplies from the market and gossiping with the servants. Most of the people he used were orphaned children or cripples unable to work, and going to the markets for a rich household was a favor they liked because it was always possible to hide a few cabbage leaves or small onions or shavings of dried fish in their clothes as they returned. "They all report the same thing. All but one. A little girl didn't come back, and we are searching for her."

"A child is missing?"

"Yes. I know what you are thinking, that small girls should not be used

because of the danger of evil men. But this one—she makes a parent of every person she meets. It is some sort of magic; we don't know how she does it, but they all want to take her in. She talks, you see, and she trusts."

"But now you have lost her?"

"It has happened before. We are looking."

"And what did the others find out?"

"That they are upset, there at the house of Taira no Kunimori. They say there is no music now. Well, that is perfectly obvious, the man is gone, isn't he?"

Aoi's silence behind her curtain suppressed his attempt at humor, and after a few wheezing laughs and coughs he went on.

"Ah, please excuse me. This is not a matter for levity. But it's what they notice, the servants—the place is too quiet, and they can never forget."

Taira no Kunimori held a position in the government like all men of his rank. He was, in fact, an important man because of his post as Minister of the Bureau of Records, the agency that checked the accounts of the provincial governments. But his fame was as a particularly subtle player of the long bamboo flute. All his life, since he first left his clan school, he had been known for this art. The very long flute he favored sounded in a low register. It was ancient, a gift from the old emperor, and was called Crane's Brother. In the quiet nights of summer the slow, bending tones carried over the walls of his home and into all the surrounding gardens. People sighed, talking fell away after someone said, "Listen, Kunimori is playing."

"Lately," continued the Combmaker, "he has secluded himself. He did not go to his office, he missed the council meetings. All day he played his flute. He began, they said, in his closed room, behind the reed blinds. Then he had them raise the blinds, and he moved to the very farthest veranda. But he was not satisfied, and they made a comfortable place for him in the garden. Then he must be on the garden pond, even taking his meals floating there in the boat. The man who rowed him complained, and he agreed at once to go in. But there were tears on his face, and the man took up the oars again. He liked the splashing, the man said, and it was such a simple pleasure, how could he be denied? All this time, in the garden, sitting on cushions in the bow of the little boat, he made music with his flute. It was sad, slow, dying away and rising, and the whole house became troubled."

"Ah," Aoi said, "something distressing was on his mind." What she meant was "in his heart," but she was wary of any such emotional phrasing. "His wife died young, before there were any children. But that was in the winter, that time long ago when so many coughed out their lives in the cold. So it could not be that he is reminded by the season of her death. What has happened now, did his people know?"

"They say only that he changed. Always so kind, always careful not to give trouble, he began to ask for special dishes to be made. He unlocked

the storeroom and had them bring out incense his mother had mixed, so rare and wonderful that it had not been used since the reign of the last regent. He would taste the new dish and ask for it again and again. Then for days he would eat only rice. He would sit by the burning fragrance of the incense and smile and play his music. Then he would have the censer taken away; he would explain that it masked the earth smell of the garden. He liked rain, and he would sit just under the eaves. His clothes would become damp, but he protected his flute as never before, closing it into his robes at night. He was always smiling, but they knew he was sad."

"And then?"

"And then one day when they went to dress him, the bedclothes were thrown aside, nothing was missing from his toilet chest, all his robes except the old ones he slept in were properly folded and stored, but he was not there. They are very upset, there at the house. They blame themselves."

"Whyever should they?"

"Well, he was such a good man, never any complaining, generous and pleasant. They feel that they have betrayed him in some way, not paying attention, not helping—but what was the trouble? No one could know that. The women are weeping, the men violently attack their work."

"Ah yes," said Aoi, "to prove that after all they have been diligent, doing what is required. And how could they know what new requirement had presented itself if no one explained it to them? This all seems perfectly normal."

"So he was not seen leaving. But," said the Combmaker, "wherever he went, he would blow his sad melodies. And so we started looking, asking about music, and there we found a trail. He played, and someone gave him food. He played, and someone let him sleep in the garden shed. They all thought he was a beggar."

"What reason had they to come to that conclusion?"

"Only, I suppose, that there are so many musicians who beg. True, they don't usually have to beg, that old lute player and his songs, he lives well, keeps his instrument in a brocade bag, I have seen it myself."

"But what frightened you?"

"Oh, the road, lady, the road."

"Unh?"

"Yes, I am afraid of a road. A long single road from a tiny village out to a temple on a spit in the sea. That is where he went, to that temple."

"You are exercising your considerable capacity to be exasperating," said Aoi. "If you have found him, why didn't you tell me at once?"

"Thith th-th-thick-headed—"

"So now you would stammer as well as lisp! Stop that and explain yourself."

"He went there, yes, that is certain. But *I* cannot go there."

"Why not?"

He sighed.

"I boast, at times, when I am impressed with myself, that I can go anywhere in the city and not be noticed. A needy man shuffling along in his dirty clothes, keeping out of the way, pitiful even to himself— no one sees such a man. But in a little village? On a long straight road through sand and blowing grass?"

"I see. It is true, everyone would know you had passed, they would all see a stranger and go in their houses, send their children to warn their relatives and to fetch the estate warden."

"I avoid wardens," said the Combmaker with a wise nod.

"Ah," said Aoi, exclaiming purely because a rush of gladness filled her. To leave, to make a journey, to have pressing reasons for visiting a remote and unknown place, to see the ocean in hot weather—she breathed in, and the world lifted away and its colors lightened. "I find," she said, "that I must go myself to this temple."

O-hana packed, a message was sent to the princess's father, and men brought the princess's second-best carriage, a light wicker one that would rock easily on rough roads. She would take two guards on horseback. The Combmaker was given suitable clothes—which O-hana would not let him wear until she had driven him into the bathhouse and personally scrubbed him all over—and they explained to the guards that he was to join them for the next few days. Aoi saw the looks of derision, the roughness with which the other two tossed him into his saddle, his panicked slide off the other side, and their grim insistence that he must ride, for who ever heard of a guard on foot, did he want to disgrace the princess, people would recognize this carriage, and . . . Aoi let her helper solve this dilemma on his own, and since he was to lead the way, she watched through the transparent front curtain of the carriage as his steadiness on the horse increased. Before they had entered open country, he was playing to perfection the part of overbearing guard.

The temple was only a day's journey away. They arrived with no notice, yet the monks, all ancient men and untrained boys, received them with grave courtesy. "Lately," they said, "we have grown quite accustomed to visitors."

This gave Aoi the opening she needed for her questions, but the evening was darkening and she retired with O-hana into a hastily curtained-off space, ate the simple beans and rice they brought, loosened her clothing to let the breath of ocean reach her skin, and slept deeply. All night gently slapping waves seemed to slide just at the edge of her pallet, a natural sound and one that filled the whole world.

"Ah, the flute player," they said in the morning. "He left."

"Tell me," said Aoi.

"He must have felt he was imposing on us, with such a large other party here."

"There were others?"

"Yes. It was rather odd. Because they did not seem religious. The old one, though—"

"Old?" Kunimori was, as far as Aoi knew, a man in the fullness of maturity.

They hesitated. "Well, he was not tidy. And he did not walk very surely."

"Um." Aoi was thoughtful.

"But he made such music, out there on the beach. He wasn't the kind of man to disturb others."

"Who were these others?"

"We never knew. They left rather poor gifts, they stayed only one night."

"And did he leave with them?"

"No. He was at his usual place out there. It was stormy that day, and we worried about him."

"He sat there all alone," said one of the boys. "The wind blew so hard that his music was almost lost."

Taira no Kunimori was not a person Aoi knew well, but she had gathered a sure sense of his character from the Combmaker's report and it seemed that, troubled as he was, he might well want to sit on a lonely beach and blend music with wild nature.

But what had so upset him? Aoi thought that she was beginning to understand. "Could you describe your other visitors?"

Men, they answered, rich clothes, horses, guards. But their sparse store of descriptive words could not convey to Aoi enough particulars for her to identify them.

"Could you show me their gifts?"

And then she knew. Two brocade boxes held only one bolt each of silk, not enough for one set of vestments; one box had a family crest woven into the cloth of the cover, the other had a crest painted in ink on the top, two names that together meant only one thing: bribery.

The monks were watching Aoi's deepening seriousness and they became uneasy. "When they didn't come in from the beach, we sent a boy to search for them," they said.

"Them?"

"Yes. There was a girl with him, his daughter."

"Ah," said Aoi.

"He searched the whole beach, but it was already dark and the flute player was not anywhere."

"This was just yesterday?"

"Yes. Late, late. The boy missed the evening service."

"Ah. Old, he seemed to you. Did he also seem blind?"

They were puzzled, they talked to each other, huddled away from such a serious mistake, to meet a blind man and not know it. But, "Yes," they said, "yes, that must have been it."

"It sometimes happens," said Aoi, speaking also to the Combmaker, who sat in a corner, "that one's sight fails instantly, something in the eyes falls apart when the yin is too strong and makes the blood thin, so that it surges into a place where it does not belong. This has long been reported to be true. I think that is what happened to this man. He was modest, not one to cause distress to others. But he seemed to be trying to sink himself into nature— sitting in the garden, listening to rain, the splash of oars. It must have seemed to him that the closest he could get to the world he had lost was to go to the sea. And his sad music was—"

"You didn't see him," said a boy. "He was not sad. He played like—" But the boy had no words for such music. He stopped, thinking hard. "It was like birds," he said.

"A fluttering?" asked Aoi. "High soaring?"

"Quiet. Like birds in their nest."

"Yes." Aoi regarded the boy with affection. He had expressed it perfectly after all, the way a long flute could imitate the serenity of cranes. "I fear that we may find something awful," she said.

The princess's guards came in then from the beach. He was not there, they said. No one at all was on the beach except some fishermen who had just come in with their catch.

The Combmaker listened, then stood up from his place against the wall and left the building without speaking. Aoi, having dreaded discovery of a body, tried to think what else they could do. O-hana came with a mix of raw vegetables, vinegar, and white bean paste. On the tray was a cup of tea, that rare herb from India.

"The monks had this," O-hana said. "They use it to keep awake for their meditation. I promised we would send them more, and they gave me a few leaves."

The tea was hot and weak and did not bring any new ideas.

Continuing their routine, the monks gathered on a shaded verandah to hold morning class for the boys. Low drones of recitation, added to the steady crash of waves and whine of wind under the eaves, gave Aoi a sense of impatience with herself, that she had come all this way, thinking in her pride that she could find a troubled man and restore him— to what? To his family? To his duty? To society? No, she thought wearily, to himself. Discontented, frustrated, she was almost dozing when she heard sounds at the shuttered door that protected her privacy.

"Thith thupid one!" said a voice, "to dreth like a guard meanth that you think like a guard." The door rattled open, and he came sliding tipsily in, one gleaming eye cocked away from the other, until he arrived with a final bump and a smile before Aoi.

"May I prethent—" he turned back and another ragged figure entered and knelt, followed by a tiny child.

"I am Taira no Kunimori, and I am helpless to repay the trouble you have taken to find me. And this is—well, she doesn't have a name, she

says, but I call her Yuri because like a lily she closes up if you breathe on her. She has adopted me."

After all the fuss of astonishment and welcome, after the Combmaker had explained that the guards were too used to proper behavior and reasoning to recognize a disheveled government official among boatmen; after food and wine and some discreet grooming by O-hana, Kunimori sat down with Aoi and the Combmaker—who would not give up the worn clothes he had exchanged for his guard uniform in order to resume his accustomed character—and began his explanation.

"Yes, I have been most unhappy. When my sight darkened so suddenly, I was in despair. Even though I have always met the world most closely through sound, how could I bear not to see it? It was too much to lose, I thought, and I tried to learn to see through hearing. But in my music I was finding scenes grander and more intense than any sounds that exist in the city. And so I left to look for a place where I could match those scenes made of music in the nature around me."

"Ah. A seashore was the perfect place," said Aoi, "full of sound."

"This little girl came along, I don't know why. She talks a lot, but she has led me through these rough country roads and finally I have stopped bruising myself. She doesn't like it here, the ocean frightens her, there is too much noise, too much open space. And since our mistreatment and then our time on the boat that took us away to safety, she has become altogether silent, a most unnatural state, and I am worried."

"Do tell us what happened."

"They broke my flute—" All those listening drew in breath.

"Who?"

"The guards who came with the other visitors. I heard the crack of it on someone's knee. And then it was only a rattling mass of splinters, and they shook the remains of it in my face and threatened to do the same to both my arms if I told anyone who I had seen at the temple. This child attacked them—she can be quite fierce."

"She has been living on the streets; the children become rather wild," said the Combmaker.

"You know her?"

"She was sent to find you."

"Ah. Well, she bit. The man was furious, and he struck her. I can only tell you what I heard. He cried out that his wrist was bleeding with toothmarks, there was a sound like a stone thrown against a wall, the other man said to come away, was he afraid of such a tiny girl? They must have left, but I heard no footsteps because of the sand. I fell down and swept my arms about until I found her. She breathed, I thought, but she would not speak. I forgot my flute, the threat of broken arms, and in my rage I must have shouted as I rose up. The fishermen had just come to their boat—some sort of night catch, I know nothing of that skill—and they chased away those who had attacked us. Before we knew it, we were at

sea, the girl and I, rocking about in a tiny cabin and sick the whole night long. She revived, but she is so quiet that I fear—"

"It will not last," said the Combmaker with a wry smile.

"I see." After some thought to retrieve the thread of his tale, Kunimori went on. "I had thought to remain here and live a life of peaceful seclusion, but then those rich visitors came to the temple. I knew them, their voices, I have had dealings with them both—and that was a revelation that I did not need to see with my eyes. I knew what they were doing in their secret meeting though I would have preferred not to know. Oh well, I thought, let the former assistant to the Governor of Awa bribe the assistant to the Minister of Ceremonial to raise him a few grades in rank. He is a criminal who has burned the records of at least two retiring governors so that his thievery could not be discovered. Because the governors these days take office, accept their handsome remittances and personal staff, and then remain in the capital without ever being present in their provinces, the provincial assistants can divert tax goods to their own storehouses with no one to know. You are aware, I am sure, of many fortunes that have been created in just that way. Then, when it is time for the governor's retirement and my office is to come into it to check the records, there is an accidental fire, and the records cease to exist. The next thing is high rank, which can be simply bought nowadays and is no longer purely hereditary, and soon the former low official is seen at court, he acquires an influential position, his favor is sought, and he becomes richer than ever. But I was leaving the world, I thought, and I would not trouble myself to report them."

He stopped speaking. His face tightened, but when he resumed, it was in the light, pleasant voice of someone who reports the return of the sun on a cloudy day. "But they had smashed my flute and struck this child."

All those listening became still. The sea tumbled and dragged on the sand outside, the wind made a sifting noise. Kunimori seemed to be thinking over the import of what he had just said, absorbing purpose, opening his mouth and stopping, as if to speak more would be to weep or to rage and he could not tell which would happen. O-hana passed him a cup of rice wine.

"It was then," he said at last, "that I discovered my life, an existence as a moral and responsible man that I was not willing to give up. This—" he indicated the weathered wooden building, the beach, the endless march of waves onto the shore "—is all very well if you fit into it somewhere, if you are a part of it. But I find that I cannot idly observe, I must meet my duties."

"Ah, but your flute!" Aoi said, pain and outrage in her voice.

"There are other flutes. I will not be threatened. They thought I had seen them, would recognize their faces, and even though they didn't recognize mine and considered me a person not really worth bothering with, they sent their guards to follow me to the beach and frighten me.

The flute, the little girl—it was pure careless evil, violence as affirmation of their own strength. The child could have died. I find myself angry; I have awakened to my own power as Minister of the Bureau of Records. I mean," he said, "to do them harm."

"You will remove them?"

"No. Oh no. I will advance them. I will see that they both become governors of remote provinces. I will insist that they reside there, an implied exile and they will know the reason for it. I will give them honest men as assistants and local men as deputies and field managers. They are quite strong for their rights in some of these outlands, they are warlike in solving their problems. These men will never have seen such warriors as are taking over in the east. They will not last long after their confiscating ways are discovered."

Aoi thought of the princess's father, how he would enjoy this tale of a dutiful minister.

The Combmaker spoke, "This girl who helped you, this strangely silent one here, she has no family and perhaps . . ."

"Yes," said Kunimori, "I admit now that I cannot see except darkly at the edges. I will need someone to lead me. And as a return I will teach her to play the long flute."

"Oh," said the girl, rushing to him from her corner, all knobby bones and flying hair. "You will not make me live in a house, will you? You will not let them scrub my face like she just did? You will not—"

"First," said Kunimori, "you should see the house and then you can decide."

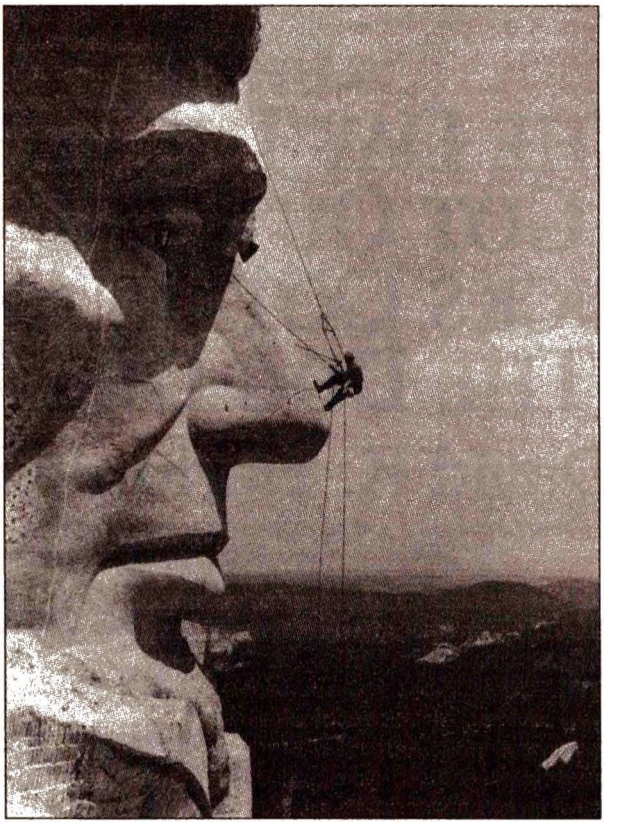
"But," she said, and putting her nose close to his chin, holding his face with both hands to make him listen, she continued her objections, beginning each one with "You won't make me—"

"No. No. Of course not," he replied, over and over.

The Combmaker turned to Aoi. "I think I have just lost one of my best helpers," he said. "By tomorrow she will have him completely tamed."

"Yes. Though she starts with total refusal, she will, for the rest of his life, be persuaded to accept civilizing comforts one after the other."

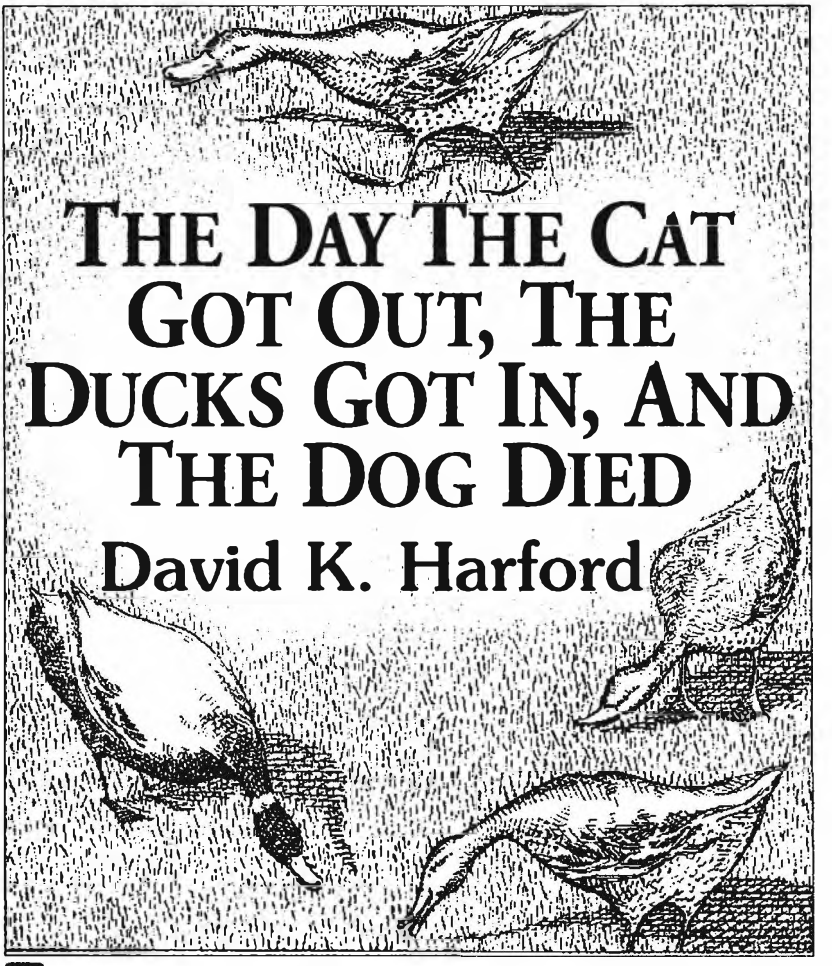
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archives

To get *here*, you go north by south. 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 "February 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 September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 143.



THE DAY THE CAT GOT OUT, THE DUCKS GOT IN, AND THE DOG DIED

David K. Harford

I never dreamed I'd be living up here.

I'd only been out of that god-awful prison a few months when Lew and me moved into this camp up Mountain View Hollow.

It was an art heist gone haywire that got me two and a half years in that federal prison up near Bradford, but it was overcrowding and good behavior that got me out on parole early.

The old weatherbeaten clapboard hunting camp belonged to my deceased father's brother out in Ohio somewhere. I hardly even knew him, but because he was getting on in age and rarely humped these steep northwestern Pennsylvania mountains hunting any more, and knew Lew and me needed someplace to squat, he let us move in free. All I had to pay was the electric bill. 'Course, everything

in the place is electric except the heat, which is a wood stove. No TV or phone either. So, it's been rugged living, especially for Lew.

But there's a real sense of peacefulness and freedom living up this hollow, in these mountains; a freedom and peace I never knew in the federal stir I was in, confined with the likes of that disgusting Ollie West, my cellmate for a while until they threw him into solitary, and having to put up with nasty guards like John "Mr. Big" Bigley and all the others who tormented and bullied me. So I liked the freedom of Mountain View Hollow a lot right off. And I learned to like it more and more as time went on.

Besides me and Lew (Lew's my younger brother who can't hear, reads lips, and talks only by signing), the only other permanent residents up this hollow are old Ma "The Sarge" Duncan on her sprawling farm at the top of the hill, which, I suppose, is where the hollow got its name—she's got one hell of a sweeping view across the entire Allegheny mountain range from up there—and, of course, there's Bob, who lives a half mile farther up the hollow, past me on the right.

Bob's retired out of Pittsburgh, where most of his family still lives. It was while we were staying at his place taking care of his animals that all that shooting and killing and everything else went on, which is what I'm setting out to tell you about.

The four of us (me, Lew, Ma Duncan, and Bob) are like a family isolated in the shady folds of these mountains. We take care of each other, especially in the winter when we get snowed in, separated from the outside world. It's good to have family.

The rest of the buildings along the dirt road, which splits the mountains like a peach pit, are hunting camps—about a dozen of them sitting empty most of the year. A couple of them camps don't have nobody come to them ever.

It's all right with me that they stand empty though 'cause that's how I make my money, and with that money and Lew's SSI check, it gives us enough to stay alive.

Watching over most of them camps is what I get paid for. It's my job (to be let out on parole I had to have a paying job) to make sure they don't get busted into while their owners are gone, don't get burnt to the ground, don't have no porcupines gnawing away at the back porches of the camps, collapsing them. Sometimes I take my old unregistered pickup out into the woods and get them flatlanders' firewood I cut from standing dead trees; sometimes I do light labor around their camps: mow the lawn, keep the weeds cut back, patch a roof, things like that.

Lew helps, too. He might not be the brightest squirrel in the forest, but he's got a strong back and an even stronger heart and he can split a load of firewood with a maul faster than I can chunk it with a chain saw. We make a good team, Lew and me, and I'm glad I went and got him out of that home the minute I got out of prison.

I think Lew's glad I come got him, too.

But anyway, to get to this shooting and killing thing, one day Bob stopped by my place and asked if I'd be willing to take care of his trailer and pets for a week while he was down in Pittsburgh at a family gathering. I could live right there in the comfort of his place for the entire week, he said. Watch TV, even.

I'd been to his trailer quite a few times, naturally, so I knew that by pets he meant his big bourbon-colored cat named Whiskey, a sick, ailing dog named Dog, who just loved Lew by the way, and about fifteen ducks Bob was raising in a pond he had dug out when he first moved into his place.

Bob pulled in a nice new seventy foot mobile home, a deluxe double-wide model with two extra bedrooms, large living room, small kitchen—plenty of space for a guy living alone with his sick dog and his cat. The ducks waddle about the property around the trailer.

Every day Bob goes out and scrounges through the brush hunting down fresh duck eggs and takes them up to Ma Duncan, who uses them for cooking things like homemade sourdough bread.

She always drops Bob off a couple of warm loaves whenever she drives by his place in that old beat-up Ford wagon of hers, and farther down the road she usually drops me and Lew off some bread. In the fall she brings us fresh garden-grown vegetables. She does great homemade berry pies, too, the aroma so warm, sweet, and thick rising off them pies you can almost chew the smell.

In exchange for her generosity and kindness, Lew and me often walk up the dusty road to the top of the mountain to do light chores (and sometimes heavy chores) for her. Ma Duncan is getting up in age and is limited a bit on what she can manage around her farm now. But I'm always glad to help her any time I can—we're family, like I told you.

But here I am, wandering again in my thoughts.

So I go down to see Bob and get my instructions about taking care of his pets for that week.

"Morning," Bob said, laying down the daily paper he was reading at his kitchen table.

You could tell he was a retired accountant or something like that because his place was always as neat as a row of numbers in a ledger book, everything in its proper place.

"You know this guy?" he asked, sliding the Bradford paper across the table to me.

Lew come with me, and he was over by Dog, who lay sick and dying from old age in the corner of the living room where Bob had set up the dog's blanket-bed. Lew was holding that big chocolate Lab's head on his lap, stroking it behind the ears, and that dog was making soft sounds, like if he were a cat, he'd've been purring. Animals always seemed to take to Lew. It's a gift he has.

Whiskey the cat jumped up on my lap as I looked at the front page of the paper.

I couldn't believe what I saw and was reading.

INMATE ESCAPES FROM FEDERAL

PRISON is what the headline said. But it was the photo I was looking at that set something sour stirring in me. There on the front page, dressed in his best prison duds, was a grim-faced Ollie West.

The article went on to say that Ollie West had only recently been transferred from the main prison to the minimum security camp built within the prison complex, where they kept the less dangerous and less troublesome prisoners. An inmate could just walk out of that camp—walk-aways, prison officials called them—and that's exactly what Ollie West did. The paper called it an escape, though.

"You know him?" Bob asked again.

"Sure, sure, I know him," I said, still reading the article and staring at Ollie's beady, untrusting eyes in that photo. "He was my cellmate for a while. Funny that they'd stick him in that camp. He was nothing but trouble for the guards and for everyone else."

Ollie West was in the slammer on a bargained-down manslaughter rap—woman slaughter actually. Before long, Ollie got religion bad, and that's what made him so miserable to cell with.

Always preaching he was, about the evils of drugs and alcohol mostly. Plenty of drugs were smuggled in there: pills, grass, cocaine, you name it. No one ever said how they got there; it was like they would just suddenly materialize one day and then everybody had some or was trading something for some.

But the "Reverend" Ollie had other things he preached about, too, like the sins of the world resting on Jesus's shoulders and how we all had better repent our dark, evil ways and help lighten Jesus's load. 'Course, he never once said nothing about the black, weighty evils of killing people, women.

And sometimes late at night he'd try to slide into my bunk with me, like he thought Jesus didn't mind him doing that, and I'd have to shove him hard to get him out.

So now he'd escaped.

"Imagine that," I told Bob.

"Watch out," Bob said. I wasn't sure if Bob was kidding or not, but he didn't sound it. "He may be prowling around this area."

"Oh, I doubt it," I told him. Even though we was only a few mountains and fifty miles south of that prison, we were in the wrong direction Ollie West would have headed. "He's from out in Kansas somewhere," I said. "He's heading that way, west. And he better be hoofing it. The families of some of those women he killed will be watching to make sure he gets sent back to prison. Not only that, those federal marshals who'll be chasing Ollie better hope some of them family members don't find him first."

But I still wondered how it came about that Ollie got to be in the minimum security camp. Someone's head was going to roll. Warden Brown or even Dawson, his assistant, who's usually as mild and gentle as a lamb—Dawson even offered me a job the day I was released—would see to it. An escape can be awful embarrassing to prison officials, and not even calling it

a walk-away can remove that embarrassment.

Bob's suitcase was already packed for his trip to Pittsburgh, his light green sweater draped neatly across it.

He said to me, "Now, whatever you do, don't let the cat out. He doesn't come back for days if he gets out. I've got the duck food here—" he pointed to a new plastic garbage can next to his fridge "—because if I keep the food in the shed, the field mice gnaw holes right through the can and get into it. Feed the ducks daily on the lawn near the door. Old Dog won't cause you any problems. If you wake up one morning and he's dead, bury him for me, would you? He hasn't got many days left."

I felt a little shot of sorrow stab me, and I was glad Lew's back was turned.

"You know how to turn the satellite dish, so if your brother wants to watch TV, he can."

"He will," I said. Lew loves the cartoons. We stepped outside.

Bob drew in a healthy lungful of air. "God, I love this place! It took every cent I had to buy it, but I love it. All those years working for McCrombie and Weatherton in hot, sweltering Pittsburgh I dreamed of retiring up here in the cool of these mountains. I worked for that dream, and now I'm living it." He rubbed his hand along the wall of the trailer, and I thought for a moment he was going to kiss it goodbye. Instead, he walked to his car, suitcase in hand.

"There's food in the fridge," he said. "Help yourself. Some of Ma Duncan's bread is there yet. Don't forget to gather eggs, if you can find them, and take them up to her. They'll rot in the heat or else the coons will get them if you don't. Call if any problems come up. Phone number's on the kitchen table. But you shouldn't have any trouble. We'll square up the money when I get back. Take good care of my buddies and my little dream house," he said.

With that, he started his car and pulled out of the driveway.

This was going to be a fast, easy, luxurious way to make a few big bucks, I could see that, and I smiled at Bob's worry about trouble. What possible trouble could come up? There was too much peace in the hollow for any trouble.

At least that's what I thought then as Bob's taillights disappeared behind a large clump of blackberry bushes loaded with inch-long berries.

But a few hours later, a little bit after I got the TV adjusted for Lew, trouble first began stirring in the form of a black sedan with dark-tinted windows all around that pulled into one of those long-empty camps directly across the road from Bob's trailer.

I never had no soft light of a dream to guide me like Bob did, dreaming of buying his property, following that light, and then finally doing it, putting up his trailer and moving in. I never had a dream any more than I ever had a real family—except for Lew, and now Bob and Ma Duncan as an extended family.

My life was more like a lonely walk across a broken, heaved sidewalk in the dark—one cautious step at a time. The only thing guiding me was my next blind, stumbling, unsure footstep.

I was thinking about that while admiring Bob's property from where I was crouched in the underbrush, hunting duck eggs around the pond behind his trailer. All the ducks were swimming in the pond or lounging on the banks enjoying the August afternoon.

I had to envy old Bob for getting what he wanted, for making his dream house come true.

Lew was inside sitting on the floor watching Toon-TV, which I found for him on the television. He had old Dog's head resting on his lap, and he was stroking his silky ears when I left, grinning a wide grin at the toons. Of course, the volume on the TV was shut off.

Suddenly there was this big cloud of dust rising and lingering in the still, late summer air, and I snapped my head around when I heard the crunching of gravel from that black car pulling into the camp across the road. I don't know why, but I just kind of instinctively ducked lower in the brush till I was out of sight.

From the front passenger seat a guy got out. He had a cell phone to his ear and was talking to someone as he stepped out of the car. He stretched his back, loosened his tie, put the phone in his pocket, and strolled down the driveway to where it met the road. He looked left and right, up and down the hollow road, then he stared long and hard in my direction, at Bob's trailer, inspecting it. From where he was, Bob's trailer was the only building up the hollow road he could see.

He couldn't see me, of course.

I was sure Bob's trailer looked empty, like many of the camps were at that time of year: no sounds coming from it, no car in the driveway, no movement outside the place or inside it, the lawn needing mowing on account of our recent rains.

Apparently satisfied, the guy made a sudden hand movement, and the driver, a real tall dude, got out. He wasn't wearing no tie, but because of the distance, that's about all I could actually see of either of them.

With no wasted moves, the big driver opened the back door of the car as the first guy unlocked the camp's front door. The driver pulled a third man out of the back seat.

With the third guy slumped over and needing propping up, the big driver half walked and half drug his friend quickly across the driveway and into the camp.

"Drunk," she whispered.

Her voice scared me a second, but when I jerked my head around, I come face to face with old Ma "The Sarge" Duncan, who'd snuck up from behind and was crouched in the brush next to me. She bit the end off one of her small stogies, spat it out, and, parting some of the sun-dried goldenrods, scrutinized the camp across the road.

"Another drunk flatlander," she said. As usual, she was wearing army camo fatigues.

"Who owns that camp?" I whis-

pered. "I've never seen no one in there before."

"Some say the syndicate out of New Jersey," she said, making syndicate rhyme with indicate. "But I doubt that. Too much of a ramshackle camp for rich, powerful syndicate boys." She tipped her army slop hat back from her forehead. "They don't even have a phone or electric run in there. In the courthouse it's listed as being owned by a guy named Randall from Trenton. He's got five or six acres stretching up the hill behind the camp that I'd like to own."

I felt my throat swell up, wanting to choke me. Syndicate? It was two feuding mob families in the Philly area who got me tangled up in that screwy art heist.

Ma Duncan had a plastic pail attached to her army web belt; it was half full of fresh blackberries. And, of course, over her left shoulder she had "Annie K." slung.

Annie K was the name Ma Duncan gave her AK47. She also owned a twelve gauge shotgun cut off at the barrel and stock so it looked like a long pistol capable of firing buckshot as fast as Ma Duncan could pump rounds into the chamber. She kept the loaded shotgun under the seat of her Ford wagon. Ma Duncan loved her guns and loved firing them.

She might have been a bit too trigger happy, though, I thought. Like the time last year when the timber rattler almost bit Lew on the face. What happened was—it was about the same time in August—the three of us were walking up the hollow road to Ma Duncan's place to help her push her old Ford wagon out of where she'd gotten it bogged down in one of her fields.

We had a lot less rain last year, nearly a drought, and with no rain the small animals—mice, chipmunks, small birds—they all come down off the higher ground 'cause there's no water up there and look for water in the lower areas and valleys. The rattlesnakes follow their food down.

There's a spot along the road where one bank is cut kind of high and steep and is always loaded with blackberry bushes.

I'd stopped to tie my shoe. Ma Duncan, with Annie K. slung over her shoulder, and Lew were up ahead of me just a ways. Lew suddenly turned to scamper up that steep bank to get himself a handful of fresh blackberries.

Ma Duncan heard the rattler first, lying in among those blackberry bushes where it was cool and comfortable for the snake. I heard its tail buzzing angrily a few seconds later.

Lew can't hear, like I told you, and no timber rattler is going to bother learning to sign.

Now, a timber rattler bite can kill a man, but usually all it does is make him wish to God he'd never been bit; make him painful sick and sorry him and that snake ever crossed paths. And when they strike, they strike quick if they're surprised, but given a choice, they'd just as soon avoid you.

The snake in the blackberry bushes was surprised by Lew suddenly clambering up the bank, and he had nowhere to go.

At the first buzz of the tail Ma Duncan yelled, *"Rattler! Grab your brother and hit the dirt!"* At the same time, faster than the snake could strike, she was unslinging Annie K., flipping off the safety, and swinging around towards Lew, who still hadn't seen it.

I was up in an instant and made one flying leap just as Ma Duncan opened up with a full burst of automatic gunfire. I could hear the bullets zipping inches above my head the moment I high-tackled Lew off the bank and fell on top of him to protect him.

A couple of moments later I felt the weight of not one but two thick black rattlers fall down off the bank and drop across my back, deader than a fencepost both of them.

I suppose I should have been grateful to Ma Duncan for saving Lew from the sure rattlesnake bite, but my first reaction was to think how fast and how carelessly Ma Duncan had fired that rifle. I mean, a split second too late and me or Lew would have taken the burst.

But I never got a chance to say nothing to Ma Duncan about it because just then she kicked them rattlers off my back and stuck her face right into mine, yelling, "The next time I tell you to hit the dirt, you hit the dirt. Don't ask why; don't even think why. Just hit it. You damn near got your brother killed being so slow-moving, soldier."

I thought I'd moved pretty quick, and I wasn't no soldier.

But Ma "The Sarge" Duncan was standing stiff as a board, her face beet red, the rifle at parade rest, and she was barking in my face like an army drill instructor, which is what she was for a while back in World War II, training WACs. I think a lot of that is still in her, too much maybe. She never got into no war zone, she told me once, never once had a chance to kill a Kraut or a Jap. Women weren't allowed in war zones where the fighting was, she said. And she always seemed kind of disappointed about that, like it was some kind of deep hole in her needing filling.

With them rattlers dead and their rattles cut off, she continued on up the road, rubbing the stock of her rifle, muttering, "God knows I love it."

Family or not, that's when I learned to be cautious around Ma Duncan when she was toting Annie K.

She shifted the rifle on her shoulder as we both watched the camp with the black car out front.

The two men emerged from the camp and climbed into the car, apparently leaving their buddy inside to sleep it off.

"Going to get more beer, I reckon," Ma Duncan said. She tapped me on the shoulder. "Later, when they get back, why not go over there and strike a deal with them about caring for their place. Looks like it could use your handiwork. And maybe then you can find out for me if they ever intend to sell it." Then she asked, "Find any eggs?"

I handed her the three duck eggs I'd found that weren't being sat on by a mother duck, and she put them in her pail atop the berries and snapped the lid shut.

I studied the camp again. Another camp on my list wouldn't hurt the old wallet. Turning back to Ma Duncan to thank her for the suggestion, I saw she was gone, as quietly and unnoticed as when she'd first appeared beside me. I could hear her soft crawling in the brush fifty yards off.

If them two other men had gone after beer in nearby Emporium, they were in some bar drinking most of it.

A couple of hours passed, and there was no stirring in the camp across the road. The black car never come back. At least, not then.

I was inside Bob's trailer peering through the small part in Bob's window curtains. Lew had fallen asleep on the floor with Dog resting his head on Lew's lap. It was kind of nice knowing Dog was getting some attention and love in the final days of his life.

I decided I should venture over to the camp and introduce myself to the guy left in there (maybe he was Randall), hoping he was sober and awake enough so I could make my offer. I checked one last time to make sure Lew was all right and then sauntered across the dirt road and up the driveway.

The camp was in worse shape than I'd imagined. The rusted gutters were drooping, and several pine saplings were growing in them. The dirt and rotted leaves that had accumulated in them through the years made fertile ground for seeds that blew off the stand of white pines growing along the bank directly behind the camp.

The walkway to the porch was rotted, foundation blocks were heaved from the frost and water under the camp, and the entire place was badly in need of paint. All this made me feel good 'cause I could see they needed me or their neglected place was going to fall down in a year or so.

I knocked on the door, waited, but heard nothing, no one stirring inside. I tried the handle, but the door was locked, surprisingly firmly locked for such a ramshackle place.

I went around to the side window, where I had to brush a thick layer of road dust and grime from the pane. I half expected to see a groggy guy with an illustrious hangover and shaky hands stooped over a cup of black coffee trying to sober up.

But what I saw was the guy lying across an old mattress on a metal bed with no bedding on it.

I tapped lightly on the window.

He stirred in the bed and rolled towards me but his eyes were all glazed over and puffy, and when he squinted through the slits of his eyelids in my direction, I knew he couldn't see no farther than the tip of his nose.

He turned completely over now and faced me, his cheekbones marked with dark purple bruises. He mouthed something but quickly passed out again, his head drooping down off the mattress.

Living with Lew, who can lipread real well if you talk slowly, I'd more or less taught myself a bit of lipreading, too, so I had no problem figuring out what the guy had just

said. "Help me," he'd said through swollen lips. "God, help me."

It was then that I realized two things that stunned me so hard they damn near knocked me off the wobbly piece of unsplit, rotted firewood I needed to stand on to get to the window.

The guy in the bed was tied—no, handcuffed or chained, it was hard to tell—to the bedposts. Only one leg was free. The other leg was attached to the footpost, and both his hands were secured to the headposts.

But what was more horrifying as I stared into that busted up, unshaven, pale face, into those closed eyes, was that I knew when they opened they'd be beady, untrusting eyes. I was looking right into the face of escaped prisoner Ollie West —the "Reverend" Ollie West, my former cellmate, lying there shackled to that bed.

Wearing the living room rug thin by nervously pacing back and forth in Bob's trailer across the road from Ollie West's new prison and his new solitary confinement, I thought and thought and debated and argued with myself over who I should call, or if I should call anyone at all.

It seemed like old Ollie West was following me around like a bad rumor, and I wasn't sure I wanted to get involved with him and his preaching again. If I just stayed out of it, stayed out of sight, maybe they would leave, taking Ollie with them.

But, in my mind, it was raining questions: What was Ollie doing down in my area instead of heading for Kansas? Why was he shackled to that bed? And who were those other men? Brothers, fathers, or husbands of Ollie's victims, families of the women Ollie killed? Many of them always swore publicly they'd kill Ollie West if he were ever released or paroled. None of them liked the plea bargain deal Ollie got offered. Most of them read the papers, too, I imagined, so they'd know he'd escaped.

I had no idea where the local Pennsylvania state police barracks were, had no phone number for them, and knew of no other law enforcement men to call.

Just stay out of it.

But then I thought, what if there were a reward for finding an escaped prisoner?

Stay out of it . . .

Reward . . .

It's not your problem . . .

Reward . . .

Ollie West is nothing but trouble . . .

Reward . . .

You don't want nothing to do with them . . . with any of them . . .

Reward . . .

Ollie's getting what he deserves from families taking care of their own . . .

Pace, pace, pace.

Reward won the argument finally, and I picked up the phone to call the prison. It was the only place I could think of to call, and at least I knew there'd be someone there I could talk to, someone I knew. In the meantime I planned to stay well hidden inside the trailer.

At first I was going to go for the top and ask for Warden Brown, but then I decided I could better talk to Dawson, Warden Brown's assistant. Dawson had always treated me square while I was his guest in that prison, and like I say, he even made mention of a driving job he knew of and said if I needed work when I got out he could line it up. But by that time I'd already made arrangements with my uncle about the camp, and, of course, if I were on the road driving, I'd have to take Lew with me and I didn't think Lew could sit in no truck for long periods of time without restlessness setting in.

So I said no to Dawson, but I always thought more of him for making me the offer.

I had the phone in my hand; through that small chink in the drapes I peered at the camp across the road. Just as I was about to dial Dawson and tell him where Ollie West was (and ask him about a reward), that black car come back up the hollow road again.

I put the phone down and watched through the curtains.

The two men got out, went to the trunk of the car, and lifted out a cardboard box with something lying atop it. The tall dude carried it into the camp. The other guy kept his eyes fixed on Bob's trailer for awhile before he went in.

Behind me Lew was stirring awake, wiping the sleep from his eyes and stroking Dog's head. Dog had been awake for some time, lying there with his head on Lew's midsection like he was guarding and protecting him while he slept.

Whiskey the cat began rubbing against my leg. He jumped up on the kitchen table, pacing worse than me. Seemed like Whiskey wanted to be fed . . .

I jerked my head around when I heard a loud *bang* like a gunshot coming from the camp, but it could have been that someone dropped something heavy. The wind up the hollow plays tricks with sounds, swirling and distorting them.

Just then I noticed all fifteen of them ducks suddenly come waddling in a line from the pond out back and around to the front of Bob's trailer.

Now, ducks like to be fed, too, and they like to be fed on time, and they know where to go when it's feeding time. And there they were; I had male and female mallards, some white ducks, some young ducks with yellow pinfeathers still, a couple of brown ducks—big and small ducks all milling around in the yard right smack in front of the door quacking loudly and sniffing the tall damp grass for bugs. But they clearly wanted to be fed their normal duck food, which was in the garbage can beside the fridge.

No way was I going to go out and feed them ducks; no way was I going to show myself. Not after what I'd seen of Ollie West.

The camp door opened, and the tall dude, who'd removed his shirt and was down to a T-shirt, stepped outside, holding something in his hand. The ducks immediately got his attention, and he called into the camp to the other guy.

It was then I could see what that

guy had in his hand, what it was that had been lying on top of the cardboard box. It was an army entrenching tool, the kind soldiers use to dig foxholes when they're in battle. The entrenching tool was unfolded and ready to use.

When the other guy come out of the camp, the tall one pointed at the trailer and the ducks milling about in the yard. The shorter guy glared in my direction and said something to the tall dude, and they both headed across the road towards me. They both had pistols drawn, and both were jacking rounds into the chambers.

Quickly I signed to Lew: Pick up Dog and take him back to the back bedroom. Set him on the bed. You stay there with him. Don't make a sound. Don't let Dog make a sound. Hurry. Hurry.

Of course, that was kind of nonsense to tell Lew not to let Dog make a sound—Lew wouldn't hear it anyway. But that's how antsy I was getting and not thinking straight.

The two men were getting closer and were splitting up, one going to the front door, the other to the locked back door of the trailer. I flipped the inside lock on the front door, so it locked, too, and then sneaked into the bedroom with Lew and Dog. The curtains were closed, so there was no way either of them men could see us short of busting through the trailer doors.

Through the drawn curtains I watched the silhouette of the tall dude moving along outside the bedroom windows. Soon I heard the back door handle being turned several times as he tried to get in.

The front door handle was being jiggled, too.

Me, Lew, and Dog sat quietly on the bed while the two men circled the trailer, checking it out, trying to get in. I kept signing to Lew: Don't make a noise. We're in trouble.

They met outside the bedroom window, and I heard them talking.

"This ain't a camp. It's someone's home. But it seems no one's here," the tall one said.

"Yeah, too many pets for a camp. There's a cat in there on the kitchen table," the other replied.

"They could be away. Cats can take care of themselves. My sister had a cat. She used to leave it in the house for a coupla days at a time."

"Where'd all them ducks come from?"

"There's a pond out back," the tall one said.

"Let's go finish it and get out of here before whoever lives here gets back. We don't need this thing getting any more complicated than it's already gotten."

The two silhouettes began moving away from the trailer.

"Ah, God," the one guy swore. "I just stepped in a big pile of duck droppings."

"I took care of that cat, you know," the big guy was saying.

"You mean, you fed it and cleaned the litterbox and all that? That don't sound like you."

"No, I mean I took care of it. I hate cats, so I drowned it in my sister's rain barrel."

"That's what I like about you best," the other said just as they

were getting out of hearing range. "You've got no heart."

Cautiously I parted the curtains a tad. The two men were back over by their camp.

Who *were* these guys? Who were they, and how'd they end up with Ollie West? Did they help him escape, meet him along the highway in that black car after Ollie walked out of the prison camp? Were they family of Ollie's victims and chased him down? And what did they intend to do with Ollie now that they had him secured to that bed?

I got a few answers a few minutes later.

The two men, one holding Ollie under the armpits, the other by his feet, carried Ollie West out of the camp and laid him down on the ground outside. Ollie's face, which a short while ago was only bruised and swollen, was now all bloodied from the bullet hole in his temple.

That was one question that got answered—the loud noise had been a gunshot.

And as I watched the big dude pick up the entrenching tool, throw Ollie over his shoulder, and head up the bank among them white pines, another question got answered: what were they going to do with the "Reverend" Ollie West? They were about to bury Ollie up behind the camp, that's what.

After three rings, two secretaries, and ten minutes on hold, I finally got through to Dawson at the prison. Lew and Dog were hunkered in the corner of the living room out of sight from the windows. I was back to peering out the living room drapes.

Dawson at first didn't seem to know who I was, but he remembered right after I reminded him of the job offer.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," he said. "How's it going? What can I do for you? Want that job?"

"I'm not calling about the job," I said. "I'm calling about Ollie West. I read in the newspaper about him escaping. I know where he is."

That perked Dawson right up. "You do? Where's that s.o.b. at? Where are you at?"

"I'm in a trailer up a hollow called Mountain View Hollow in Cameron County, fifty miles south of you."

"Okay."

"And a couple of dudes brought Ollie to a camp across the road from me. They tied him to a bed and just a bit ago they killed him, and now they're burying him."

"You recognize any of them men?" Dawson asked.

"No. There's two of them. A real tall guy and another guy, but I haven't got a good look at either one of them. They've always been too far away."

Dawson cursed. "You stay right there." He spoke in a hurried voice. "I'll get someone down there. I'll be down myself. Mountain View Hollow, you say?"

"Right. I'll tell you how to get here—"

"I'll find it. I'll find it. You stay there, and stay out of sight. Don't spook them guys."

The phone went dead.

No way was I going to spook them guys.

It was comfort knowing help was on its way. But I wasn't sure how

Dawson was going to find the place. I mean, *I* had trouble finding it when I first moved here. The hollow road is pretty well hidden from the main highway, and there's no sign announcing you're about to drive up Mountain View Hollow. There must be hundreds of hollows in the county because of all the mountains. But, I remembered, the local state police would surely know where it was, and that was probably who Dawson was going to contact.

That made me feel a bit more at ease, imagining a horde of state troopers and federal marshals swooping down on us, guns drawn, a SWAT team, the whole nine yards. All Lew and me had to do was stay out of sight until everyone arrived.

Just after I hung up the phone, I realized I'd forgotten to ask Dawson about a reward.

Ducks aren't dumb.

They knew where the duck food was because Bob always come out the front door of the trailer with food at feeding time. The hungrier those ducks got, the more they gathered around the front door and the noisier they were. I almost expected them to start kicking at the trailer door with their webbed feet trying to bust it down.

So there was an increase in commotion out in front of Bob's trailer at a time when I wished everything were back to being quiet.

About ten minutes after I talked with Dawson, the shorter dude come out of the camp and looked quickly across the road at where Lew, me, Dog, and Whiskey were hiding inside the trailer, with them ducks quacking louder and louder and kicking up a storm near the door.

He called up into the pines behind the camp at the taller dude, who come down the hill right away. He wasn't carrying the entrenching tool, though, so I figured he wasn't done burying Ollie yet.

After a quick discussion both men drew their pistols and at a near run headed across the road to us.

There was no time to move Dog or Lew. But given the way those two were moving, I had a feeling they weren't just going to test the trailer doors this time. And sure enough, almost before I could sign to Lew that we were in trouble, there come an awful crash at the back door just as the flimsy front door come flying open on account of the smaller guy putting his foot to it hard.

And there me and Lew were, caught in the middle of the living room with no escape.

The smaller man, his gun pointed right at me, was sweating bad, but not as bad as I started to sweat when I looked eyeball to eyeball at the tall dude who by that time had busted open the back door and was on the other side of the living room blocking our escape, his pistol stuck in Lew's ear.

You ever notice how clothes can change a man's looks? Someone you know in one kind of clothes—a priest, for instance—might be somebody you don't recognize at first if you see him in civvies. Ever notice that?

Well, that's what happened with the tall dude pointing the pistol at Lew's head. Because he wasn't in his uniform, I didn't recognize him outside. But once he was in the trailer and I was looking square into his scarred, evil face, I knew right away we were in deeper trouble than I'd ever imagined.

He was wearing civvies like that priest I mentioned, but John "Mr. Big" Bigley, the worst, meanest guard in the entire federal prison system, was no priest. Mr. Big was more like that rattlesnake I told you about earlier.

And there he stood, in a T-shirt splotched with Ollie West's blood. Mr. Big, grinning an evil grin, pressing that pistol hard against Lew's temple.

"*You?*" he said.

"You know him?" the other asked with genuine surprise in his voice.

I'd never seen the other guy in my life.

Mr. Big laughed a mean little chuckle. "Yeah, I know him." He moved closer to Lew, gripping Lew by the shoulder. At the same time Mr. Big tried to muscle Dog out of the way with his foot.

Dog didn't like being kicked, and he let out a little growl from where he was lying on his blanket-bed.

"You know what we got to do with them, Randall." Mr. Big stated.

"I don't know," Randall said. "This thing has gotten way out of whack."

"We gotta do them, too." Mr. Big spoke a little too matter-of-factly to suit me. "He's seen too much; knows too much." He nodded in my direction. His stormy eyes swept across me slowly, but then he let his gaze travel until he was staring beyond me into the kitchen.

I heard Whiskey the cat meow once, coming out from behind the fridge where he'd scooted to get away from the ruckus of everyone busting into the place. He jumped back on the table, and I guessed it was Whiskey that Mr. Big was glaring at over my shoulder.

At the sight of the cat Mr. Big's eyes narrowed with a dangerous mixture of hate and glee.

Given the talk about killing us, I knew I'd better start buying us some time, hoping against hope Dawson and his posse could get to us. I saw no indication these guys were anything but serious. Imagining Ollie West being buried up among those pines convinced me even more that they were serious—dead serious. Besides, seeing Mr. Big queered my thoughts, and suddenly my mind opened up with a torrential downpour of questions I couldn't stop.

"Don't we have a right to know?" I asked Mr. Big, the first thought I could grab hold of among all the thoughts rumbling and rolling through my mind.

He flashed a lightning hot look at me and skewed his face up quizzically. "A right to know what?"

"A right to know what this is all about. A right to know why you killed and buried Ollie West. He was a little troublesome, a little too preachy, sure, but to kill him? His sermons weren't that bad. A right

to know why we might be lying right next to Ollie in a few minutes."

Mr. Big laughed a hearty but fake laugh. "Rights?" he growled. "Kid, you're a dud, a klutz. You got two left feet and noooooooo rights. What do we have here?" He cast a long scrutinizing look at Lew. "Dumb and dumber?" The thick red scar above Mr. Big's eye wiggled and jiggled up and down as he spoke, like there was something alive embedded under that scar tissue. "In a few minutes you can ask Ollie West himself what this is all about."

Mr. Big was no one to trifle with. He got that scar busting heads in the slammer. The four other guys looked worse, someone told me. And when I was in the place, I noticed that whenever Mr. Big walked the halls of the prison, even the toughest inmates automatically stepped back deeper into their cells, not wanting to do nothing to antagonize him and risk getting a few scars of their own.

"Been too much killing," Randall complained. "That was never part of the deal."

"The Man isn't going to see it that way," Mr. Big hissed. "The Man is going to want us to keep this thing cleaned up."

"Yeah, well, it just keeps getting messier."

"Well, we'll just have to keep cleaning, now won't we? What's two more graves? I'm the one doing the digging. Maybe I'll just do one large grave—maybe big enough for four."

He cocked his pistol and jammed it deeper into Lew's ear.

Lew tried to wrestle free of Mr. Big's tight grip, but Mr. Big wore a look of sheer determination and power and strength. I mean, he was dead set on killing us, no question about that, and probably was looking forward to it.

"I called the prison. I talked to the warden." I blurted out the lie.

A soft chuckle oozed out of Mr. Big. "Did you now?" he said to me. "You talked to the warden?"

Even Randall was smiling.

"How could you have?" Mr. Big asked. "The warden's in Washington, and right about now he's probably trying to explain to his boss how he let Ollie West escape."

"You snitched him out of the minimum security camp."

"Hey," Mr. Big said to Randall, "the kid's got smarts."

"And everyone else thinks he just walked away."

"Is that a brain I see growing between your ears?"

"But why—"

Like he wasn't listening to me no more (or if he was, it didn't matter), Mr. Big's interest suddenly returned to Whiskey on the table behind me.

"I hate cats," he snarled, and he swung the pistol around, pointing the 9 mm at a spot right over my shoulder aiming for Whiskey—aiming to kill the cat right there on the kitchen table.

Now, Lew loves cats, too, and he loved Whiskey, and Lew didn't need to hear him to realize what Mr. Big was about to do, so Lew lashed out, shoving Mr. Big's gun arm upwards just as he got off a round that, thanks to Lew, put a large, jagged

hole right through the ceiling light. Everything that happened next happened in a split-second, and was timed so perfectly you'd have thought Nature put it together. And maybe Nature did.

Mr. Big, who outweighed Lew by a hundred pounds, slammed him hard against the living room wall. That awoke primal canine instincts in Dog---"Protect! Protect!" those instincts probably called out, however weakly—and Dog, with almost his last breath, obeyed that call, raising his head and emitting a long, rumbling growl coming up from deep in his throat.

With a sudden lunge and a chomp, that big chocolate lab clamped his large and powerful jaws around Mr. Big's ankle, crunching down on it, crushing the footbone like it was nothing more than a large beef knuckle Dog used to chew on when he was stronger and healthier.

That was Dog's last act. He left this world fulfilling his dog duty—protect, protect. He died right then and there clamped tight onto Mr. Big's ankle, his jaw working back and forth in spasms so that he died clamping tighter and tighter on that ankle, crushing it between canine molars.

Mr. Big screamed in pain.

That was too much noise for Whiskey, who leapt for the open door, bouncing off the top of the garbage can of duck food and tipping it over on the kitchen floor as he beat feet to outside and freedom.

And that, of course, is what brought them hungry ducks in—their favorite duck food spilled all over the kitchen floor and the door suddenly standing wide open.

Randall didn't know what to watch first: Dog clamping down on Mr. Big's ankle; Lew wrestling the gun out of Mr. Big's hand; Mr. Big reaching down one-handed, trying to get the dog off his ankle and still screaming in pain; the cat bounding out of the kitchen; or all them ducks coming in. So it was easy for me to reach right over and snatch the gun from Randall's hand.

In Lew's struggle over Mr. Big's gun, the pistol went off again twice, one bullet shattering the big living room window, the second smashing a table lamp as it passed through the wall. The noise of the shots scattered the ducks, sending some of them flying into the living room, so to add to all the commotion, we now had a half dozen ducks flying around inside the trailer, quacking wildly, beating everyone with flapping wings, and raining down feathers on all of us wrestling for possession of pistols.

When the dust and feathers settled, Lew and me ended up with the armaments. And just like that, *we* had *them* and not the other way around. " 'Dumb and dumber?' " I mocked Mr. Big, waving Randall's cocked pistol right in his face and feeling a little proud and a whole lot brave. Lew was standing back holding Mr. Big's pistol. Dog was still tightly clamped to Mr. Big's ankle. The ducks were landing again, settling down near the food. Whiskey was probably halfway out of the county by that time.

I made them both kneel with

their hands in their pockets on the living room floor. I held the pistol against Mr. Big's forehead while Lew pried open Dog's jaws from around Mr. Big's ankle, thereby freeing him from Mountain View Hollow's version of a ball and chain.

Dumb and dumber. That really irritated me.

I glanced out the broken front window, looking for Dawson and the boys. Thus far they were no-shows.

I sure hoped Bob had insurance to cover the damage his dream house had suffered. But then I thought, well, it was only two bullet holes through his trailer, a broken lamp, a broken ceiling light, and a broken window. It could have been worse. The carpet could have been stained with blood—mine and Lew's.

Randall looked a little lost and a whole lot dejected, frowning at the spot where his knees touched the floor. "I should never have gotten involved with you guys, John," he said. "This thing hasn't had a right moment since we started."

"Shut up," Mr. Big told him. "Quit your whining. You had no problems spending the money." He craned his thick neck and scarred face up towards me, scowling. "You better be careful who you're screwing with, kid," he said to me. His scar pulsated and throbbed, like whatever was crawling around under the scar tissue was just itching to come busting out.

I thought his tough talk was a little bold considering the position he was in.

I turned back to Randall. "So what exactly is this thing you're involved in?" I asked, waving the pistol under his nose to encourage him to start talking.

The voice that answered me come from behind and scared me so bad that when I jerked my head around I sprained my neck.

"They're up to no good, you can count on that," Dawson answered flatly.

Dawson stood in the doorway, frowning down at, and then trying to step over, the bunch of ducks still feeding on the kitchen floor. He had a pistol drawn and was wearing a tie and coat, although the tie was loosened.

I have to admit I had hazy, uneasy feelings right away; my mind swirling in a mixture of relief and bewilderment. I mean, I was really glad to see Dawson, really glad that help had arrived—I even lowered my pistol a bit—but when I glanced outside, I didn't see no line of state troopers, no SWAT team, no federal marshals, not even a single state police car. The only thing I saw out there was Dawson's car parked in Bob's driveway like Dawson was paying a visit to Bob and didn't have a care in the world about no escaped prisoner, let alone the killing of one.

"Are you alone?" I asked Dawson, relaxing only a little.

"Others are on their way," Dawson said. He smiled at Mr. Big and Randall kneeling on the floor. "You did good to nail them," Dawson said.

"You don't seem too surprised. About Mr. Big here—"

"No. I'm not at all surprised.

We've had our eye on him for some time."

"How'd you find us?"

"Wasn't hard. Better give me those pistols." He reached out for them. "We'll need them for ballistic tests to find out which of these guys shot Ollie West. Besides, you're on parole and it's a violation to be in possession of a weapon. We don't want you to get into trouble, now do we?"

After what I'd just been through and what I'd done, his talk of a parole violation didn't sit quite right. I mean, I was expecting a reward; maybe even being taken off parole, if that could be done. But I handed him my pistol anyway, butt first, because Dawson was in charge now and Dawson had his own pistol.

Just as I turned to chase the ducks out of the kitchen, I noticed Mr. Big begin to unfold his large frame and rise with a menacing grin.

"You're The Man," Mr. Big said to Dawson as Dawson handed Mr. Big his pistol back. Randall got his back, too.

I felt myself go all marshmallowy inside. Dawson was The Man. And I was—

Dumb and dumber.

Oh yeah. Big time.

Lew and I got slammed up against the wall, our faces mashed into the paneling.

Randall, Mr. Big, and Dawson stood in a little group right behind us, each with his pistol still drawn. Mr. Big went over and kicked Dog's body hard.

It suddenly dawned on me how Mr. Big and Randall knew to come busting into the trailer without any hesitation the second time. After I spoke with Dawson at the prison, Dawson must have immediately called Randall on the cell phone Randall carried in his coat pocket.

"We won't bother you," I managed to mutter—my lips were pressed hard against the living room wall. "We don't care what you're up to. We just want to be left alone. Just like you do. You go your way and we'll go ours. We can—"

"Kill them," Dawson said to Mr. Big so coldly I could feel the chill of the command running right up my spine. "Kill them both. Right here. Right now." He spoke very much like a man in charge.

"Gladly," Mr. Big said and he spun me around hard, jamming the pistol barrel into my mouth.

I could feel the front sights scraping the roof of my mouth; the barrel pressing against my throat nearly gagged me. I could taste the gun oil on the warm steel, and I smelled the fresh gunpowder from the gun's being fired a few moments before.

The scar above Mr. Big's eye danced in jubilation.

"Waste him." Dawson's voice rose with urgency.

Now, they say at the point of near-death people begin to see and hear inexplicable things. Some have reported having out-of-body experiences, where they see themselves rise out of a hospital bed, for instance, and are able to watch loved ones mourn their passing. Some have reported seeing angels or Christ or God, or bright, warm

lights; others have heard voices of long dead relatives and friends.

At the precise moment Mr. Big began pulling back on the trigger of the cocked pistol jammed in my mouth, aiming to blow the back of my throat out, I heard a voice that, at that instant, could only be described as angelic.

Angels have soft, sweet voices, I've been told, but the one I heard wasn't exactly soft and sweet. The sound of it was coarse and scratchy coming from a throat clogged by too many stogies. But it sure was a heavenly voice.

"Grab your brother and hit the dirt!" Ma "The Sarge" Duncan yelled from out in the yard, where she was standing dressed in full battle gear. And once again everything that happened happened in a split-second.

At that moment Mr. Big pulled the pistol out of my mouth and whirled around in a crouch towards the broken window and Ma Duncan's voice; Dawson and Randall spun around, too, one of them saying, "Hey, what the—"

I caught a glimpse of Ma Duncan through the window as I grabbed Lew and pushed him to the floor of the hallway.

Good training had already taught me what was coming next, so I needed me and Lew to be as flat to the floor as a throw rug.

But on the way down, where I eventually wound up lying on top of Lew, I caught a glimpse of Ma Duncan standing in front of her old Ford wagon out front, a flak jacket and some bandoliers of bullets draped crisscross across her chest. She even had a canteen at her waist. The butt end of a half-smoked stogie dangled from her lips.

She already had the business end of Annie K. looking right at us with two long banana clips of ammo taped together so that all she had to do to reload was to flip them over when one clip got used up. The sawed-off twelve gauge was hanging at her side from her belt.

Ma Duncan waved her hand forward. "Come on, girls," she called out to an imaginary army of WACs. "Follow me. Let's take that German pillbox—"

I didn't hear much more because right about then she let loose with long bursts of automatic gunfire, spraying the sides of Bob's dream house from one end to the other and from top to bottom.

Lew and I managed to scurry beneath the flying lead to a spot where we could hunker behind the furnace and the small hot-water tank built in a hallway closet so that the steel of those two things gave us the protection we needed.

"Corporal O'Harrigan," Ma Duncan called out, still commanding her dream army as she continued to lay down a heavy barrage of small arms fire, "take a squad and circle around to the back. We'll catch them Krauts in a crossfire."

I heard the ducks squawking and scattering, flying out the open door and out the windows, most of which soon had no glass in them.

Bullets were zipping in and through the thin walls of the trailer, smashing lights, furniture, the TV, a clock, pictures on the wall, small appliances on the kitchen

counter. The wall phone got hit four times.

Randall, Dawson, and Mr. Big grunted and groaned and cursed, but none of them ever had a chance to return fire. I heard someone—Dawson, I think—finally, after thirty seconds of intense gunfire, cry out, "We give up. We give up. Cease fire, you crazy old woman." And then I heard him tell the others, "Toss your guns out. Toss them out. *Now!*"

And just like that, the half-minute war was over.

Then Ma Duncan was standing in the kitchen doorway. The door itself was hanging by only one hinge, so shot up it was. She motioned for the three men to lie flat on the living room floor. *"Mach Schnell, Mach Schnell!"* She ordered them in German to hurry up.

"Are my kids all right?" she asked me and Lew, spitting out the end of a fresh stogie and casting only casual glances at Bob's shot-up dream house. She rubbed the stock of her AK47 and breathed out a long, contented sigh of ecstasy. "That was great," she said. "God knows I love it."

"Powdered sugar," Ma Duncan said once we had the three men lying spread-eagled on the ground outside in the grass. "When I looked in there, about the only thing inside their camp besides regular camp furniture was a cardboard box on the table full of small green cellophane packets of powdered sugar, it looks like."

"Cocaine," I told her. And I figured right away that's what I would have been hauling driving for Dawson. He needed a mule to transport the drugs—probably from New Jersey to the prison or at least to somewhere in this area of Pennsylvania. I remembered seeing those same green packets sometimes in the trashcans at the prison. I never paid much attention to them, though. Never cared.

"Oh boy," Ma Duncan groaned. "Look what I've done to Bob's trailer." She shook her head sadly.

She'd done a number on it, that was for sure. Bob's dream house looked kind of like a tin can in the yard of a young kid who'd gotten a .22 and ten boxes of shells for his birthday.

"I guess I lost control."

No doubt there. It's what happens when two people's dreams collide. In this case Bob's dream house stood in the way of Ma Duncan's dream war.

But then a small smile crept over her aged, cracked lips. "Ahhh, but it was great," she said, and her face glowed.

"How'd you know we were in trouble?" I asked her. She seemed back to her old self again, back to reality.

"Oh, that?" She waved it off with her hand. "That was simple." In the distance I heard police sirens screaming up the hollow road.

"I was walking my property line back behind their place, seeing where their boundary lines run, and I saw some guy lying dead among them pines, lying next to a hole someone had dug like they were going to fertilize them pines with him." She relit her stogie. "So I crept

down and looked into the camp, but no one was there. Then I saw movement over at Bob's, namely all them ducks in your kitchen. I knew that wasn't right, so I went back to my place and, well—" She rubbed Annie K.'s stock fondly, lovingly. "We prepared for battle. I called the state police, too. Just in case."

The police cars were nearing.

I straddled Randall and leaned down and hissed in his ear. "Why was Ollie killed to begin with?" It was something I had to know.

When Randall didn't answer right away, I hissed again, "You want me to have *her* ask you?"

He blurted out quickly, "Ollie found out we were the ones dealing drugs in the prison."

"Shut up, Randall," Mr. Big said next to Randall.

But Randall continued. "He was going to go to the warden or even higher. I had nothing to do with killing him, though. Tell the police that. John killed Ollie West."

"You're dead meat whenever we get to where we're going," Mr. Big growled.

Several police cars came sliding to a stop on the dirt road, their lights flashing crazily.

While Ma Duncan went down to talk with the officer in charge, I ventured back into the debris of Bob's trailer. Pushing broken glass and pieces of dishes out of the way on the kitchen table, I wrote him a note that later made him break down in tears:

Bob,
I didn't do so good.
The cat got out, the ducks
got in, and the dog died.
And your trailer don't look so
great either. Sorry about that.
I had a spot of trouble, but I
couldn't call. The phone's shot up.
I'll be at my place. I think we
should talk about this.
No charge. Remember,
we're family.

For a few moments I stood there amid the ruins of Bob's trailer, his dream house.

I thought about my having no dream.

Maybe I was lucky, I thought. Maybe it's a good thing, having no dreams. Dreams are all right when you're just dreaming them. They can carry you a long ways. But once they become real, they're just like anything else. They can make you do crazy things like Ma Duncan's dream did; they can be destroyed like Bob's dream house got destroyed.

Maybe having nothing sometimes is something.

Or was I just being dumb and dumber?

I reached back to close the trailer door as I was leaving, and the door fell entirely off its last hinge.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

It was evening in the library of the old mansion. A charcoal fire glowed cheerfully in the ornate grate. Three persons stood with their attention focused on the open wall safe. The mechanism of its door had been neatly and precisely drilled. It was empty.

Lady Worthington maintained her regal composure, but there was a slight quaver in her voice as she said, "Oh, I—I wish I had never started remodeling this house. Now the jewels that have been passed down in my family for generations are—are gone. Gone forever . . ."

"Perhaps we may yet recover them, ma'am," declared Detective Maxwell. He wasn't at all confident—this had all the earmarks of a professional job. "Who had access to the safe?" he asked.

"I had engaged six workmen," stated the elderly lady. "Let me think." She began ticking them off on her delicate, ringed fingers. "An electrician to improve the lighting in the hallway, a carpenter to fix the stairs (they were getting a bit rickety), a man to finish the floor in the living room, a paperhanger to redo the dining room, a painter for the foyer (it *was* a trifle dingy), and a plumber to install new fixtures in the baths. There, that makes the six."

"When were they inside, ma'am?" Maxwell inquired.

"My butler can tell you precisely. I had him check each of them in and out. Actually, I trust no one except my very close acquaintances." She turned to the short, stoop-shouldered old man who had been standing respectfully at one side. "Tell the detective, Sylvester."

"Yes, m'lady," murmured the butler. He took a small black notebook from the pocket of his perfectly tailored coat and opened it. "The workmen, sir," he reported, "arrived at 8:15, 8:45, 9:05, 9:13, 9:32, and 9:40 this morning. Two departed together at 2:03, another two at 3:30, and the others at 2:33 and 3:17."

"That may help," said Detective Maxwell. "Even with the best bits available, drilling that safe took at *least* six hours. What else can you tell me?"

Sylvester cleared his throat. "Sir, I can swear to the accuracy of the following."

(1) The first names of the workmen are Andy, Burt, Carl, Dave, Earl,

and Fred; their surnames are Garrels, Hawkins, Indura, Jackson, Kingman, and Landau. Mr. Garrels arrived just after Andy and just before the painter. Andy and the electrician did not leave at the same time.

(2) Carl and the painter departed together, as did Mr. Hawkins and the man who arrived at 9:40.

(3) The plumber spent exactly one hour longer inside the mansion than did Mr. Jackson.

(4) Mr. Kingman arrived just after the carpenter and just before Dave. Mr. Kingman left just before Dave; neither is the electrician (who was not the first workman to arrive).

(5) Neither Earl nor the floor finisher was the first to arrive or the first to leave.

(6) Mr. Landau and the paperhanger spent exactly the same amount of time inside the mansion.

(7) The workman who came at 9:13 was not Burt, Mr. Indura, or the carpenter.

(8) Neither Fred nor Mr. Indura was the first workman to arrive.

The detective had been carefully writing down all this information. After spending several minutes with his pocket calculator, he announced, "Let us hope, Lady Worthington, that the safecracker has not yet fenced your jewels. I *know* who he is."

Detective Maxwell had figured out which workman drilled the safe and absconded with its contents. Can you?

See page 124 for the solution to the January puzzle.

THE ALLEY

Mike Owens

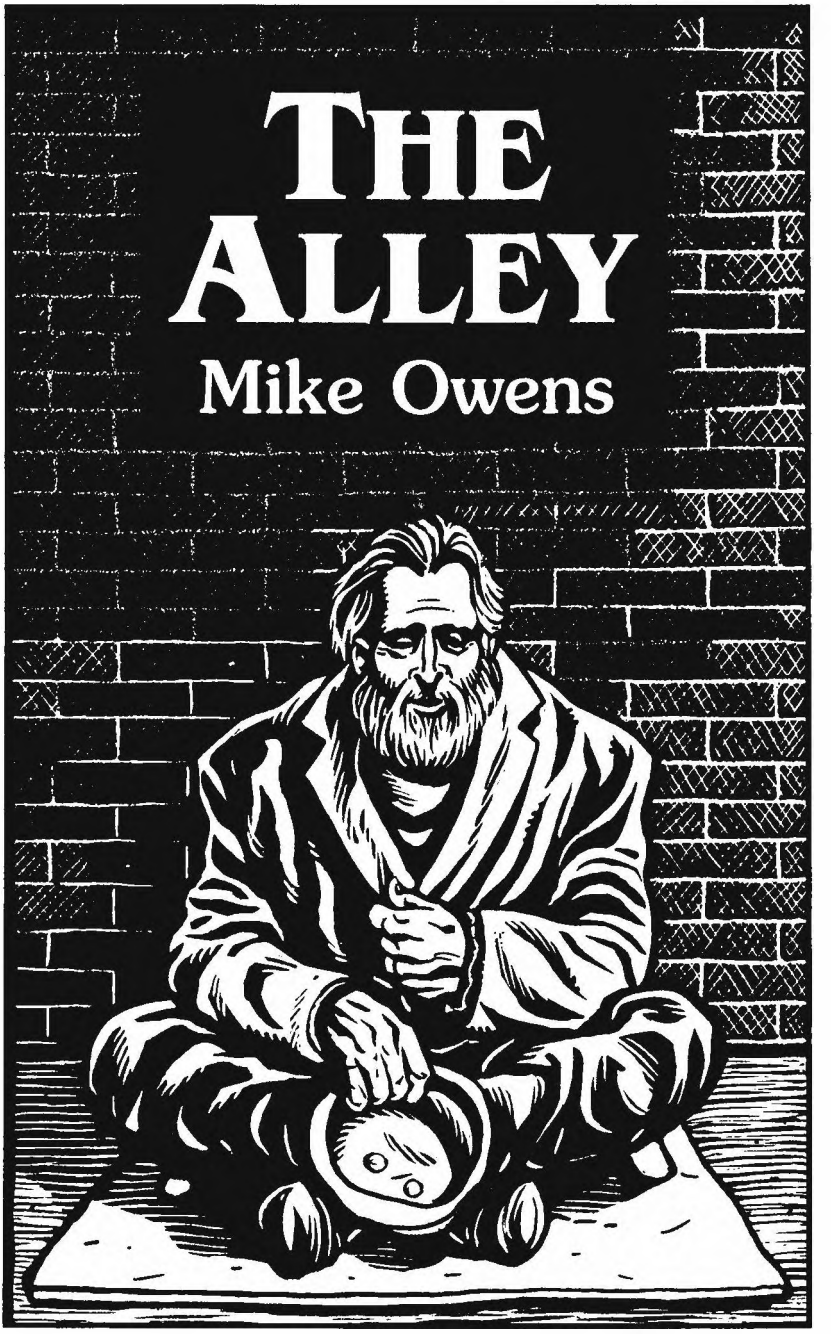


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

I picked a brochure from the rack and walked the length of The Alley. It was a pleasant oasis in the middle of Whitefork's slum. The brochure told me that the property had come down through the distaff side to the two remaining sisters of the Weiser family, who, in honor of their childhood when the area was a happier place, had determined to restore it.

It had everything. A fancy grocery, a jewelry store, an art gallery showing the work of local artists. All supported by the Weisers, with the shop folk recruited from the local population.

At the far end of The Alley, hidden, discreet, and in keeping with the sisters' intent to make the neighborhood entirely self-sufficient, stood the Weiser Funeral Home, owned by the brother, Alan, who (according to the brochure) benefited thus from the generosity of his sisters while not being a part of the inheritance itself. Mr. Weiser also benefited from an entrepreneurial bent: in the space behind the shops were the rest of the services needed for a happy life, and Alan Weiser had at least part ownership in a laundry, an auto body shop, a hardware store, a pharmacy, and a stationer's.

The sisters, in order to encourage the carriage trade, had deemed it necessary to bring some kind of order to the rambling homeless, and to achieve that, a shelter had been built in which one could get a meal and a night's rest in exchange for some kind of work in the shelter itself. "We'll help those who help themselves," the sisters would say in a twist on the proverb, to which one or the other would quickly suggest that it was all in God's hands . . . they were instruments only.

It was the shelter that had brought Frank Santucci and me to this area. More specifically, it was Mr. Dickenson, director of The Sisters' Shelter, who had sought Frank's assistance in a matter of disappearances.

"I'm not really sure that there are any missing people," he had told Frank. "What I do know is that Bony is missing. As for the others, it's difficult to say. As missing persons go, it's not really alarming; I would just like to be sure about Bony." He paused, then continued: "He was a friend, you see."

"Why would you think Bony is missing while not being sure about others?" Frank asked.

"The Sisters' Shelter has two kinds of patrons, Mr. Santucci. One kind is more or less transient. Others work in the shelter, actually looking to make a life here or to put a life back together. Bony hadn't been here long, a few months maybe, but he was a regular."

"He moved here from somewhere else. Maybe he just decided to move again?"

Mr. Dickenson shook his head. "Bony was so called because that's what he was. Bony and old. Somewhere in his late eighties. He was at the shelter to wait out the rest of his life. He wouldn't have moved on."

"You've talked to the police?"

Mr. Dickenson had nodded. "Yes. They looked. But they're not going to put much effort into trying to find a missing bum who probably took a wrong turn one night and simply didn't come back."

At that point I had taken my walk through The Alley, and now, as I headed back to The Sisters' Shelter, Frank and Mr. Dickenson were still deep in conversation. Frank had asked, "How many, Mr. Dickenson? Besides Bony."

The reply was prompt. "Three, I think. Four with Bony. Over a period of some five years. I'm sorry to be so vague, but Bony's the only one I'm sure of."

"Any similarities?"

Dickenson thought and started to shake his head, then recalled something. "As I told you before, Bony was ancient, nearly at the end of his life. I think that one other was also quite old. The other two I'm not really sure about; it's been a long time."

"Is there any way you can find out?"

"I keep journals," he said. "I probably should have looked at them before talking to you, but I don't really see any need. We're looking for Bony, you know."

"Yes," said Frank. "Perhaps you could check your journals and let Nick know." They shook hands, and Frank came down the steps to where I was standing. "We have a case, Nick, and I have a feeling you're not going to like it."

He was smiling when he said it, but something about his eyes suggested he was right: I was not going to like it. I waited.

"You're going to go undercover."

"Undercover." I cleared my throat. "Undercover could mean panhandling, dumpster diving, and carrying my stuff in a shopping bag."

"Undercover means exactly that."

"How in hell am I going to pass as a bum?"

"I have faith, Nick. I think you have it in you."

I worked my way through the streets, walking slowly past anyone who looked as though they would attempt to touch me for cash. Whitefork's laws, thanks in part to the Weisers, prevented aggressive behavior, so I had to push at times to get someone to accost me. Everyone had a different style; I was looking for one I could use.

"Spare change?" He was layered with old military clothing. "Spare change?" he repeated, hand surreptitiously poking toward me, palm up, waiting for silver. "Vietnam vet," he said. "Need some food. And a bottle of wine to wash it down." I had to laugh. I gave him a buck.

A mumbler shuffled gracelessly down the street looking at no one, "Change, spare change. Got a buck?" Over and over without stopping. Another simply stood at curbside and stared at his reflection in a shop window, a cap held by the bill at his chest. An old woman coming out of an

ice cream store quickly shifted her strawberry cone to her left hand and just as quickly poked her right at me in wordless request.

I went through a full day of this, and by evening I was about as depressed as I could be. I treated myself to dinner at a restaurant in The Alley, and midway through the meal it occurred to me that I was only a hundred yards from where I'd been working all day. It also occurred to me that I was eating alone, washing things down with a glass of wine. The ability to pay for quality made the difference between sitting here and sitting next to the dumpster behind the restaurant.

The meal did not lift my spirits.

It was some comfort, at least, that Mr. Dickenson did not recognize me in disguise. I had to seek him out, which wasn't difficult, since people had access to his office at any time of the day. Frank had already contacted him, and it was established that I'd been most recently in Portland. Mr. Dickenson had then mentioned it to a man called Whisper, "our resident liar, snoop, and gossip. The word will be on the street before the day is over." It seemed my new life was waiting.

I decided on a shuffle for locomotion and an extended hat for collection. That allowed me to avoid actually accosting the well-dressed as they moved quickly from store to store, and it also allowed me to keep moving. I shuffled, I mumbled. Once in a while I got into conversation with people called Red Dog or Pimple. I spoke to Jeremy, to Ronron, and to one strange, nameless man who rode an ancient bicycle around the block loudly announcing, "You know! You know!" No one had any serious knowledge about Bony.

By the end of the third day I started to acclimate. It was cold, but my raggedy layers kept me from serious chill and there was the shelter for warmth at night. No one knew where I was. I was out of touch. No TV, no cell phone, no pressure. I was assured of an evening meal, though the price I paid was a night's sleep constantly broken by the toss and wheeze of some thirty men. Were it not for that, I could almost appreciate having dropped out of the world.

I had found a bench overlooking the green park at the entrance to The Alley. It became my favorite spot, and if it were occupied by shopper or shopkeeper, I would quickly be alone a few minutes after sitting down. I sat, and the sun came out, and the day grew marginally warmer. I could nap in the sun right here. I put my hat on my knees and closed my eyes.

I woke an hour later, stiff and sore from sitting on the hard bench. I had a dollar in my hat. I put the hat on top of my watch cap, dollar bill safely inside, and shuffled across the park. Some unwritten rule kept bums out of The Alley, but there seemed to be no restriction against simply standing at the entrance. I kept my head down, watching my feet, but even so I could see people around me looking at places I wasn't.

Two elderly women made their way through the crowd at the far end

of The Alley. They were dressed identically in black dresses, starched white circles at their throats, wide-brimmed white hats on their heads. The crowd parted respectfully for them. They looked like wealthy and elegant nuns, did the Sisters Weiser.

I woke. Something had been heaped at the foot of my bed. A streetlight offered a faint glow through the window, and I could see a pile of rags.

"You're a cop," the heap murmured. I sat up to get a better look. Rags were layered in a wrap that obviously never came off. They made my own layers pale by comparison. They were the Mozart of rags. "I'm not a cop," I whispered.

He moved closer and knelt by the bed so he could talk confidentially. "I worked with the cops," he said. "They come looking to spy out Bony and wanted a man on the scene, that's what they said. Me, Old Tack, and Louie. You ain't workin'. You gotta work to stay at the Sisters'. You ain't workin', but you get a meal and a flop. Maybe you're spyin', too. I could help. I ain't expensive. Just ask." He pushed himself up and headed up the hallway to the door. Halfway there he turned, and in a normal voice said, "Ask for Geo. Like the car, short for George. I'm easy to find." In the beds around me bodies stirred cautiously. I eased down into the mildewed covers trying to be invisible.

Geo was indeed easy to find. He sat in the park that fronted The Alley with his hat beneath his feet, which did not touch the ground. I approached and sat beside him. "Hello, Geo," I said.

He didn't lift his gaze from the hat. There were a couple of coins there, and I thought perhaps he was attempting to conjure more. Out of the side of his mouth, still keeping things confidential, he muttered, "Mornin', copper."

"Tell me about Bony," I said.

Geo checked out the surroundings, making sure we were alone. Finally satisfied, he said, "Old Tack ran the gig. Me and Louie go along in case of any rough stuff." I wondered how the diminutive Geo would handle rough stuff. "Tack had the brain, see. So we're looking for Bony, Old Tack asking questions, me and Louie hangin' back, watching for trouble." He'd forgotten that he was attempting to conceal his conversation and turned his carved-apple face to me, speaking normally.

I stared out across the green grass of the park, surprised at this trio's involvement in a police activity. I couldn't quite see a bum, no matter his credentials, being recruited for an undercover operation.

Geo had stopped talking and simply sat, looking expectantly at me. "And Bony?" I asked. "Did you find him?"

"Nothin'. Old Tack cashed in, checked out." Geo pulled his wraps closer around his body. He leaned forward, groaning, to pick up the hat, removing the few coins and stashing them in one of the many pockets in

his costume. He got to his feet and started to walk away. He was either a born storyteller or had a short attention span. "Geo," I said, and when he stopped, I asked what he meant by "checked out."

"Died. Old Tack. Jeez, me and Louie was hanging loose, after. Old Tack kept our eyes on the ball, he did." He turned away from me again and started up the street. I let him go. I didn't want to go rushing after him to get the rest of the story. After all, he would be around.

I was at Dickenson's office that afternoon to ask about Geo's "police work." "It was my clumsy attempt to determine whether or not there was anything to my suspicions," he said. "At the very least, I was hoping for some information about Bony. I didn't want him slowly rotting away behind some dumpster."

"When was this?"

"Maybe four months ago. It was stupid, of course, but the police were no help. There was no real evidence that anything unusual was going on. So I recruited Old Tack. Geo and Louie were part of the package. I even paid them."

"Geo thinks they were working for the police."

Dickenson smiled. "Yes. You've met Geo. Very gullible. Old Tack and I decided to keep Louie and Geo quiet by telling them it was a police operation. If they talked, the police would come and take the money back and put them in jail."

"Why pick Old Tack?"

"He was very intelligent. I suspected an academic background. That got him the 'Old Tack' nickname. You know, 'sharp as a tack.' I don't know what brought him here, but he'd been around for about a year. His mind was still good, but it's possible he was slipping into Alzheimer's. I thought, as one of the community, he could just ask around.

"Geo said he died."

"Yes. He did. It was a hit and run. Terrible, just terrible." Dickenson's pale, thin hands trembled slightly. "I blame myself."

"The police investigated?"

"Oh yes. I think the file is still open . . . they never did find the car, and there were no witnesses. I . . . didn't think it necessary to tell them of Tack's extracurricular activity."

"Nor Santucci Investigations?"

"Pardon?"

"You didn't tell us that another man died who could have been connected to Bony and the others."

"Ah." He thought for a moment, looking out the window at the distant mountains of the Cascade Range. The day had been cleansed by the night's rain, and I thought longingly of the forest smells of fresh air, the deep silence of the woods at night. I lived with the smells of urine and garbage. I stank, and vermin crawled in my clothes. At night I was con-

stantly waked by coughs and wheezing outcries from the dreamers around me.

Dickenson continued, still observing the distant view, "It didn't occur to me. You see, Mr. Anderson, he didn't disappear. Old Tack died in an accident. He was old and weak and could have easily stumbled into the path of the car. The driver panicked, took off. Reprehensible behavior, but it happens. I would hate to think there was a sinister conspiracy linking Bony and Old Tack."

I sat contemplating Mr. Dickenson. Neat and clean, the aging skin of his face carefully shaved, the color of his tie precisely matching his three-piece suit, clear eyes gazing without judgment on the world around him. For a man who dealt daily with the bottom of humanity's barrel, he was surprisingly innocent.

Frank sat at some distance from me on the bench. I filled him in, with an emphasis on my own discomfort. He ignored that. "Ask Dickenson what happened to Old Tack's body." He fiddled with his tie, opened his briefcase: a businessman on a park bench, ignoring a bum. "At any rate we know that two out of the four were old men. Add Old Tack and that's three out of five, and his death is suspicious." He closed the briefcase. "What do you suppose old bums might have that would make death necessary? A common history?"

I stood and Frank, continuing to sit, told me to be careful about contacting Geo. I nodded and walked off to another night of communal sleep, accompanied by the chilling idea that Geo might become a target.

Old Tack's body had been turned over to the Weiser Mortuary when the police were finished with it. "The sisters always make sure the street people get a nice funeral," Mr. Dickenson said. He was still researching his journals; there was so far no further information on the men who concerned him.

I went looking for Geo, hoping it would seem accidental when I found him sitting on my park bench. "You wanna see the scene of the crime?" he asked, easily continuing yesterday's conversation.

"I do."

He stood, put a finger to his lips and beckoned me to follow. He led me to a short street not far from The Alley that even in broad daylight was heavily shadowed. "Right here," he said. "Just before dark. Kind of shadowy, you know? I seen him wobbling, Old Tack wobbled something fierce, and *whambam!* Right here." He pointed to a spot on the asphalt. "Smackaroony! Old Tack raised his hand like stopping a taxi, and then he stumbled right into the car."

"You saw it? You saw the car?"

"I seen the car, but I ain't got the peepers. Pretended so's I could get into the gig, but I seen a black shape, that's all."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothin' else to see. I went over to him and held his head in my lap. He was still alive, and he looked up at me and said, 'God help me,' and then he was gone. I took off, left him lying there. Didn't want cops thinking I was an eyewitness. They might not have paid me if they knew I don't see so well."

"You're sure the car was black?"

"I seen a black shape. So what? Lots of black cars in the world." Too many questions. Geo seemed to be remembering I might be a cop. "Me and Louie got a few bucks. We spent the money. I'm flat, got pocket-moth, and Louie's ditto. You're here to get the money back, ain't you."

I shook my head and leaned comfortably into the back of the bench. I'd lost Geo for now. That was all right, I would just take a little nap in the sunlight. Geo would be around.

I sat with Frank on the bench while the prosperous young flowed back and forth on the sidewalk. "Get back to Dickenson, look into those journals," he said. "I want to know the age of the other men. Push him. He's taking too long."

"At least two were very old," I said. "Maybe it was just a natural death. Old bum out in the cold and the ticker stops. Four or five over a five year period is not that unusual."

"Old Tack is unusual. That upraised arm might have been to ward off an attack." He looked idly about, then said, "Mary. What comes to mind?"

I thought for a second. "Had a little lamb."

He shook his head. "Nope. Mary, Mary, quite contrary. Try another but a little faster this time. Today is the first . . ."

I said without thinking, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

He shook his head. "No. Today is the first of March."

"What's the point of this?"

"Nothing, really." He leaned back on the bench and looked across the park at the opulence of The Alley. One could almost believe there was no substratum of society here at all, just nice, well-fed people idly looking into smart and trendy shop windows. He turned back to me. "Sometimes the brain has to create a connection, right or wrong." He looked around, making sure we were unobserved, and then pushed something into my pocket before standing and walking away.

I sat for a good ten minutes, basking in the warm sun before reaching into that pocket. It was a cell phone. I was electronically reconnected. Things were heating up, it would seem, though I didn't see how.

Dickenson pulled down a couple of the journals from the shelf behind his desk. "These should cover the years we're looking for," he said, leafing through neatly written pages.

He found something. "Okay. Here's Tex. Fiftyish. Went missing in the

fall of '97." He read for a bit to himself. "Nothing there. Just a note to indicate that he didn't seem to be around any more." He flipped back through the pages. "Maybe I said something earlier." Again, he read silently, then, "Here! Emphysema. Heavy smoker when he could afford it. Refused treatment. I'm sorry to be so slow; other responsibilities, you know."

I used the phone on Dickenson's desk and called Frank to tell him about Tex. "It's our connection," Frank said. "The common history: old age or disease. Let me talk to Dickenson. I'll tell him to put out the word through the mysterious Whisper."

"What word?"

"You're dying. Not long to live but not contagious. I'll let Dickenson decide."

I carried my mysterious disease through the next week while I talked to Bookman and Everett and Geo's friend Louie. The You Know Man circled the block, and I schmoozed with Big Bert and Sis. I didn't ask about Bony; I talked about how bad I felt. I was in a holding pattern, waiting for events.

I itched and I smelled and so many people did not see me that I began to feel I was invisible. Those who did look at me did so with contempt or disgust, and in those cases I felt contemptible and disgusting. Frank's faith in my ability to become a street person was well placed.

A huddled shape crouched next to me was whispering in my ear. "You ain't shelter type." I thought perhaps Geo was paying another visit, but the smell was different and the voice had a thicker, phlegmy sound. "You want out, just let me know." The shape rose, outlined against the window, scuttled to the door, and disappeared. I rolled over and went back to sleep, sure that I'd been dreaming.

Next morning I left the shelter and shuffled down First Avenue. An hour later found me on my bench. Someone sat down and spoke without looking at me. "Sleep good?"

The voice was that of my night visitor. Someone huddling beside my bed, whispering into my ear. "I'm Whisper," he said, his voice a low rasp.

"We met last night."

He snorted and grinned yellow at me. "You think about what I said? About cutting loose from the sisters' charity?"

"I like it at the shelter."

He shrugged. "So it goes. "But I figured, well . . ."

"Figured what?"

"You'd be tougher. You know. A survivor. A loner. But maybe you ain't got the skills, like maybe you need some advice. I just want to help." He sat quietly beside me, dirty hands restless in his lap, not looking at me at all. He was larger than Geo but still a small man with a tiny face holding two close-set eyes over a thin, pointed nose. He shrugged and stood,

swaying from one foot to the other. "I seen you. I seen you tryin' to sleep at night." He shuffled away.

I sat, thinking about what Whisper had said. He was wrong. I did have the skills. Living on the streets had a lot of living in the backcountry in it. The need to find good shelter, water, forage for food. The three absolute basics. I had those skills, I just needed advice.

I watched him walking away and then heaved myself from the bench and walked after him. Whisper's appearance on the scene followed too close on the rumor of my pending death.

He showed me a packing carton folded flat, hidden behind a dumpster. "Make sure you know the dumpster schedule," he said. "This un's emptied Wednesdays, so the carton comes out. I carry it with me on Wednesdays."

Whisper opened the carton and motioned me to sit on the ground. He lowered it over me, and I was suddenly in the dark. I could barely hear his muffled voice. "I'm gonna pass you a candle." A small square of cardboard was pushed back from the top of the carton, and a candle was lowered. By its light I found myself in a cosy environment decorated with pictures cut from magazines and newspapers. I leaned against the wall that supported the back of the carton and looked at Whisper's gallery. This is a tent, I thought. A place to go to at night. A quiet place. It was warm now from the candle.

The carton was suddenly lifted from me, and I blinked in the painful light of day. Whisper folded it and put it carefully behind the dumpster. Then he came back to where I was sitting and snuffed the candle. "Candles suck air," he said. "Gotta watch it, keep that lid open." He put the candle in his pocket. "Whatcher think?"

"Where do you find these cartons?" I asked.

I kept it simple. Whisper's shelter was too elaborate for my taste. I wanted spare, austere. A place where I could escape the stink and noise.

My packing crate changed my day's routine. Now I actively sought "spare change," for I needed to buy duct tape to seal the corners of my shelter. "Spare change," I'd say. "Spare change for duct tape." It got a laugh and a fair amount of cash as well.

I didn't share this with Frank. Somehow I didn't think he'd approve. He might consider that my efforts to upgrade my packing carton were taking away from my work as an investigator. But although I was raking in the dough, I was still looking and listening, and thinking hard about Whisper. I decided to make a foray right into The Alley. I wanted to get a look at the utility shops behind the glitter.

I shuffled and mumbled my way up as far as Alan Weiser's funeral home. Mr. Weiser's business seemed to be doing well: there was a beautifully kept red Mercedes in the drive, and the funeral home itself had a decorous air of wealth about it.

I detoured through a narrow path that led me to the shops behind the shops. I passed a drugstore, an auto shop, a dry cleaner's, a stationer's, and got as far as the hardware store before a hard hand clamped down on my shoulder and a minion of the law escorted me, shuffling and mumbling, back to First Avenue and the familiar surroundings designated as an easy environment for the likes of me.

That night I lay on my cot and thought about the four worlds in this section of Whitefork. Along First Street was the "real" world of shops and offices, their employees and customers mixing indifferently, from long association, with the street people.

The Alley came next, and then the world behind the alley that catered to the office worker, supplying all the services needed by those people. A complete world lacking only a maternity hospital to bring one into it in the first place.

The fourth was the one in which I lived. Limited, circumscribed. We who lived there would not be going home at night, for we were already there, and we were unaware of life in the other worlds . . . in all this time, apart from the glimpse I'd had two weeks ago, I'd seen nothing of the Weisers. I'd not seen Alan at all. At my level they did not exist.

As I began to drift, Whisper came to mind, crabbing his way along the floor of the shelter, his portable home beneath his arm. I woke and looked about me. No sinister shape approached my bed. I lay there for a minute judging the quality of the silence in the room. It seemed that everyone was asleep. No time like the present, I thought, carefully creeping out from under the covers.

I sat in my tent, hidden in the deeps of a blind alley. On my way in I had caught sight of my reflection in a dark shop window, carton folded under my arm, and felt for a strange moment that I should look about and find the person reflected there.

I lit my candle and felt the warmth penetrate my cave. A rustling outside, a small sound repeated once more. A rat. Wildlife. I was safe, my tent was secure: no place for wildlife to enter.

The walls were bare. Perhaps Whisper had the better idea. Something to look at. Something to occupy the mind before extinguishing the candle and dropping off to sleep. I leaned my head back and saw that the flap had closed. I thought about opening it, but I was too comfortable to move. Better to leave it closed so there would be no tiny gleam of light to bring the curious down this dark alley to investigate. I'd know when I reached a point of danger.

I looked back at the candle. We men, I thought, dying from disease or age. We needed a shelter to keep us safe. Shelter from the storm. Where had I heard that?

Something to read. What's black and white and read all over? Red. Geo had seen a dark shape, black. I had read a little mystery novel where a

man in a black cloak had been seen leaving the twilit scene of the crime. But the killer had a red cloak.

Alan Weiser had a red car.

Whisper. Taught me to shelter myself. Good old Whisper, popping up in my time of need. Helpful Whisper. I hummed for a bit, "Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb." I tried "God helps those who help themselves," but I didn't have a tune.

Old Tack had gone to his final rest in the Weiser Mortuary, an easy introduction into infinity, courtesy of the sisters. One could hope that Bony had the same kind of sendoff. And Tex. No, they disappeared. I fumbled through my rags, located the cell phone, and pushed the redial. Frank's answering machine came on. "It's Nick," I said and then waited, trying to remember my reason for the call. "Red car, not black," seemed a good one. My left leg kicked out and struck the candle, plunging me into darkness even as the carton tipped over. "God helps," I said, and the phone clattered to the pavement.

A shuddering gust of what passed for fresh air filled my lungs, and in the same moment I heard the little rat steps again and, against the light at the end of the alley, I saw a scuttling shape making good its escape. "Whisper," I said, struggling to my feet. I gave the carton a feeble kick and shouted at the cell phone somewhere in the darkness, "It's Whisper!," but I could have saved my breath: Dickenson had come to see me after making a discovery in his journals, and when he found my bed empty, he called Frank with the news that there was yet another common denominator. "Whisper," he'd said. "It's in my journals. Whisper befriended all these men." By the time I reached the shelter, Frank had caught up with Whisper.

A full week had gone by, and the turmoil in The Alley was just beginning to subside from the startling announcement that Alan Weiser had "collected" dying street people and used them to supplement his income when things got a little tight. He bilked his own sisters by padding the bill for the funeral, then pocketing the considerable difference. "God helps those who help themselves," the sisters, in their innocence, might have said.

Whisper was Alan's Igor, sliding through shadows to pinpoint a candidate whose physical condition usually precluded a struggle. When the time was right, Whisper would move in gently, gently, with a pillow, and an old man would die of a heart attack. In those rare cases where Whisper figured wrong, the resulting struggle would result in some bruising, and in that case the individual would simply disappear into the crematorium. Better to lose money than to bring in the suspicious police.

Whisper, it turned out, was also Alan's Boswell, eagerly chronicling their activities in the hopes of a favorable reaction from the police. And so we discovered that Old Tack's death occurred in a moment of panic. Alan had

learned that Old Tack was looking into the disappearance of Bony, one of the pillow jobs Whisper had botched. It was a spur of the moment thing, seeing Old Tack in the street, an easy target. He could simply vanish like the others, but Geo complicated that decision: Alan did not know until too late that there was a witness too young to die of "natural causes," which saved Geo's life and made it impossible for Old Tack's body to "vanish."

When enough time passed with no hue and cry, Alan, the entrepreneur, breathed a sigh of relief and had the minimal damage to his car repaired in his own auto body shop. All's well that ends well.

Still tired and disoriented, I sat with Frank in Mr. Dickenson's office while he read the file. "Red car?" he asked, looking up.

Frank answered. "Something Nick read a long time ago. Red appears as black in low light. The police took Geo to look at Weiser's red car. He got the shape right."

Mr. Dickenson, back in the file, shook his head. " 'God helps.' Old Tack trying to identify one of the Weisers?"

"Yes," Frank said. "The brain finishes a familiar phrase, and Geo picked the wrong ending. Old Tack said 'helps,' not 'help,' you see."

"Why did they decide to set Nick up with a packing carton? Why not the usual pillow over the face?"

"I think because Nick seemed stronger than most. Whisper didn't want to risk being Weiser's next customer. Suffocation would at least weaken him enough for Whisper to safely apply his version of the last rites. The candle in the carton would provide a handy cause of death."

Mr. Dickenson, clean and neat, sat at his desk, reading. Beside me, the impeccable Frank. They talked to each other as though I were still invisible, still living in the world that held Geo, Big Bert, Pimple, and the wheeling You Know Man. But not, I thought, Alan Weiser or Whisper.

I settled deeper into my chair, still invisible, and listened to their voices while I contemplated my return to the world that held Mr. Dickenson and Frank Santucci.

It Takes Two

Molly MacRae

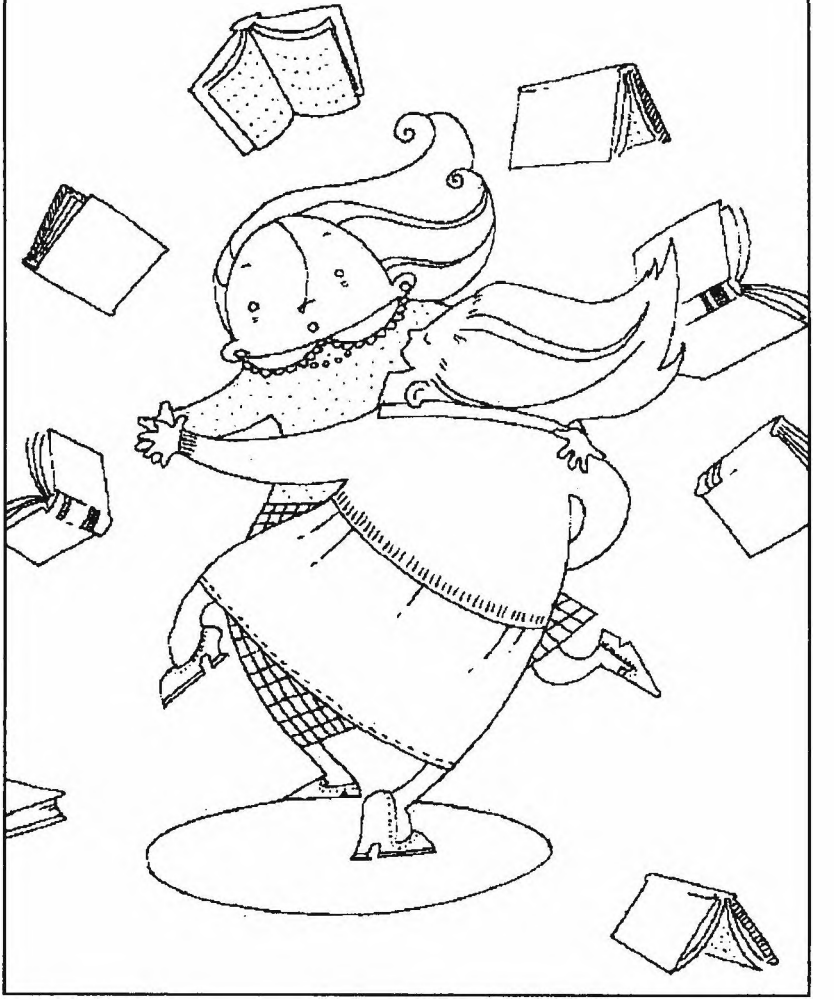


Illustration by Kelly Denato

My sister Bitsy called the other morning and asked me over for a cup of tea and a piece of strudel. Homemade strudel, hot from the oven. If I'd held the receiver out, you could have smelled the apple and cinnamon and mouthwatering, flaky pastry over the phone. It was a nice invitation, very warm and sisterly. So tempting. Which just goes to show what a sad sack I am because it only made me suspicious. I can't help it. It's my nature. As our late mother used to say, it takes two to tangle, and the two she had in mind were Bitsy and me.

Not that we always tangle. Our relationship can't be characterized that simply. It's more like we're involved in some lifelong dance. We glide along nicely for awhile, and then we hit a dip and pose dramatically at opposite ends of our sibling bond, often exchanging words not generally associated with dancing. But we always get swept up by the music again and renew the uneasy grace in our lives. If that sounds something like the tango, well, that also takes two. And it doesn't look as though either one of us is bowing out anytime soon.

Bitsy's latest passion, that which had me feeling leery of her tempting invitation, has had her grubbing around the family roots. The genealogy bug bit her, and she's been working at spreading the infection. She's been sifting through papers and records and writing letters and e-mailing far and wide. What she's ended up with is an inflated vision of our family and the dream of someday publishing a little book detailing our illustrious lineage. Which she will expect me to sell in my bookstore. I dread the day. Not that we haven't had our flashier moments and some respectable accomplishments. But ancestor hunting has never thrilled me. And books like that tend to petrify on my shelves.

So I was tentative on the phone, wondering what might lie behind this overture.

"Margaret," she finally said, sounding exasperated. "Why are you making such a production out of this? It's tea. It's strudel. Just come over and have some."

I hung up, admiring her unusual succinctness. Was this a new leaf she'd turned over whilst investigating the family tree? The only way to find out, I decided, was to trot around to her house, something my tastebuds and tummy had been begging me to do all along. I could always gallop back home again if it turned out she had a hidden agenda.

"Now, this is cosy, Margaret," she said half an hour later as we sat at her kitchen table. "We should do this more often. We so rarely spend time like this together, just the two of us."

"You forgot our friend the strudel," I said, helping myself to another slice. "That makes three of us. Mmm. You really are a great cook." See, I can be swell, too. Bitsy managed to roll her eyes and preen at the same time, something only a professional like her should try.

While she poured more tea into teacups that actually matched the

saucers and the teapot, I looked around her kitchen, marveling. Imagine not only taking the time to bake fresh strudel, but ending up with a spotless kitchen to boot, and nerves steady enough to calmly serve tea. I leaned back and let her happy prattle waft over me with the aromatic steam from my teacup.

". . . so I joined the Historical Society."

I shook myself from my strudel stupor. "The Historical Society? What, are you the youngest living member?"

"Margaret." She looked pained. "They are a lovely group of people."

"Sorry, Bitsy, I know they are. Some of my very best customers are members of the Historical Society. It's just that I'd hate to see you dying your hair blue prematurely. So what's new at the Historical Society?"

"Well, this is something that might interest you." Uh-oh. "Have you ever seen their little library and archives?"

"No," I said cautiously.

"They have some fascinating things. For instance, there is this one book, very rare I understand, *The Thrilling Adventures of Grenoble Grundy, Union Spy.*"

"I've read it." Bitsy raised her eyebrows. Point for my team. "I found a copy of it for Good Old Melva about eight years ago, and she let me read it before she bought it." One eyebrow was now lower than the other, and she was giving me the fisheye. "It was definitely thrilling," I offered. Her mouth got tiny. I shrugged. "It's what I do, Bitsy. I find ways for books and the people who love them to get together. Kind of like a dating service."

"I'm aware of what you do, Margaret. What surprises me is the casual way you refer to Miss Melva Jenkins."

"Good Old Melva? She and I are pals from way back. I only know her through the store, but we've done each other a lot of good over the years. Why, is she a revered goddess of the Historical Society?"

"She's dead."

"What?"

"I guess you're not the good friends you thought you were if you didn't know that, Margaret. She died two months ago."

There was suddenly a small rent in my universe. I sat back in my chair and didn't care that my mouth was hanging open unbecomingly. Melva had slipped away without my noticing.

"Oh, Bitsy, that's so sad. I really liked her."

"Don't you read the obituaries?"

"No."

"And you accuse me of hiding from reality."

"There's a difference between being realistic and running after the morbid details."

We exchanged looks through narrow slits, but I wavered first, not having the heart just now for a good tangle. Instead I sighed.

"Well, I'm sorry she's gone, too, Margaret. But I'm glad you knew her and liked her. Now I don't feel so bad asking you what I was going to."

Here it came. I knew the tea and

strudel had to be spiked with an ulterior motive. What an absolutely ripping day this was turning out to be. "What?"

"Don't sound so negative, Margaret. Miss Melva Jenkins left her collection of local history books and various papers to the Historical Society, and I volunteered to inventory them. We'd like an appraisal of the books for our records as well, and I thought you might be interested in donating your two t's to the project.

"My what?"

"Your time and talent. What do you think?"

Despite Bitsy's two c's (cloying cuteness), the idea was actually appealing. Good Old Melva had bought some great old books from me, and I'd always hoped she'd invite me over to drool through her private library someday. Now she was gone and I'd gotten my wish. Thanks to Bitsy. Who'd've figured? So I thanked her for the tea and the strudel, and I thanked her for putting me in touch with Melva one more time, and the two of us made arrangements to meet at the Historical Society Sunday afternoon to start going through boxes of books.

Bitsy's car was already parked out front when I arrived at the house the Historical Society calls home. It's a nice example of a Craftsman-style bungalow on the opposite end of Main Street from my bookstore. The porch and foundation are made of local river rocks. Around the turn of the century there was a guy who made his living using smoothed and rounded knobs in everything he built. His legacy is visible around town and here and there out in the county. These days people either hate the somewhat eccentric buildings or love them. I love them and was glad the Historical Society did, too.

"Hello!" I called, stepping in the front door. I heard Bitsy's answering trill coming from somewhere upstairs. Everything else was quiet. On the wall as I headed up the stairs was a series of photographs of members of the Historical Society over the years. I looked at each as I climbed and saw the members growing older before my eyes. Good Old Melva first appeared in a1964 photo, looking about fifty. I did a fast-forward through her life the rest of the way up.

"It's nice to know some things never change," I said to Bitsy. She was standing at the top of the stairs with her hands on her hips.

"Like your being late?"

"You might call it late, Bitsy. I like to think of it as being reliable. I'm reliably behind schedule. No, I was talking about Good Old Melva in these pictures. I thought dressing like Queen Elizabeth was just a costume she'd adopted for her role as a little old lady."

"Margaret!"

"But it turns out she'd always dressed like that. She looked like Julia Child and dressed like Queen Elizabeth. What a great combination. Did you ever meet her?"

"No. I wish I had."

"You would've liked her. She was one of the good ones. I think I'd be happy if I knew I'd grow up to be Good Old Melva."

"If you ever grow up."

"Where are the books?"

"In here." She led the way into a back bedroom now being used as the library and archives. The walls were lined with shelves, and an old library table took up the middle of the room. A dozen or so sturdy liquor boxes were stacked in a corner, HISTORICAL SOCIETY BOOKS scrawled across each in black Magic Marker. A familiar tingle danced down my spine when I saw them, and I couldn't help grinning. It's like Christmas morning every time. The promise of wonderful books lay before me. I think my fingers were wriggling in anticipation. Let me at them.

"What's your plan of action, Bitsy?"

"Don't you have one?"

"Of course I do. A bookseller is always prepared." I opened one of the boxes and took a whiff. Oh, thank you, Melva, for not letting your books get musty. "Okay, how about we take them out of the boxes and roughly arrange them according to category. Paperbacks in one place, magazines and journals in another, anything that looks like family papers in another, and the hardbacks in another yet. We can refine the categories as we go if we need to."

"Why are your cheeks all pink?"

"Don't you feel it? Don't you hear them calling? It's the books, Bitsy. They want me."

"Oh brother. Okay, let's get started."

We spent the next couple of hours sorting things into their respective piles. We could have moved faster, but at times like this and with books the quality of Melva's, it's impossible not to stop and ogle a bit at each one. And Good Old Melva had some real treasures. She actually had a first edition of *Godsey's Annals,* incredibly hard to come by and very much sought-after. I sat and stroked its cover until Bitsy began to look uncomfortable. Melva also had something I'd never even heard a whisper of. It was a limited edition, small press issue of an epic poem written for the state's centennial celebration in 1896, bound in green silk. I was completely charmed.

"Wow," Bitsy said when the last box was finally empty. She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead and pushed the hair out of her eyes. "There is some amazing stuff here!"

"Yeah, Melva was a marvel."

"She must have been." She was sitting next to the last box she'd emptied, and now she shoved it out of the way and leaned against the wall. "Tell me about her."

"Well, I told you I only knew her through the store, but it's amazing what you can learn about a person through their books."

"Like what?"

"She had class, Bitsy, real class. From her Julia Child stature to her Queen Elizabeth clothes to her voice, which always made me think of Eudora Welty for some reason. But a thread of irreverence ran through everything she said and did, and I don't quite picture Eudora Welty using some of Melva's vocabulary."

"What do you mean?"

"She swore like a sailor."

"Oh, come on!"

"It's not only the truth, it's the goddamned truth."

"Margaret!"

"That's a direct quote from Miss Melva Jenkins. She was very funny, Bitsy."

"Well, I can see why you liked her," she said with a sniff.

"She was Good Old Melva, Bitsy. One of the best." I stopped and looked around at the piles.

"What's the matter? Disappointed there isn't more?"

"Hmm? Oh no, I was just wondering." Something was bothering me, but I didn't know quite what. Of course I would have loved it if there'd been a dozen more boxes like these to go through. I would have felt as though I'd died and gone to heaven along with Good Old Melva. But it was *something* about more books. And then I knew. "Bitsy, did Melva give *all* her local history stuff to the society? Did she leave any of it to her niece or nephew?"

"As far as I know, everything came to us. Why?"

"A couple of things are missing."

"What do you mean? How can you possibly know that?"

"One is the copy of *Grenoble Grundy* that I sold her. It's not here. And the other is something I never saw but that she told me about. It was a diary. I think it was her father's."

"Well, there's the copy of *The Thrilling Adventures of Grenoble Grundy* that's already here. Maybe that was hers. Maybe she gave it before she died."

"Where is it?"

She made a face but got up and scanned the shelves.

"Here. Happy?"

I took it from her and looked it over, leafing through the pages and checking the spine and endpapers. "Not Melva's."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. How do you know? You said you got it for her years ago."

I raised my eyebrows at her. "Eight years ago in February. Her copy didn't have any foxing, and, although it could have gained some foxing in that time, none of her other books has suffered in that way. And her copy had an inscription on the title page." She looked skeptical. "Trust me, Bitsy, this is the kind of information I clutter my brain with so that I don't have room for other things like what size bag my vacuum cleaner takes."

"That's very impressive, Margaret." Somehow I didn't think she really thought so. "She probably just gave the *Grundy* and the diary to her niece or somebody."

"Or maybe somebody bumped her off for them."

"Oh, right."

"Maybe someone stalked Good Old Melva and tipped her down the staircase. Do you know how she died? Did anyone test for arsenic?"

"I think you are being extremely tasteless." We both jumped. An elderly woman stood in the doorway. I didn't recognize her, but by the way Bitsy sort of cringed, I figured *she* did.

"Mrs. Martin," Bitsy said, standing up straighter and using her dazzling smile to good effect. "We didn't hear you come in. We've just

been going through Good Old, I mean Miss Jenkins' books—"

"So I heard. I don't believe I know you." She directed this at me. Bitsy was kind enough, or cowed enough, to make the introductions.

"This is my sister, Margaret Welch. She's going to do the appraisal for us. Margaret, this is Mrs. Alice Martin, the president of the Historical Society."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Martin. Your library here is very impressive, and Melva's books are a wonderful addition."

I thought I sounded nice, but all Mrs. Martin said was "Hmph." I've been hmphed at by little old ladies before, but none of them was able to give it quite the spin that Mrs. Martin did. Then she turned on her heel, and we heard her huff her way down the stairs.

Bitsy and I looked at each other, Bitsy looking properly chagrined. I wondered how long Mrs. Martin had been standing there before saying something. Hadn't her mother ever told her it was impolite to listen in on other people's conversations?

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, Bitsy," I said, hoping to cheer her up, "Good Old Melva was never one to say hmph at anyone."

"Oh, stop with the Good Old Melva! I am mortified! I'll probably be the only person ever thrown out of the Historical Society."

I couldn't imagine why anyone would toss her out of the Hysterical Society just because I'd been making uncalled-for jokes about Melva's death. But Bitsy often thinks she's the only person ever involved in the daily crises that make up our lives. And who knows, maybe the members would rise up as one to banish her. I didn't really think they'd have the energy to spare for that kind of thing, though. They tend to expend whatever spunk they can muster on squabbling over things like which historic paint chip palette to use for repainting the old inn.

It was getting late, and the whole job of inventorying the books and giving any kind of ballpark estimate of their value was going to take a few more sessions. Bitsy half-heartedly picked up her legal pad to get started and then put it down again. It was her idea that we should come back later in the week when maybe St. Alice wouldn't be lurking. She said she'd call me some evening when the coast was clear. So we adjourned to her house for leftover strudel. That was my idea.

A funny thing about Bitsy is that she really does care what people think of her. She was genuinely worried, for instance, about Alice Martin's opinion. And although Bitsy is sometimes a little heavy-handed when it comes to laying blame, if she wanted to consider the incident in the library as being all my fault, I decided I couldn't be anything other than gracious in accepting it. It wasn't she, after all, who had run on and on about missing books and the murderous ways they might have disappeared.

So, as well as being uncharacteristically gracious, I thought I'd be generous, too. I decided to do something for Bitsy and the Historical

Society to make up for joking about one of their dearly departed own. Melva's niece, Christy Orebank, had been a few years ahead of us in school. I vaguely remembered her but not enough to remember either liking or disliking her. After a little telephone work, I tracked her down in Knoxville.

"Margaret Welch? Are you the one whose nose got so sunburned every summer that we called you Rudolph?"

"Oh yeah, right. Thanks for reminding me."

"Kids are awful, aren't they?"

"And then they grow up and become loan officers and surgeons." I explained to her how I knew her aunt and why I was calling now.

"Wow, all that old stuff? No, I've never been interested in any of it, and I doubt Bill ever was, either. Aunt Melva would've known better than to leave any of it to us. No, she was pretty good to us in her will, but it was always understood that the books and family papers and everything would go to the Historical Society. But I remember the diary." She laughed, sounding a little like a younger version of Good Old Melva.

"There was some story about that diary that always made my mother turn red and Aunt Melva giggle. I don't know what it was. They always said they'd tell us about it when we were old enough. I guess by the time we got old enough we'd lost interest."

We said a few things along the lines of how isn't that the way things always go. Then I thanked her and she asked after my nose again and I managed to say goodbye without sounding too peeved.

She called back about twenty minutes later.

"Rudy?" I almost hung up. "I got to thinking about that diary, and I remembered that one of my kids borrowed it for a history project."

"So you do have it?" I asked.

"No, Aunt Melva only let her have it on pain of death if she didn't return it."

"Well, rats." So why'd she bother to call me back?

"But she transcribed it. Do you think the Historical Society would like a copy of the transcription?"

"To quote your aunt, not only yes, but hell yes."

"That was Aunt Melva, all right," she laughed. "I'll put it in the mail for you tomorrow."

I thanked her again and this time didn't have any trouble sounding sincere.

The transcription arrived a few days later. Bitsy hadn't called me in the meantime to schedule any furtive book appraising. Maybe I was already too late and she'd been booted out of the society. She might be in seclusion, keeping her shame hidden behind drawn shades. I didn't really think that was the case, though, because I would have been the first to hear about it. Loudly and at great length.

I thought about calling her and telling her the good news about the copy of the diary. But it was a slow afternoon in the bookstore, and even though I tried burying it under some bills, I finally couldn't resist that thick brown envelope. I

retrieved it without disturbing the bills and settled myself comfortably on the stool behind the counter to read.

Melva's father must have had the dominant genes in that family. It was pretty obvious where her charm, irreverence, vocabulary, and name had come from. Good Old Melvin Jenkins, Jr., was a character even as a teenager. His father had given him the diary for his fifteenth birthday in 1899, and he'd written in it off and on until he'd gone off to college somewhere in the Midwest.

I wished I could hold the real thing in my hands. I wished Melva's great-niece had been a better typist. But I enjoyed my afternoon with Melvin, age fifteen through eighteen. Especially age seventeen through eighteen. He developed an interest in astronomy about then, and his father gave him a telescope for his seventeenth birthday. Most of his diary entries after that described the moon and the stars and the other heavenly bodies he spent hours gazing upon. He apparently spent hours and hours gazing. And the descriptions were pretty detailed. No wonder Melva had giggled and Christy's mother turned red.

My elderly cousin Leona stopped in while I was in the middle of a particularly colorful passage.

"Leering doesn't become you, Margaret," she said by way of greeting.

I composed myself and asked how she was feeling. She's not quite as old as Melva was, but she is getting frail. She said she was feeling fine, which would have been her answer even if I'd caught her taking her last breath. Then I thought of something else to ask her.

"Cousin Leona, do you know anyone named Agnes Mae Pritchard?"

"Agnes Pritchard Kelley that would be. She married the banker, Arthur Kelley. She was quite a famous beauty in her day, or so my mother used to say. I haven't heard her name in years. Why?"

"I've been reading an old diary. Melvin Jenkins'."

"Melva Jenkins' father? Good heavens, I remember him." I don't recall ever seeing Cousin Leona blush before. Obviously Melvin's eye for the ladies hadn't dimmed in middle age.

Leona didn't stay for her usual cup of tea.

Bitsy called as I was closing up shop for the day. "Is the coast clear?" I whispered.

"Yes, Margaret. And try to control yourself this time."

"Sorry, Bitsy. I'll see you there. Oh, and I have something for you."

"What?"

"Don't sound so suspicious. You'll like it. Trust me."

"Yeah, right."

Now why was she being like that?

We met that evening to perform our clandestine inventory and ended up not getting a lot of work done after all. For one thing, Bitsy was delighted with the transcription, and I spent most of our time entertaining her by reading aloud some of the better bits. We had quite a lot of fun, and I began to see this doing-

things-together idea of hers in a better light.

"What a hoot!" she said when I finally put the diary aside. "And speaking of hoots, wouldn't you just give anything to know who Agnes Mae Pritchard was?"

"According to Leona, she married Arthur Kelley. She was Agnes Pritchard Kelley." Bitsy's jaw dropped. "What?" I asked.

"Oh my god. Margaret, I know where the diary is."

"Where? Did the ghost of Agnes Mae bump off Good Old Melva so she could get her hands on it?"

"You are tiresomely tasteless," came a voice from the doorway.

"My two t's," I said.

"Margaret!" Bitsy hissed, turning toward the door.

And there was the other reason we didn't end up getting much work done that night.

"Mrs. Martin, how nice to see you again. Why don't you come in and sit down." Bitsy has a knack for issuing that kind of invitation. They don't come with question marks, and, even though she's short and not very prepossessing, the message gets through. It might have something to do with the steely look she gets in her eye. I know it makes me jumpy. It had that effect on Mrs. Martin, too.

"And just where did you get a copy of that, that—" She tried to bluster, but Bitsy held her ground.

"The diary, Mrs. Martin?"

"Filth is more like it."

Bitsy quelled any further comment by moving her left eyebrow a fraction of an inch.

"Bitsy," I said quietly, not wanting to distract her but hoping for a little enlightenment, "what's going on?"

"Margaret, let me introduce you to Alice Kelley Martin."

I managed to keep my jaw from dropping but couldn't do anything about the smile playing around my lips. "Oh," I said. "Very good, Bitsy." And then I let the smile get completely away from me. "Mrs. Martin, I think we'd like to hear about your two a's."

"My what?"

"And your two p's. Your actionable appropriation and petty pilfering. Why did you do it?"

"Because of the scandal!"

"The scandal of a beautiful girl being described in execrable poetry by a randy seventeen-year-old?"

"I'll be a laughing-stock if this gets out!"

"I think there's more scandal in stealing the diary," Bitsy said.

"You were laughing."

"But not at you, Mrs. Martin. Not at Agnes Mae."

"At what, then?"

We looked at each other, wondering. "At the seventeen-year-old in all of us," I finally said. "It's a ridiculous age but not a scandalous one. Don't you think, Mrs. Martin, that if Miss Melva Jenkins were comfortable sharing her father's diary with the Historical Society you should honor her wish?"

"Melva Jenkins was an old bat!" Alice Martin said and stormed out.

"Those two never got along," Bitsy said shaking her head.

"So she had the *Grenoble Grundy*, too. Mm, mm, mm. What a piece

of work is Mrs. Alice Martin." Bitsy and I were sitting at the library table in the Historical Society several evenings later, surrounded by Good Old Melva's newly inventoried books. I was holding Melvin's diary and petting it as though it were a cat. It's an odd compulsion, but some books just affect me that way. I stopped when I realized Bitsy was looking at me.

"She's an odd duck, all right," she said, and I wasn't entirely sure she was talking about Alice Martin. "She had a few other books that were duplicates from our collection. She returned those, too."

"How uncommonly good of her. So I guess there'll be a new president soon?"

"Oh no."

"No? Why not?"

"Because of the scandal, Margaret. Can you imagine if word got out that the president of the society was helping herself to whatever took her fancy?"

"And what if something else catches her eye?"

"I told her I'd have my eye on her." Well that would certainly keep her in line if anything could. "So, Margaret," Bitsy said, turning that eye on me, "now that we've finished this project, why don't we start something else?"

I was feeling pretty mellow and magnanimous. We'd had some fun together.

"What did you have in mind, Bitsy?" I asked.

"The family history. Why don't we write it together? It would be such fun, and with the two of us working on it we could . . ."

But I was already on my way out the door. I saluted Good Old Melva as I flew down the stairs, Bitsy's single echoing "m" in my ears.

"Margaret!"

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

Judy McCord shot her husband Carl. The poor fellow had gone on the safari to view elephants.

DAY	HUSBAND	WIFE	ANIMAL
Monday	Bill O'Dell	Inez	leopards
Tuesday	Carl McCord	Judy	elephants
Wednesday	Fred Newman	Helen	zebras
Thursday	Adam Quimby	Lola	antelope
Friday	Dave Rogers	Greta	wildebeest
Saturday	Evan Parker	Kathy	lions

"And Lesser Breeds Without the Law"

Arthur Train

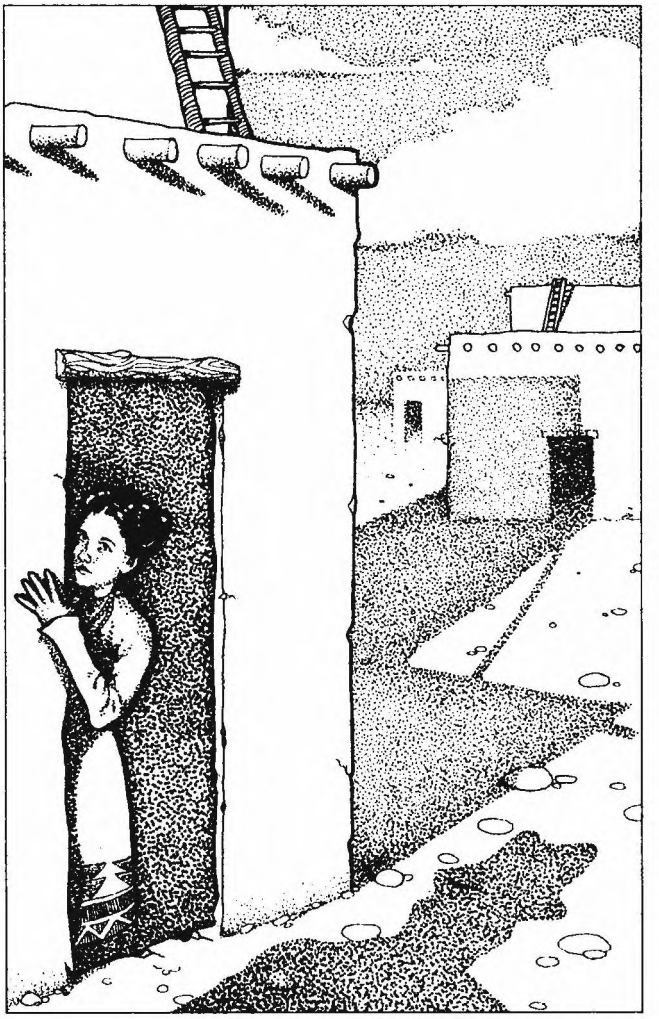


Illustration by Andrew Perkowski

"Tom-tom, tom-tom-tom!" went the drums.

The two lines of Indian maidens and young men in their ceremonial costumes of embroidered doeskin, turquoise necklaces, and eagles' feathers, wavered forward and back, hesitated and glided sideways, like tasseled cornstalks swaying in the wind. Each girl carried beneath her serape a newly made ornamental basket —token of fertility. If Slatsina were pleased, there would be rain and a full harvest; if not, drought and famine. Hence, they danced solemnly and with reverence, invoking the favor and cooperation of the Cloud Beings—since corn was their life. Leading the maidens was a slender girl who despite the weight of her basket and her many chains of turquoises carried herself proudly erect. The flush on her bronzed skin was like the purple bloom of the wild plum.

"Who is that lovely creature?" asked Ephraim Tutt of his friend Sheriff Brady as they sat in the latter's motorcar among the crowd of tourists, cowboys, and Spanish-Americans assembled on the dusty piazza of the Cocas Pueblo for the annual Basket Dance.

"That's Tamo-yoa-powi—'Dawn Flower,' " replied Sheriff Brady. "She'd make some o' them Hollywood babies look like pikers! She was down to the Indian Boarding School for four years, but she didn't like the 'white way.' She's pure Cocas, and a high-stepper. Her dad Agoyotsire was a big *cacique* when he was alive, but Tasikuma her mama is a tough old bitch!"

"And that young Indian opposite her?"

"That's Okuwahpee—'Cloud Prayer Feather'—assistant to Oyike Sendo—the one they call 'Ice Hard Old Man.' Some day he'll be Oyike Sendo himself—if he lives. He's a good boy!"

He looked it, this lithe youth with grave aquiline features and eagle's feather dangling from his coiled black locks. In one hand he held a prayer stick, in the other he rattled a gourd in time to the tom-tom of the drums. Lining each side of the square in front of the stepped-back adobe pueblos were two or three hundred Cocas Indians in fiesta costume, the elders grouped about the two drummers. Whites as well as Indians all stood motionless, enthralled by the beauty and sincerity of the dance. Although after six o'clock, it was still hot, the sky without a cloud, the air dry and brittle. Across the sagebrush-dotted salmon-pink valley of the Rio Grande smoldered the snowcapped Jemez ridge, its canyons veiled in translucent and ever deepening lavenders, blues, and purples. The shadows of the dancers were moving fingers on the white parchment of the piazza, writing their appeal to the Cloud Beings. Forward and back, sideways, forward and back. The girl kept her eyes upon the ground. Not once did she glance at the young *cacique,* nor he at her.

The sheriff poked Mr. Tutt in the ribs. "See that fat buck down

there?" he whispered, indicating a squat Indian with pigtails protruding from beneath his large felt hat. "That's old Spotted Dog, the richest man in the pueblo but a bad hombre. I've arrested him half a dozen times for drunkenness, and he's always in trouble over women. Looks as if he's got Dawn Flower marked down, all right."

"You mean she'd marry that old ruffian?"

The sheriff just missed scoring a liquid bull's-eye on an incautious lizard.

"It would be a shame, of course, but these Cocan girls don't have much say about that sort of thing. Spotted Dog's been married five times. His last wife disappeared over six months ago and no one knows where she is. So now he's lookin' for another. He's a big catch for an Indian, even if he is a lousy, lyin', lecherous half-breed. If he wants her, he'll get her! Look at the old bastard!"

Mr. Tutt looked, and his aged heart rose in revolt. Spotted Dog's obsidian eyes were following every movement of Dawn Flower's figure with sensual gratification. From time to time he moistened his lips. The Old Man hated to think of what would be the girl's fate if she fell into the half-breed's clutches.

Perhaps it was because Mr. Tutt's disgust showed so clearly on his face or perhaps merely because Spotted Dog didn't like the sheriff, but conscious of being the object of their attention, he removed his cornhusk cigarette and with malevolent deliberation squirted a yellow stream in their direction.

At that instant the sun dropped below the burning crests in a saffron glow; to the east the snowy range of the Sangre de Christos changed to lavender, to mauve, to purplish blue. The drummers accelerated their tempo to a frenzied roll. The climax of the dance was at hand. Dawn Flower sprang in front of her companions, threw open her serape, and tossed her basket high in the air. The young braves with shrill cries rushed forward in a body to capture it, but Cloud Prayer Feather, leaping up amid the whoops and yells of the onlookers, caught it above their heads. For an instant he stood there looking at Dawn Flower, but although their eyes met, their faces remained without expression. Then the drums stopped, and the dancers scattered.

Night, as always on the desert, fell swiftly. A breeze sprang up and sent a tumbleweed bouncing across the fast-emptying piazza. The mountains became masses of vague gray. The stars came out as if thrown on by a switch. They seemed startlingly near. Through the open doorways of the pueblos drifted the sweet smoke of piñon wood fires, dimly illuminating whitewashed interiors.

The sheriff started the car across the square, past McCann's Trading Post and Hotel, through the scattered houses of the town of Cocas, and out onto the starlit desert aromatic with the odor of sage, of pine, of ju-

niper, and of chimosa. But Mr. Tutt was oblivious to its beauty. He was thinking of a young and graceful Indian girl doomed to union with a half-breed satyr.

"I can't—I won't believe it!" he repeated indignantly.

"You don't know the half of it!" retorted the sheriff. "Indians is different from white folks. A pure Navajo or Cocas regards us Anglos as inferiors. You see, they've been here thousands of years, long before the days of the conquistadors, when Coronado came up from Old Mexico in 1540 lookin' fer the Seven Cities of Cibola. He didn't find no gold, but he did find thousands of Pueblo Indians living in the sides of cliffs or in big rookeries piled up on the mesas, and so he started in to Christianize 'em. They was a peaceful, goodnatured bunch, and because they didn't want no trouble, they accepted the King of Spain as their boss and let the padres baptize 'em, just like Coronado told 'em to do. But the Spaniards treated 'em plenty tough, and when the Indians got a chance, they revolted, massacred the padres, and went back to their old religion. Of course they got licked in the end. It's quite a story."

"Yes, quite a story!" agreed the Old Man, who knew the legends of Fra Marcos, of the black slave Estevan, of the false Turcos, and of Coronado's blistering trek in search of the Grand Quivira—the fabulous jeweled city. For an instant he seemed to see vague shapes in armor straggling across the starlit desert.

" 'Know ye the trail that the Salt bands go?
Close by the Rock where they carved their names?
Know ye the hills of the Navajo?
And the barren sands that the Hopi claims?
Dim in the cañons of the dead,
Where the towns are dust and the last scalps dried,
Their swords are rust, and the desert crow
Scarce can tell where the Spaniards died,' "

he murmured. "The Indians are all Christians now, aren't they?"

"Sure, on the surface. It's a queer setup—nuthin' like it, so fer as I know, anywhere's else. They go to Mass, keep the saints' days, and respect 'the Sunday Jesus' as they call him, but they go right on worshipping their old gods, too, and, between you and me, think a hell of a lot more of 'em than of the new ones. Everything an Indian does is tied up with their old religion and has its own particular ceremony—like this Basket Dance, fer instance. They have their own tribal *caciques* and officials, and what goes on in the *kiva* no one knows but themselves. Everything is decided in secret by their Council of Elders according to the old traditions."

"Do you mean they're allowed to run their own affairs?"

"Practically. The Treaty gives 'em entire jurisdiction over their communal property, domestic relations, and minor criminal offenses inside

the pueblo, with their own government, consisting of a *toyo*—or governor, who with his police assistants is supposed to keep order and administer justice. We call 'em 'the Spanish set,' but they're only a screen for the real authority exercised by the council. The big boss who really runs the whole show is Oyike Sendo, Ice Hard Old Man. Outside the reservation, of course, they're subject to the state laws of New Mexico same as anybody, and so is any property they happen to own there individually."

As a lawyer Mr. Tutt was interested in this dual authority, one apparent, the other genuine.

"Suppose an Indian goes really bad? Commits a murder in the pueblo or some other serious crime?"

"In that case the Federal government steps in, and we try to do something about it. Otherwise the council takes care of 'most everything and punishes the offenders in its own way."

"How about matrimonial affairs? Take this girl Dawn Flower. Suppose Spotted Dog wants to marry her, how will he go about it?"

"Each pueblo has its own customs. Here in Cocas he goes to see her mother. She decides. If she's in favor of it, they're married according to the Indian ritual—which consists merely of a feast and a prayer by a *cacique*. If they're particular, they can go outside the pueblo and be married like ordinary white folks in church or before a justice of the peace."

"And if the girl refuses?"

"Then it's just too bad. Her mother probably kicks her out."

"So a Cocas girl hasn't got much chance to follow the dictates of her own heart?" demanded Mr. Tutt.

"I'll say she hasn't!" replied Mr. Brady. "She does what her old woman tells her—or else!"

When Dawn Flower entered her mother's house after climbing the two ladders of the pueblo, her heart was beating less from exertion than from the fact that in the instant her eyes had met those of Okuwahpee she knew that he was her "eagle-feather man" and that she longed to be his wife. Her mother Tasikuma, who was bending over the fire, did not look around.

"You tossed the basket so that Okuwahpee could get it," croaked the old woman. "It was not seemly. Slatsina will be displeased, and the dance will go for nothing or worse!"

The deeply religious Dawn Flower was shocked at the thought of such sacrilege. "I had no wish that Okuwahpee would get it. He had never so much as looked at me!"

"So much the better," replied Tasikuma. "I have arranged a fine marriage for you."

Dawn Flower's heart sank.

"So soon!—when I have been back from school less than a month!"

"Why not? The meat should be eaten while it is fresh."

"Whom—whom do you wish me to marry?"

"The richest man in Cocas—Spotted Dog."

Dawn Flower sat down weakly on the bed rug. The mere thought made her sick. "That horrible old man! He smells always of whisky! Besides, he has already been married five times!"

"You will do as I say!" retorted her mother angrily. "We have no one to support us—no uncles or cousins. We have nothing to eat but borrowed scrapings of corn. Spotted Dog will buy you a fine house with a garden outside the pueblo in the town. He is an old man and will die before long. Then you will inherit a lot of land, my old age will be provided for, and you can marry whom you like."

"I am Indian!" cried Dawn Flower. "Spotted Dog is part white. I don't want to marry a *bohaña* or to live the white way."

"If you wish to follow the Indian tradition, stubborn girl, then marry as I direct," threatened Tasikuma. "This marriage will revive our clan, which is now almost extinct. It will bring us money, and safeguard my dying years. It will be an act of piety on your part. A disobedient daughter is an offense to the gods. You must do this for me."

Dawn Flower went out and stood disconsolately on the pueblo roof. It was true that for the mother to choose was the Cocas way, and after her four years at the school, she was fiercely resolved to be Indian in all things. It was also true that they were wretchedly poor. Cloud Prayer Feather had never looked at her until that afternoon; she had no reason to suppose that he would think of asking her to marry him. Besides, he was a *cacique* and his mind doubtless dwelt not on marrying but on more spiritual things. For an hour she struggled with herself, then went inside. "Very well," she said tonelessly. "I will do as you say."

"Good!" exclaimed Tasikuma. "You shall marry him as soon as he has bought the house and the land."

"But I don't want to live outside the pueblo!" protested Dawn Flower. "I want to live with my own people."

"All right. But first let him buy the land so that you can inherit it. I will speak to Father Angelico tomorrow."

"I don't want to be married by a priest. I want an Indian marriage!"

"Tush!" said the old woman. "Unless you are married the white way, who knows what will happen when Spotted Dog dies?"

"In that case I shall want an Indian wedding also!" insisted her daughter.

"Have as many weddings as you like!" grunted Tasikuma.

Cloud Prayer Feather walked back to his house crooning a love song:

" 'Can it be that my young maiden fair
Sits awaiting all alone tonight?
Is she waiting for me only?' "

"Why do you sing, Okuwahpee?" asked his father.

"I caught the basket," replied the youth. "It will bring me good luck."

"But your song is not about a basket!"

Cloud Prayer Feather hung his head.

"Until last month I had not thought of marrying. But now I am a grown man, a *cacique* of the Hunting Society and assistant to Oyike Sendo. I should like Tamo-yoa-powi for my wife."

"She is pure Indian and a good girl," nodded his father. "If you wish, I will speak to her mother tomorrow!"

"I do wish!" exclaimed Okuwahpee. Then, having put away his prayer stick and basket, he went out upon the terrace of the pueblo whence on the other side of the piazza he could distinguish the glow from Dawn Flower's fire. Some one was standing there in the starlight.

He raised his voice hoping that she might hear:

" 'O what happiness! How delightful,
When together we 'neath one blanket walk,
When we together walk beneath one blanket!' "

Tasikuma let no juniper grow under her flat feet but, having secured Dawn Flower's acquiescence in the marriage, hastened from the pueblo next morning to the office of Mr. Jose Lopez, a real estate dealer and notary public who advised the Indians regarding their business affairs and acted as a go-between among them and the Spanish Americans. He was small, yellow, and crafty and, although he had notably failed elsewhere to make a living, occupied a position of considerable influence among the Cocas owing to the fact that he was Mr. McCann's brother-in-law.

Primarily interested in protecting the interests of the wealthy Spotted Dog, he realized at the same time that Tasikuma was a determined woman and that he must needs be adroit to outwit her. The old girl wasn't taking any chances, and insisted that Spotted Dog execute a deed of the land to Dawn Flower at once. It so happened that Spotted Dog had for a long time owned a strip of an old Spanish grant running "from river to mountain" and supposedly valueless except for grazing. This—owing to Dawn Flower's refusal to live outside the pueblo—Lopez induced Tasikuma to accept in lieu of the original house and land, but on the question of delivery she was adamant and the best he could do was to persuade her to agree that the deed to Dawn Flower should be held by McCann in escrow to take effect when and if the marriage should actually take place.

These details having been satisfactorily arranged, and Tasikuma

having seen Spotted Dog execute the deed and deliver it to McCann, the marriage ceremony was duly performed by Father Angelico, in whose eyes the groom was a bachelor, his former marriages having been solemnized—if at all—only after the Indian fashion. Indeed, the good priest expressed much gratification that this pagan recalcitrant who had so long lived in sin should at last desire the rites of the Holy Church.

Since Dawn Flower continued to insist upon an Indian marriage also, this was set for the next day but one in the house of Spotted Dog, and pending it, she returned to her mother's house. Now, a wedding among the Cocas Pueblos is not so much a religious rite as a public announcement of the contract followed by a feast consecrated by prayer. By the irony of fate, to Cloud Prayer Feather, already stunned by the news of the ceremony before Father Angelico, had been delegated the duty of invoking the blessing of the Cloud Beings upon the newly married pair.

For forty-eight hours in the semidarkness of the *kiva* the young *cacique* had fasted and prayed in order that, purified and exalted, he might be fit to perform his sacred office. Now having reverently received from the hands of Oyike Sendo the sacred dried ear of blue corn and the prayer stick with eagle feathers, he walked weakly across the piazza to the house of Spotted Dog, where upon the earthen floor the more important guests were already squatting in their fiesta clothes. As a *cacique* he could not evade his priestly duty no matter how personally repugnant it might be to him, and the thought of so doing did not enter his mind; but he was in a highly emotional state induced by lack of food and sleep.

The Indians arose as he entered the room and formed a circle against the walls. Spotted Dog, who was smoking a cornhusk cigarette, remained seated, a complacent grin on his creased, leathery face. Beside him sat Dawn Flower dressed as at the Basket Dance, save that her hair had been done in heavy glossy coils to resemble squash blossoms, her hands folded in her lap. In her eyes was a look of blank despair.

Cloud Prayer Feather took a position in the center of the room facing the bride and groom. Although the ritual required him to turn his glance toward the Six World Quarters, he could not take them from Dawn Flower's face. Lowering the prayer stick towards the floor he bent forward, still fixedly gazing at her.

"I give prayer sticks to you, O Earth Mother!" he chanted, then stood up and elevated his arms: "I give prayer sticks to you, O Sun Father!"

As he was about to begin his invocation to the Cloud Beings, he felt a sudden upsurge of the spirit as if his chest would burst, the air turned icy cold, and a great light filled the room while above his head, about the smoke hole, appeared the Cloud Being of the North, his namesake.

"Go no further, Okuwahpee!" commanded the vision. "Ask not my

blessing upon this marriage, for it is accurst. This woman is of pure Indian blood while he who seeks to wed her is not. Such a union would symbolize the engulfment and absorption of the Indian race. It must not go on!"

Then in a clap of thunder the spirit vanished through the smoke hole, and Cloud Prayer Feather found himself covered with sweat upon the floor. Shaking as with an ague, he raised himself with the sacred fetishes in his hands and stared about him.

"You heard what the Cloud Spirit of the North said!" he gasped. "The Indian race must retain its purity. This wedding must not go on for it is displeasing to the Cloud Beings. In the name of the gods I forbid it."

The crowd of Cocas were frozen with astonishment and awe. Spotted Dog scrambled to his feet, his face distorted with rage.

"You lie, priest!" he shouted. "There was no Cloud Spirit here. No one heard anything. It is just a trick to break up my wedding."

"But Okuwahpee is one of our priests," replied one of the Indians. "He heard the Cloud Spirit of the North forbid your marriage to Tamo-yoa-powi!"

"Bah!" screamed Spotted Dog. "Tamo-yoa-powi and I have been already married by Father Angelico. See, I have the marriage paper! I do not need anything more to make Dawn Flower my wife!"

An excited hubbub arose, and those outside tried to crowd in to learn what had happened. Nothing of the sort had ever occurred at the pueblo—not even in a thousand years. Everyone began taking sides. Half the Indians were satisfied that Cloud Prayer Feather had really seen and spoken with Slatsina, but some of them were in doubt, others frankly skeptical. That Okuwahpee should have deliberately taken advantage of his priestly office to upset Spotted Dog's wedding was of course unthinkable, but in his exalted state he might honestly have mistaken the smoke from the fire that hung against the ceiling for the Cloud Being of the North and imagined that he had heard Slatsina's voice. But were Spotted Dog and Dawn Flower married or not? Was an unconsummated marriage by a priest a lawful Indian marriage inside the pueblo—if the *cacique* forbade it? Would not the Cloud Beings wreak vengeance upon all of them if they were defied?

Cloud Prayer Feather turned towards the door of the pueblo.

"Wait! Wait!" cried Dawn Feather, forcing her way after him through the crowd. "Take me with you, Okuwahpee!"

That night as Cloud Prayer Feather was riding his horse back to the corral a rifle bullet pierced his chest, missing his heart by half an inch, and next day, hovering between life and death, he was taken in an ambulance to the hospital at Santa Fe.

There might be better fishing in the Southwest than on Harry Chan-

dler's two hundred eighty thousand acre "Dermejo Park," but if so, Mr. Tutt did not know where. It is reached by rail most readily from Trinidad, but the Old Man had never seen the Indian country and on returning from the San Francisco Fair had decided to leave the eastbound train at Albuquerque and motor up the valley of the Rio Grande via Santa Fe, Taos, and Raton. For over a month now, amid virgin forests ten thousand feet above sea level, he had taken his daily limit of two and three pound rainbow, Eastern brook, and salmon trout in a fisherman's paradise.

Yet each evening as he had sat smoking his stogy in front of the ranch house, watching the daylight fade on the snowy peaks of the Costillos, his mind had inevitably reverted to the Basket Dance at the pueblo. What had happened to Dawn Flower, he wondered. Had Spotted Dog got her as the sheriff had foretold? As his vacation drew to an end, he had become more and more desirous of finding out. So he had started back by motor over the same trail by which he had come, to pause once again at Cocas.

The landscape was quite different now, for the pale greens of the cottonwoods and box elders along the bottoms, the aspens upon the sides of the Sangre de Christos, had turned to gold and in the fields the Indians were harvesting their corn, leaving the green and yellow melons exposed to ripen. Slatsina had been good to them—apparently the Cloud Beings had been pleased.

"I'm sure glad to see you back!" the sheriff greeted him at the door of McCann's Trading Post where Mr. Tutt planned to spend the night. "No, nuthin' much hez happened around here since you left. There was a little excitement over Dawn Flower's marriage to Spotted Dog and some skunk shot Cloud Prayer Feather and nearly killed him, but the boy's comin' along all right now and everything's quieted down again."

"So Dawn Flower actually did marry Spotted Dog?" inquired the Old Man incredulously.

"Yep, they were married all right before Father Angelico, but the Indian ceremony went haywire and damn if any one knows now whether they were married or not. It was certainly a mixup. I told you Spotted Dog would get her—and I was right—up to a point. He got her and yet he didn't get her. He bought the mother all right, which I knew was the main thing, and the old girl saw to it that he gave her a big tract of land and had a proper marriage paper from the padre. But Dawn Flower insisted on having an Indian wedding besides, and right in the middle of it the *cacique* threw a fit and called the whole thing off."

"Who was the *cacique?*"

"Cloud Prayer Feather, the young chap that led the boys in the Basket Dance the day you was here. Of course there was a hell of a row, and Spotted Dog swore it was a frameup. But Dawn Feather didn't take it

that way. She claimed that to go on with the wedding would be to defy the gods and that that was the end of Spotted Dog as far as she was concerned. So she walked out on him then and there—left him flat."

"And as a result Spotted Dog tried to kill Cloud Prayer Feather?"

"Mebbe. But we can't prove it."

"Is there no evidence at all?"

"Just a single brass cartridge shell behind a piñon tree. McCann's rifle was stolen that night. They're the same caliber—.303. I've got the shell in my pocket—with the hammer marks on it."

"H'm! What next!"

"Well, Spotted Dog was furious, for McCann had delivered the deed to Dawn Flower as soon as Father Angelico married them and Lopez had sent it down to Santa Fe to be recorded, and now that the girl refused to live with him, naturally Spotted Dog right away wanted his land back fer himself. Dawn Flower was willin' and allowed that was okay by her, but Tasikuma said oh no!, that her daughter being his legal wife ought to have an interest in the land no matter what happened. As you see, there was a good deal to be said on both sides, and Spotted Dog and Tasikuma quarreled over it for days.

"Finally Lopez suggested a compromise and put one over on the old lady. 'Well,' he says, 'if she don't want to give back all the land let her deed it over as community property between her and Spotted Dog so they'll own it fifty-fifty.' You see, under the old Spanish law down here in New Mexico we have such an arrangement whereby a husband and wife can own land in common.

"That looked all right to Tasikuma, but as soon as Dawn Flower had deeded over the land, Old Spotted Dog started a divorce against her in the district court on the ground of desertion. Of course she was as anxious to be rid of him as he was of her, and Judge Prescott granted it right off the bat. Once the decree was entered, Lopez claimed that Dawn Flower had no right in the land because under the Spanish law if a woman is divorced she loses all her interest in community property.

"Pretty slick, wasn't it? So Spotted Dog has got his land again and, what's more, a couple of weeks after the divorce when he was walking up the canyon he stumbled on a turquoise deposit worth ten thousand dollars. He's been offered that for it already! Some Indians have luck!"

"What has become of Dawn Flower?" asked Mr. Tutt thoughtfully.

"Tasikuma won't take the girl back into her house. There aren't any relatives for Dawn Flower to go to, so she's had to leave the pueblo and take a job over here at the trading post."

"You mean that girl—the daughter of a chief—is working here as a servant?"

"That's correct. She washes dishes and waits on table."

Mr. Tutt's face grew stern.

"Has Dawn Flower got a lawyer?"

"Only Lopez—he kind of represents all of 'em."

"Who's the big medicine man now over in the pueblo?"

"Oyike Sendo—Ice Hard Old Man."

"Well, take me over and introduce me to him, will you? We three ought to have a little chat together. I'm going to be an ice hard old man myself!—Do you think he'd smoke one of my stogies?"

"You bet he would!" Mr. Brady assured him. "But first I hope you don't mind my giving you a little pointer on Indian etiquette? Fust you light up your stogy, then move it—"

Ice Hard Old Man was squatting by his fireplace apparently deep in contemplation when the sheriff entered accompanied by Mr. Tutt. He looked up and waved them to be seated.

Mr. Tutt took a stogy from his pocket, lit it, moved it ceremoniously from east to north and from west to south, and blew a puff of smoke in each of the Six World Quarters. Then, having duly propitiated the Trues, he gravely handed the stogy to his venerable host.

"Oyike Sendo," he said impressively, "I give you to smoke."

It was dark before the Old Man returned to the trading post. All his stogies might be gone—to the Six World Quarters—but anyhow he'd started something! Entering the cafe by the side door he nearly collided with Spotted Dog and a redheaded Mexican woman both hurling insults at Dawn Flower, who cowered helplessly before them holding a tray. In place of the ceremonial costume in which Mr. Tutt had last seen her, she had on a gingham flowered dress draped across one shoulder and held at the waist by a wide belt of woven cloth, while her hair was drawn together in *chango* coiffure tied behind with red tassels.

At that moment, his vocabulary of abuse apparently exhausted, Spotted Dog reeled forward, dashed the tray from her hands, and would have struck her had not Mr. Tutt grabbed his arm and, seizing him by the shoulders, bundled him through the swinging doors. Meanwhile the Mexican woman had flung herself upon Dawn Flower, scratching, biting, and tearing at her hair. McCann, who had heard the crash, dashed in from the store, pinioned her arms, and hurled her after Spotted Dog. Then he shouted for Sheriff Brady, who hustled them both to the *calabozo.* The excitement over, Mr. Tutt turned to Dawn Flower. "Sit down, my dear!" he said. "Those two won't trouble you further.—I am your friend. I want to help you!"

Dawn Flower, trembling, sat down.

"How you help me?" she asked stolidly in the high-pitched Cocas timbre, occasionally dropping the article, which most Indians regard as superfluous. "What your people ever do for us?"

"Not much, I admit!" he answered. "But that has been more from ignorance than from evil intent."

Dawn Flower shook her head.

"Since Spaniards come long time ago, we have been treated as inferior race. Then we had own culture, own religion. We was free. Afterwards you come with your soldiers and rob us of our land and try to take away our religion. But you cannot do it, for our gods protect us that way. All you really do is exterminate us! We die of white diseases. Famine come and we starve. Your traders steal our rations and our goods! We—we—are only slaves!"

"Doesn't the government give the Indians schools and hospitals?"

"What sort schools? What kind hospitals? All miles away. For four years I—Tamo-yoa-powi—Indian girl brought up in pueblo—go to government boardin' school, way off. What I learn? Readin', writin', history, dates, how use washin' machine, how set table, on what side of plate go fish forks, how fold napkins. No Indian language or culture—nothin' like that! Nothin' of use when I go back to my people. Why? Because United States Government doan' want us go back! They wan' us stop bein' Indians. They wan' absorb us! So they teach us only 'domestic service'—how be servants. How work for them in their houses, not in our own houses. Why not let us work for ourselves our own way? Indian will never be servant. Look at me? I forget how use *matate,* our mealing stone. I forget how make pottery. I 'most forget how speak Cocas. They teach me how Hannibal cross Alps in B.C. 218, how make icecake in electric refrigerator! Lot good that in pueblo!"

Dawn Flower spoke with a fierce sadness. Mr. Tutt's heart beat in sympathy.

"There's a great deal in what you say," he agreed. "But as a practical matter, what would you do if you had plenty of money?"

Dawn Flower did not hesitate.

"I build hospital right in Cocas and have local doctor," she answered eagerly. "Train Indian girl for nurse so she go round every day and see what kids are sick. Then I have school where they learn make mats and pottery—our culture. I kick out Mr. McCann and his pawnshop and give Indians own store where they sell nice stuff direct, maybe ship to East. And I get nice *bohaña* lawyer-attorney to represent us and keep Indians from being cheated." She looked at him seriously. "You good nice man. Maybe you like be Indian attorney?"

"I'll think it over," chuckled Mr. Tutt. "Anyhow I'll be glad to be your lawyer, Dawn Flower! Would you like to have a lot of money?"

"Not for myself," she answered. "But for my people—yes!"

District Judge Cyrus Prescott, who now spent most of his time in Cocas, had come when a young man to the Southwest for his health and had remained there ever since. An excellent lawyer, he was interested in the Indians and enjoyed open air life, but he missed the companion-

ship of his own kind and he loathed and distrusted Señor Jose Lopez, who managed to wangle himself into almost every case that came before him. Hence he was not only surprised but pleased when next morning he was visited in his chambers by a gaunt old gentleman whose face for some reason seemed familiar to him.

"My name is Tutt—Ephraim Tutt," said the stranger. "I am a member of the New York bar, but not that of New Mexico. I have come to ask the favor of being allowed to argue a case before you."

The judge extended his hand.

"Glad to meet you!" he replied. "Do sit down! I heard you were up at Harry Chandler's. Of course it will be an honor to see you in my court. What can I do for you?"

"Well," confessed the Old Man, "the fact is I've formed a high regard for a young Indian girl named Tamo-yoa-powi. I believe it is through Indians like her that their problem is to be solved. I want to help her."

"The girl old Spotted Dog divorced six weeks ago?"

"That's the one. I want you to let me reopen the case and apply for additional relief. Is there any legal objection?"

"My court is practically always in session," answered Judge Prescott. "And I'm always inclined to reopen that kind of a case. Who represents Spotted Dog?"

"A Mexican gentleman named Mr. Jose Lopez."

"In that case," remarked His Honor with finality, "there is no legal objection *whatsoever!*"

The District Court House at Cocas is a one-storied brown adobe building with whitewashed walls and ceiling of rough-hewn yellow pine. A deal table on a slightly raised platform serves for the judge's dais, and behind it hangs a crayon portrait of the famous Governor Otermin, savior of New Mexico. In the body of the room are settees for about a hundred people. The proceedings are indifferently conducted through an interpreter in English, Spanish, or Cocas as may be most expedient. When Judge Prescott ascended the bench three mornings later, the entire room was crowded with Indians, who filled the benches and lined the walls. Mr. Tutt sat inside the rail with Dawn Flower beside him, opposite Señor Lopez and Spotted Dog, who looked considerably the worse for wear. On the front bench where he could see Dawn Flower was Cloud Prayer Feather, his crutches resting beside him.

Mr. Tutt arose:

"If the Court please, this is an application to reopen a divorce case and to amend the judgment so as to allocate the property rights as between the parties. There is no dispute upon the facts. No evidence was taken at the trial in regard to community or other rights, and there was no finding as to alimony."

Mr. Lopez twirled his mustache.

"This lady," he announced, "deliberately abandoned her husband and refused to live with him. This court divorced her on that ground. She cannot possibly claim alimony."

"I am not asking for alimony," replied Mr. Tutt. "I am inquiring as to the ownership of a valuable piece of real property of which the plaintiff, Spotted Dog, claims to be in lawful possession."

"To what property do you refer, Mr. Tutt?" asked His Honor.

"To a tract of land—part of an ancient Spanish grant—deeded by the plaintiff to my client, which transfer became effective on her marriage to him. You concede, do you not, Señor Lopez, that she got a good title?"

"Sure!" retorted Lopez. "She got a good title. But later, after she had refused to go on with the Indian marriage, she deeded it over to herself as community property, and when her husband divorced her for desertion, under Spanish law—which is the law of this state—she lost all her rights in it."

Mr. Tutt smiled benignly at him.

"Mr. Lopez is apparently unaware that the law of New Mexico, while still recognizing community property between husband and wife, no longer penalizes a divorced woman by depriving her of her share in it. That was settled by Beale versus Ayers, in 25 New Mexico, 459."

Judge Prescott nodded.

"That is correct, Mr. Tutt. I see that even you Yankees are familiar with that famous controversy out here."

Señor Lopez was dancing up and down in outraged excitement.

"No! No!" he protested. "I except! This land ceased to be community property the minute the divorce decree was entered."

"On the contrary," countered the Old Man, "this land never became community property at all—it belongs *to her alone.*"

"How is that, Mr. Tutt?" inquired His Honor curiously.

"The matter is simple enough," quietly replied the lawyer. "It has been complicated only by Mr. Lopez' abortive attempt—due to his own ignorance of the New Mexican laws—to deceive his client Tasikuma. I am informed, and if necessary can prove, that Lopez advised Dawn Flower's mother—for whom he was then acting—that if the girl deeded the land back as 'community property' between her husband and herself she would retain a half interest in it. He gave her this advice well knowing that Spotted Dog intended to apply for a divorce, but under the mistaken apprehension that if a divorce were granted Dawn Flower would forfeit all her rights in it under the ancient law of Spain. Not only is the law in this respect contrary to what Mr. Lopez supposed it to be, but—" and he turned triumphantly to the bewildered Mexican "—under the statutes of this state, 'community property' is defined as property acquired during the marriage by either or both spouses *oth-*

erwise than by gift, descent, or devise. Dawn Flower's deed of this land to herself and Spotted Dog as 'community property,' being without consideration, was a gift, and hence the attempted conveyance thereof was void. Title to the property remained in her. If you have any doubt as to the law, I refer you to McDonald versus Lambert, 43 New Mexico, 27. Had her deed been effective under the law to make this 'community property,' she would in any event be entitled to half of it—as it is, she owns the whole of it!"

The old lawyer offered a volume of reports to Judge Prescott, who waved it aside.

"Mr. Tutt is right," he said. "The point in question had not occurred to me. I have no hesitation in holding that Tamo-yoa-powi, otherwise known as Dawn Flower, is the sole owner of the tract in question."

Señor Lopez was too stunned to speak, but Spotted Dog, sensing that the case must have gone sour, jumped to his feet.

"Dawn Flower she gimme back that land!" he shouted. "You no can take away, judge! No damn law goin' rob Indian like that!"

His paroxysm was interrupted by a disturbance at the back of the courtroom as Sheriff Brady entered, accompanied by Oyike Sendo in his ceremonial costume, followed by the *toyo* and two Indian policemen. One of them was carrying a rifle.

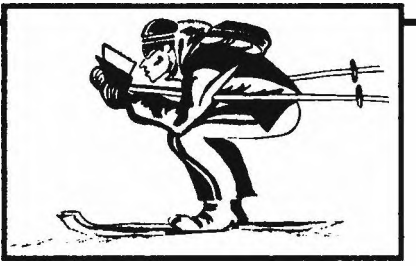
"Excuse me, Your Honor," said Brady amid a profound silence. "This ain't got anything to do with this here case—that is, not directly. But I felt I ought to tell you that while Spotted Dog has been in the *calabozo,* the guv'nor and I dug up the floor of his sittin' room and found Buck McCann's gun. I tested the hammer and the marks are the same as on the cartridge shell used to shoot Cloud Prayer Feather here."

He paused, as a guttural murmur ran along the walls.

"But that weren't all we found," dryly continued Mr. Brady, whisking out a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs. "No, sirree, it weren't!—A few inches further down we excavated the fifth Mrs. Spotted Dog."

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Popular cosy author Ellen Hart mixes murder with meatloaf in her latest Sophie and Bram Greenway adventure, **Dial M for Meat Loaf** (Fawcett, $6.99). An act of kindness finds Sophie offering to drive Bernice Washburn, a colleague from their newspaper, to the small-town hospital in Minnesota where Bernice's father is recovering from a stroke. Once there, both a blizzard and a flashback from her girlhood pull this snoopy sleuth into Bernice's family potboiler. And quite a stew it is, too, with a batch of purloined letters penned from a jail cell, evidence of bigamy and multiple wife-murder, a gangster lurking in the shrubbery who's stalking Bernice, a man who chats with a cow—and that's not even mentioning the heated competition for the winning meatloaf recipe! This is a hearty, satisfying meal of a mystery, with chunks of good characters and more than a dash of wit. And for the record, I made Pinwheel Meat Loaf (recipe included in the back of the book), and it was a huge hit.

Here's a period mystery that offers a fascinating peek into the past. Brent Monahan's **The Jekyl Island Club** (St. Martin's Minotaur, $13.95) takes readers back to 1899 when the swankiest, most elite club in the nation was nestled on its own island off the Georgia coast. Several of the mansions remain and can be toured today, but in 1899 the club was at its peak in popularity and prestige. Thus, when a member is fatally shot, the apparent victim of a shooting accident, the club's founders fully expect the town authorities to do little more than sign off on the death. What they have not reckoned on is Sheriff John Le Brun, longtime area resident, sharp as a tack, and impervious to intimidation. Poke around with Le Brun as he matches wits with J. P. Morgan, Joseph Pulitzer, and their ilk to unmask a coldblooded murderer. A spirited hero, a clever killer, and rich period detail all add to the entertainment. Look for it if you like historical mysteries.

Author Deborah Morgan and her protagonist, antiques expert Jeff Talbot, make their debut in the engaging **Death Is a Cabaret** (Berkley

Illustration by June Levine

Prime Crime, $5.99). Talbot has an intriguing past (a stint with the FBI antiques squad) and an even more interesting present life in Seattle that includes a young British butler who loves American musical theater, a beautiful wife who suffers from severe agoraphobia, and an inherited five story Victorian mansion filled with family heirlooms. In this tale, however, Jeff is off to Lake Michigan's upper peninsula and an opulent Old World resort on Mackinac Island, where he plans to attend a weekend antiques show and auction. The first surprise (not a pleasant one) is to find that a rival Seattle antiques "picker" like himself is also attending. The second surprise is to find a dead body in the hotel's courtyard fountain. Morgan has filled her mystery with lively characters, beautiful locales, some colorful historical background, and a whiff of the passion and glamour surrounding the world of antiques and those who collect them. Mystery readers love to go places where they wouldn't otherwise be invited and to learn things they don't know. I'd say Morgan's book delivers both to readers of cosies.

Craving a more masculine adventure? Pick up Carsten Stroud's **Black Water Transit,** and you've put the pedal to the metal (Delacorte, $24.95). The setting is the New York City waterfront, where former Vietnam marine Jack Vermillion has labored for years to build his small shipping business into a multimillion dollar company. That's all well and good until Jack is approached by a retired army colonel who wants to arrange for an illegal shipment of guns—weapons that compose his personal collection, he alleges, some of them in his family for generations. Jack knows that this guy is serious: serious trouble, seriously dangerous, and deadly serious about this shipment. Add to the mix Jack's wastrel son, who's going to be sent to a hardcore prison term unless Dad can come up with something to offer the authorities. Jack has already been approached in the hope that he will give up his boyhood pal, a highly placed mafioso. Now bring in an ambitious, amoral, and arguably sociopathic female federal prosecutor who wants to add Jack's company to her belt: the government's coffers of seized goods. Get the picture? In the blink of an eye Jack is in the middle of what soon appears to be a hopelessly tightening net. Watch how this veteran puts his own survival skills to the test, and enjoy the ride.

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THE STORY THAT WON

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The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Pam Kressman of New Haven, Connecticut. Honorable mentions go to Edward T. Eden of Houston, Missouri; Glen A. Hunter of Flagstaff, Arizona; Ron Mayer of St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada; Hugh MacKinnon of New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada; Frances Lowe of Orlando, Florida; A. E. Matheson of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Patricia German of Federal Way, Washington; and Heather F. Marks of Geneva, New York.

PAYTE'S WAIT by Pam Kressman

Payte hated to wait. She had to make bail for her nephew Nate. Nate had always been a good boy, studied hard in school, and had a good job at the gun factory when he exhibited the family trait. He had worked an extra shift and left the factory late. He saw two guns leaning against the back gate.

He thought, They must have fallen out of their crate. I'll take them along with me so that I'm not late for my date.

He hurried home, and taking a shortcut through the Manvilles' back yard, he waved at their daughter Kate. He heard a man's voice call his name and had started to jog when he tripped on a piece of slate.

The company guard looked down at him and said, "I guess getting caught is your fate."

Nate replied angrily, "Fate had nothing to do with it; you left those guns out there as bait."

The guard laughed. "As excuses go, that one ain't great."

"And so here I am," Payte fumed, "waiting to bail out a relative who can't go straight."

"I'm here, too," Kate said as she sidled up to Payte. "Nate never did show up for our date. My dad says he's not cut out to be a great mate."

"Your dad's right, Kate," said Payte. "My nephew's problem is innate. Find another man, who's first-rate."

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