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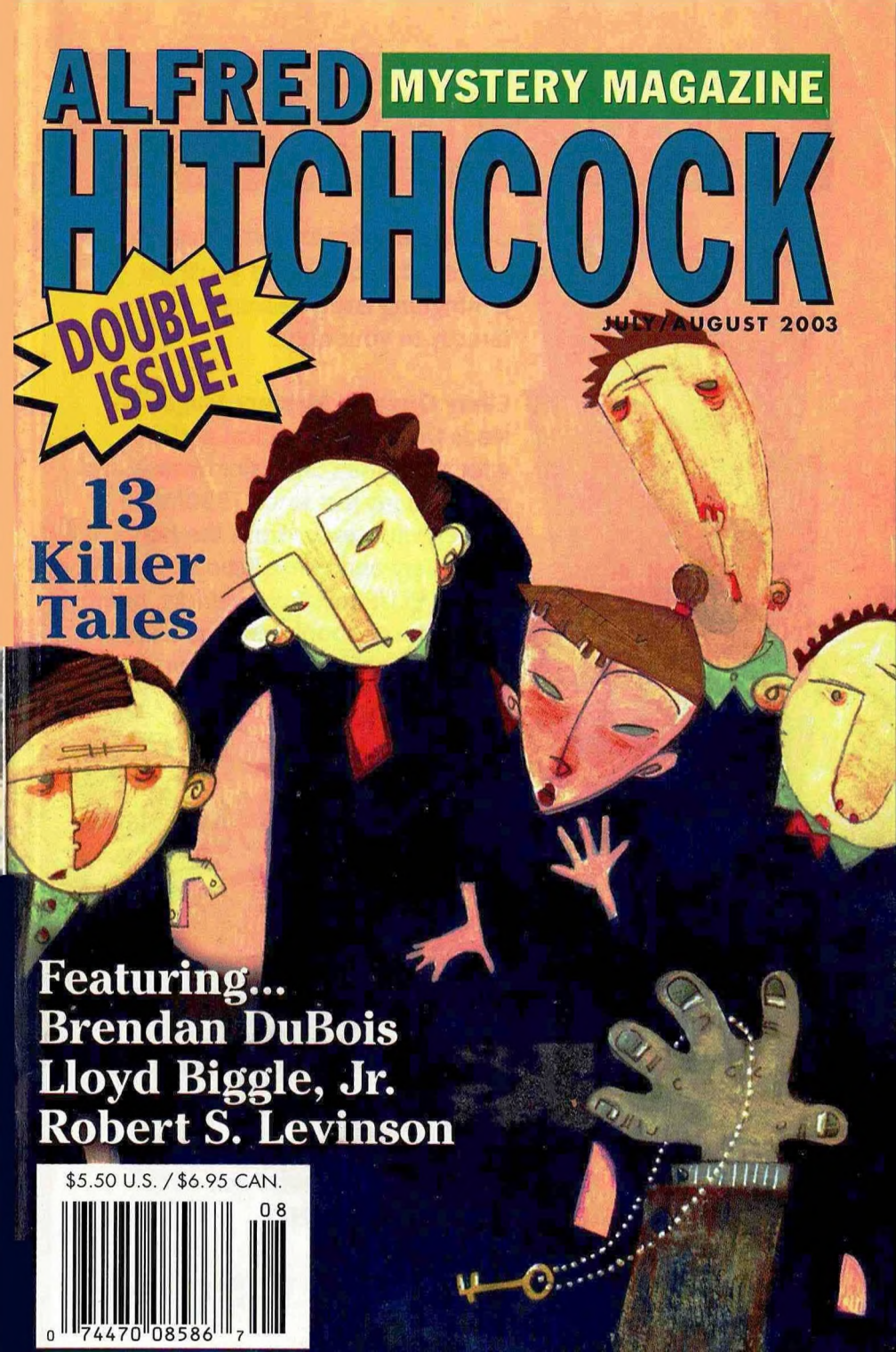

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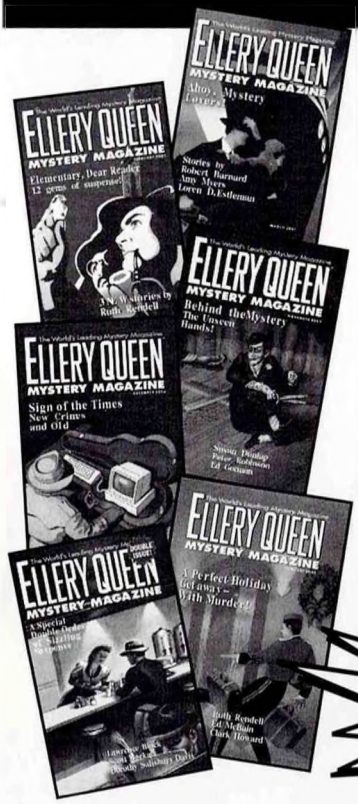

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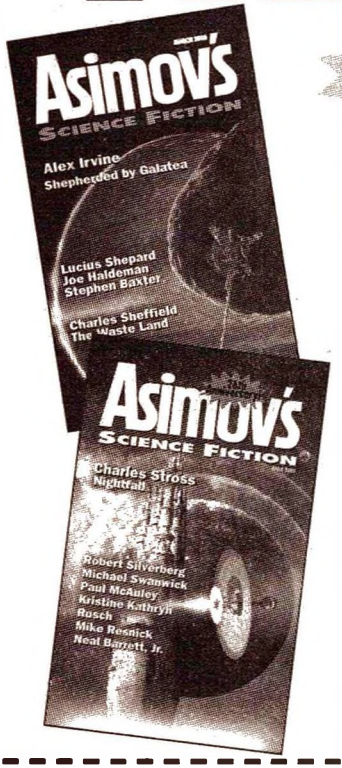

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Cover by Kelly Denato

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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

AHMM Congratulates the 2003 Edgar Award Nominees and Winners

Each year the Mystery Writers of America presents the Edgar Allan Poe Awards to mystery writers in a variety of categories. Jury members for each category read hundreds of submissions, so to be short-listed for the award is an honor. In addition, The Ellery Queen Award is presented to distinguished editors or publishers in the mystery field and The Raven Award recognizes non-writers and institutions who have made significant contributions to the genre. The Edgar Awards banquet is a grand event where editors, agents, authors, and screenwriters mingle. This year's 57th gala banquet took place at New York City's Grand Hyatt Hotel; it was hosted by Jerry Orbach, who plays Lennie Briscoe on "Law & Order," and produced by Robert S. Levinson (who makes his AHMM debut in this issue with his story "Ziggy Comes Through").

Below are the nominees, with category winners indicated in bold face. Our special congratulations go out to our sister magazine, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

BEST NOVEL

Savannah Blues by Mary Kay Andrews (HarperCollins)
Jolie Blon's Bounce by James Lee Burke (Simon & Schuster)
City of Bones by Michael Connelly (Little, Brown)
Winter and Night **by S. J. Rozan (St. Martin's Minotaur)**
No Good Deed by Manda Scott (Bantam)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR

Southern Latitudes by Stephen J. Clark (Penguin Putnam)
The Blue Edge of Midnight **by Jonathon King (Dutton)**
High Wire by Kam Majd (Dell)
Buck Fever by Ben Rehder (St. Martin's Minotaur)
Open and Shut by David Rosenfelt (Mysterious Press)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL

Black Jack Point by Jeff Abbott (NAL-Onyx)
The Night Watcher by John Lutz (Pinnacle)
Out of Sight **by T. J. MacGregor (Pinnacle)**
Trauma by Graham Masterton (NAL-Signet)
Prison Blues by Anna Salter (Pocket Books)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL

The Mammoth Encyclopedia of Modern Crime Fiction **by Mike Ashley (Carroll & Graf)**

The Classic Era of Crime Fiction by Peter Haining (Chicago Review Press)

Crime Films by Thomas Leitch (Cambridge University Press)

The Art of Noir by Eddie Muller (Overlook)

BEST FACT CRIME

Blood & Ink: An International Guide to Fact-Based Crime Literature by Albert Borowitz (Kent State University Press)

Takedown: The Fall of the Last Mafia Empire by Rick Cowan and Douglas Century (Putnam)

Death at the Priory: Love, Sex, and Murder in Victorian England by James Ruddick (Grove/Atlantic)

The Count and the Confession by John Taylor (Random House)

Fire Lover **by Joseph Wambaugh (Morrow)**

BEST SHORT STORY

"The Murder Ballads" by Doug Allyn (EQMM/March)

"To Live and Die in Midland, Texas" by Clark Howard (EQMM/September-October)

"Rumpole and the Primrose Path" by John Mortimer *(The Strand)*

"Angel of Wrath" by Joyce Carol Oates (EQMM/June)

"Mexican Gatsby" by Raymond Steiber (EQMM/March)

BEST YOUNG ADULT

Cheating Lessons by Nan Willard Cappo (Atheneum)

Safe House by Jenny Carroll (Simon & Schuster)

Hit and Run by Mark Delaney (Peachtree)

The Night the Penningtons Vanished by Marianna Heusler (Larcom Press)

The Wessex Papers, Vols. 1, 2, & 3 **by Daniel Parker (Avon)**

BEST JUVENILE

Harriet Spies Again **by Helen Ericson (Delacorte)**

O'Dwyer & Grady: Starring in Acting Innocent by Eileen Heyes (Simon & Schuster/Alladin Paperbacks)

The Case of the Greedy Granny: Jake Gander, Storyville Detective by George McClements (Hyperion)

Riding the Flume by Patricia Curtis Pfitsch (Simon & Schuster)

Sammy Keyes and the Search for Snake Eyes by Wendelin Van Draanen (Knopf)

continued on page 236

ANIMALS

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Peter Lorre was melting before Larry Erie's eyes. The soft-voiced, sad-eyed actor was the Turner Classic Movies Star of the Month. In the span of forty-eight hours, Erie watched more than a dozen Lorre films.

The movies progressed chronologically, so Erie saw the young, lithe Lorre of *The Maltese Falcon* gradually give way to the puffy, middle-aged Lorre of *Beat the Devil* and finally the hunchbacked, basset-faced Lorre of *The Raven*. As the actor got older, he seemed to curl in on himself, as if he were shrinking into a ball like a giant pillbug trying to protect itself from time and age.

Erie found watching another man's deterioration sad but strangely compelling. His cats enjoyed it as well. Or at least they enjoyed his enjoyment. They liked it when he stayed still. One curled up on his lap, one between his feet. Erie obliged them by moving as little as possible. He critiqued the weaker films for them, saying things like, "Geez, would you look at that?" and "Is that the dumbest thing you ever saw or what?" The cats never disagreed with him.

The doorbell rang about twenty minutes into *The Comedy of Terrors*. The cats ran to the front of the house to investigate, but Erie already knew who it was—his friend Bass, come to repeat in person the conversation they'd had on the phone twice in the past four days.

Bass: "Let's go fishing."

Erie: "I hate fishing."

Bass: "Me too. Let's go."

Erie: "I don't think so."

Bass: "Come on, Larry. You gotta do something. You can't just keep moping around the house."

Erie: "I'm not moping."

Bass: "Yes, you are. You've been moping for weeks. You're depressed."

Erie: "Goodbye, Bass."

Daniel Calanaugh

Bass: [sigh] "Bye."

Erie reluctantly clicked off the TV. Potato chip crumbs fluttered to the floor like snow when he stood up. The bell rang again as he shuffled toward the front door.

"All right! Calm down! I'm coming!" Erie bellowed.

He pulled open the door expecting to see Bass standing before him, a fishing rod in one hand and a tackle box in the other. The "I don't fish!" was already forming in Erie's mouth when he realized his mistake. Bass was a wrinkled, small-boned man. The person on Erie's porch was a young, chubby-cheeked girl.

Not Bass. Not even close.

"Oh," Erie said. "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"That's okay." The girl stared up at him with her hazel eyes opened wide.

"So what can I do for you?" Erie asked, trying to make up for yelling by keeping his tone as mild and avuncular as possible. He steeled himself for a pitch for Girl Scout cookies or magazine subscriptions.

"Are you Mr. Erie?" the girl asked. She seemed to find it hard to believe.

"Yes."

"The detective?"

Erie smiled grimly and shrugged. "From time to time." Erie Investigations, his one-man detective agency, hadn't had a case in three months.

"Well, I'd like to hire you," the girl said.

Erie's smile sagged. It was going to be just like in the old days, before he'd retired, when he was still a cop. Every so often a neighborhood kid would drop by and say, "Mr. Erie, can you help me? Someone stole my bike." Or "I haven't seen my cat in three days. Can you find him for me?" Erie wondered which it was going to be this time. She'd probably offer to pay him with the nickels and dimes in her piggy bank.

Erie suddenly wished he'd stayed in his La-Z-Boy.

"What do you need a detective for?"

The girl's mouth glittered silver with braces, and her lips seemed to catch on the metal as she spoke, giving her a slight lisp. So when she answered, the words came out like this: "Shomebody shtole my dog."

A sigh heaved up in Erie's chest. A missing pet. Of course. And he was supposed to roam the countryside with a leash and a box of Milkbones shouting, "Lassie, come home!"

The girl was young, around eleven or twelve by the look of her.

But she was old enough to read Erie's body language. "She didn't just run away," she protested. "There were these people in a van driving around the neighborhood real slow yesterday and my dog was in our backyard and then she was gone and so was Mr. and Mrs. Wingate's dog and David Greek's cat got stolen, too."

One of Erie's cats, Mae, was slinking along the wall toward the open door. Erie put up a slipper-covered foot to block her. Mae turned and walked away, feigning indifference for the door that had her practically hypnotized a moment before. The girl kept talking.

"We called the police and this detective called us back and talked to us, but I could tell he didn't care. He didn't even come out to look around and he didn't call the Wingates or the Greeks like he said he would. He's not even going to try."

There was a slight tremor in the girl's voice, and for a moment Erie was terrified that she was about to start crying—and that he would have to comfort her. But no tears came. She was more outraged than sad. The tears would come later, when she got the bad news that almost always ended stories like hers. For now, she still had one hope to cling to.

Erie.

The thought of being a little girl's knight in shining armor made him want to squirm.

"I heard you became a private detective—that you help people for money. Well, I can pay you. I've been babysitting. I've got my own money. I'd pay anything to get Ginger back."

Mae returned, creeping along the wall again. The front door was open, and she was going to get through it. It was her mission in life.

Erie blocked her, like he always did. It was his mission to keep her inside. This time Mae protested with a piteous meow. Erie looked down into her wide, owlish eyes and felt the push of a sudden impulse. He acted on it instantly, knowing somehow in that split second that if he thought about it he wouldn't do it.

"Don't worry about the money," he said to the girl. "I'll take the case. Come on in."

The girl flashed him a metal-studded grin and stepped inside.

Limber, long-haired Mae and lumbering, short-haired Goldie quickly joined the girl on the couch in the living room. She stroked one cat then the other as she told her story.

Her name was Jodi Marksberry. She lived about five blocks away. Her dog, Ginger, was a ten-year-old chocolate Lab. Jodi

always put Ginger out when she got home from school so the dog could "do her business" and have some time outside. Yesterday was no different. But when Jodi checked on the dog an hour or so later, she was gone.

A rusty brown van—or a brown truck, some said, or a black van—driving up and down the street "real slow."

Jodi went looking for her. She asked some of the neighborhood kids if they'd seen her. They said no, but they had seen a rusty brown van—or a brown truck, some said, or a black van—driving up and down the street "real slow." In school they'd all been taught how to spot potential abductors, so the unfamiliar brown/black van/truck had struck a nerve. Some of the boys went off on their bikes to look for it, determined to see who was inside, but they couldn't find it.

Later that night, Jodi and her parents went door to door, asking more neighbors if they'd seen Ginger. No one had. But the Wingates, who lived five doors down from Erie, reported that their dog Sweetie had been gone for hours. Sweetie was a beagle-collie mix the Wingates allowed to roam the neighborhood. The Greeks, who lived a few blocks over, hadn't seen their cat Buster since he'd gone out that morning.

None of the animals returned later that night or the next morning or the next afternoon. Jodi had checked. Ginger, Sweetie, and Buster were all missing.

"And they all disappeared the same day there's this weird van driving around. That can't just be a coincidence," Jodi concluded, her voice and bearing deadly serious, like a little prosecutor summing up for a jury of one. "They were stolen by those people in the van."

She brushed a long, stray strand of auburn hair out of her face, and her confidence seemed to evaporate. "I mean . . . at least that's what *I* think," she said, suddenly hesitant. "But . . . you know . . . what do *you* think?"

"Well, for one thing," Erie said, "I think you might make a good detective one day. That was a very thorough report."

The girl shyly shrugged off the compliment.

"And I think you're right about the animals," Erie continued. "They were probably stolen."

"So there are guys who steal people's pets just like stealing cars and bikes and stuff?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"That's so weird. So who do they sell the animals to? Pet stores?"

Erie saw the hope in her eyes. Ginger had been spirited off to a crooked pet store somewhere. Getting her back was just a matter of finding it, right?

Erie nodded. "Sometimes," he said.

It wasn't true. But he wasn't ready to share the truth with her. Not until he knew he had to.

"So do you have a picture of Ginger I can see?" he asked.

"Oh. Yeah, but I didn't bring one. There's a ton at my house. Like practically hundreds."

Erie stood up. "Good. I've got some things to do here. How about if I come by a little later and get one?"

Jodi picked up on the cue. She stood as well. "Okay."

Erie started for the door, and Jodi followed. So did Mae.

"What's your address?"

"Fourteen twelve Hamilton Drive."

"All right. I'll be there in a couple of hours. I'd also like to talk to your parents while I'm there. You know—interview them."

"Sure." Jodi nodded as if the ins and outs of an investigation were old hat to her. When they reached the door, she held out her hand. "Thank you, Mr. Erie."

Erie wrapped his hand around hers and gave it two solemn shakes.

"You're welcome," he said.

What he really felt like saying was, "Don't thank me yet."

Jodi said goodbye and walked to a bicycle lying in the grass near the driveway. She hopped on it, waved, and pedaled away.

So he had a new client. A kid looking for her dog. Should he feel noble or pathetic?

Erie didn't know. He wasn't even sure why he'd agreed to do anything at all.

Maybe it was because a little girl had asked for his help. Maybe it was just because someone—it didn't matter who—thought there was something he could do. Maybe it was because he suddenly couldn't stomach the thought of spending more time with Peter Lorre.

When Erie closed the door, Mae looked up and gave him another frustrated meow.

"Forget it, knucklehead," he said to her. "You're a lot better off in here."

And then again, maybe he'd taken the case because he'd begun talking to his cats. Maybe it was time to try talking to people again.

The first thing Erie did now that he had work to do was sleep. In his bed. For the first time in two days.

Sleep came to him easily now. There was no hint of the smothering mix of insomnia and lethargy that had left him stranded in front of the television. He simply got under the covers and he slept. And when the alarm went off ninety minutes later, he got up. It was that easy.

He brushed his teeth and showered and shaved. He put on a suit. Then he took it off, replacing it with jeans and a knit shirt and a sweater. He was looking for a dog, not the Crown jewels.

He stepped in front of a mirror, hurrying through a quick inspection—hair in place, zipper zipped, clothes free of stains and cat fuzz. He checked himself without really looking at himself. He was ten pounds heavier and a few dozen hairs grayer than he'd been the year before. He knew that. He didn't need to see it again.

When he felt ready, he began his investigation by picking up the phone and calling his friend Bill "Bass" Anderson.

"It lives!" Bass declared when he heard Erie's voice.

"Yeah, I'm alive. And I need your help."

"You got a case?"

"Yup."

"Well, all right then! Whaddaya need me to do? Tail somebody? Go out on a stakeout with ya? Whatever it is, I'm your man!"

Bass was so excited he was practically panting. Erie Investigations had been his idea. Like Erie, he was a retired widower. Unlike Erie, but like most of the world, he romanticized detective work. He'd pushed Erie to become a P.I. and had been waiting impatiently for the day when he could help Erie out with "a genuine undercover assignment." Erie hoped what he had in mind would count.

"I've got a very important role for you to play," he said.

"Oh, yeah? What kinda role?"

"Bait."

There was a pause. "What now?"

Erie explained, trying to make it sound as exciting as possible.

Bass bit. "Oh yeah, I could do that," he said. "I'm a natural-born actor. People've always said so."

"That's why I came to you," Erie said. Which was half true. Erie was reasonably certain Bass wouldn't screw up. And he was even more certain Bass was the only person he knew who'd do it.

"So when do we get rolling?" Bass asked.

"Soon. I'll let you know."

"All right, chief. I'll start practicing."

It pleased Erie to hear Bass so happy. He figured it might be the only positive thing to come out of this case, so he basked in it. "Yeah, good idea. You do that," he said.

After they'd said their goodbyes, Erie picked up the River City phone book. He looked up the numbers for *The Weekly Nickel Pincher* and the *River City Herald-Times*. He placed the same ad in each.

PETS
FREE TO GOOD HOME
2 beautiful choc. Labs, both 5 yrs old.
Moving to FL, can't take them. Great with
kids, cats. Call before they're gone!

Erie ended the ad with Bass's name and phone number. *The Weekly Nickel Pincher,* a smudgy black-and-white collection of classified ads and coupons, wouldn't come out for another four days. But the *Herald-Times* ad would appear in the next morning's edition.

That was good news. Erie recalculated his chances of finding Ginger alive. They moved from "no way in hell" to a simple "unlikely."

Erie sat in his car for a minute and stared at 1412 Hamilton Drive. Jodi Marksberry's house.

The backyard was fenced in. But it was a simple, low, chain-link fence. Good, *maybe,* for keeping a dog in. Not so good for keeping a person out.

The fence had a latched entrance on one side of the house. It faced the street.

When Erie finally went to the front door and rang the bell, he was greeted by a fortyish man with graying red hair and a bushy mustache. The man looked vaguely familiar. Erie had probably seen him at some ancient block party or Christmas pageant. Erie had stopped going to things like block parties and Christmas pageants after his wife died. He'd stopped doing a lot of things.

"Oh, hello . . ."

Erie could see that the man was groping for his first name. "Larry," Erie prompted.

The man smiled and nodded. "Yeah, of course. Larry. Thanks for coming over."

The two men shook hands.

"My pleasure . . ."

"John."

"My pleasure, John."

"So Jodi tells me you're going to help us look for Ginger."

"I'm going to do what I can." Erie peered over Marksberry's shoulder into the house. The lights were on in the kitchen, and he heard the clinking and scraping of silverware on plates and the murmur of conversation. "Am I interrupting dinner?"

"Oh, don't worry about it." For a moment, Erie almost expected—or maybe hoped or maybe feared—that Marksberry would invite him inside to join his family at the dinner table. But he didn't. "So do you really think some kind of dognapping gang stole Ginger?" he said instead.

Erie took a step back from the door and lowered his voice. "Would you mind stepping out here with me for a moment?"

"Oh. Okay. Sure."

Marksberry followed him onto the porch, looking confused and a little nervous. Erie had seen that look plenty of times before he'd retired. When you're a cop, people are always expecting you to accuse them of something.

"Look, John, I just wanted a chance to talk to you for a minute without Jodi overhearing. You understand?"

"Sure," Marksberry said glumly. He obviously wasn't looking forward to hearing what Erie had to say.

"I'm going to be honest with you here. It doesn't look good. There *are* people who steal pets."

"To sell to pet stores?" Marksberry broke in, sounding skeptical. He had good reason for that.

"I sort of let Jodi jump to a conclusion there. The truth's a little harder to hear," Erie said. "Ginger's ten years old, right?"

"That's right."

"That makes her too old to be much use to your run-of-the-mill breeder or dealer. And . . . well, the other possibilities aren't very pleasant."

Erie paused, giving Marksberry the chance to say, "I don't know if I want to hear this." Marksberry didn't take it, so Erie pressed on.

"One of the possibilities," he said, "would be ritual sacrifice."

"What? You mean like devil worshippers?" Marksberry spat out.

Erie shrugged. "You could call them that. That's a real longshot, though. That kind of thing's never popped up much around here, except for teenage boys stirring up trouble on Halloween. Another longshot's a dogfighting ring. They've been known to steal animals. They use them to . . . train their dogs."

Dusk was settling in, but there was still enough light for Erie to see Marksberry's face growing more and more pale as the world receded into shadow.

"But it's a lot more likely these guys are bunchers—people who grab pets and sell them to research labs. There's a place down in Missouri called Calkins Life Sciences. They'll put out the call sometimes for certain kinds of dogs, certain kinds of cats. When they do, people's pets start disappearing all over the Midwest."

"My God." A flash of color returned to Marksberry's cheeks. Anger was mixing in with his fear. "What kind of scumbags would do a thing like that?"

"People who want money and don't care how they get it. Unfortunately, it's not exactly an exotic breed. They're everywhere."

"My God," Marksberry said again. "I can't believe they'd steal a dog right out of someone's yard and do that to her."

"They would. But we don't know yet that's what happened to Ginger," Erie said. "So, now you see why I didn't want to have this talk in front of Jodi."

"Yeah. Thanks, Larry." Marksberry glanced back at the front door of his house. He took a deep breath. "She really loves that dog. They grew up together. They're practically like sisters."

"I understand."

"I've got to tell you—I was a little miffed when I heard Jodi had gone to you. Last night I told her not to do it. I was sure Ginger would turn up today. But now, after hearing all that . . . Look, I know Jodi offered to pay you, and you said no. But I'd like to—"

Erie brought up a hand and shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Just think of it as one neighbor helping another."

Marksberry's gaze dropped for a moment, and something flickered across his face. It took Erie a second to recognize it.

Guilt.

Here was this sad, lonely old man, practically the neighborhood hermit, coming to offer help. And yet how many times had Marksberry dropped by to help him?

Marksberry's transparent pity and shame annoyed Erie. "You weren't the neighbor I was talking about," he wanted to say. But he didn't.

Jodi rescued them from the moment by charging out the door with a handful of snapshots.

"Hi, Mr. Erie! I got some pictures of Ginger for you."

She marched up to Erie and began sorting through the photo-

graphs. Marksberry took the opportunity to fade back a few steps toward the door.

"She's looking right at the camera in this one, so you can really see her face and her eyes," Jodi babbled. "Her eyes are dark brown, see? And in this one she's kind of looking off to the side, so you can see that. And then here she is when she puts her ears up, like when she hears a siren or something. She almost looks like another dog. And in this one—"

Erie left with more than a dozen snapshots of the dog. "Thanks, these will be a big help," he told Jodi as he slipped them into a pocket in his cardigan. But he didn't know if he'd end up using the pictures at all. He wasn't looking for Ginger. Not to begin with.

He was looking for a brown van. Or a brown truck. Or a black van. Or a black truck. And it was time to start. He said goodbye to the Marksberrys, promising to update them when he had some news, and left.

As he drove away, the futility of his task dragged behind him like an anchor. More than a hundred thousand people live in River City, Indiana. Erie remembered hearing one of the detectives in Auto Theft say that there were nearly that many cars. How many brown/black van/trucks could there be?

A lot.

Erie thought about his house, his cats, his La-Z-Boy. He wondered what was on television. But he kept driving. And driving. And driving.

If he was looking for a needle in a haystack, at least this particular needle didn't just lie there like all the others. The van—and it had to be a van, really, if someone was using it to haul around stolen pets—was going to be doing what he was doing. Prowling around River City's west side neighborhoods, searching, hunting.

In three hours behind the wheel, he saw fourteen roaming cats, six dogs, one brown van, and no black vans. The brown van was parked in front of a church. Erie didn't even bother to slow down and get a good look at it. The words "West Side United Church of Christ" were printed along both sides in white. Even kids who couldn't tell the difference between a brown van and a black truck would've noticed that.

When Erie got home, Mae and Goldie met him at the door. As always, Mae tried to dart past his feet and get outside. Erie snatched up the little black cat and cradled her in his arms.

"No way, Jose," he said to her. "It's not safe out there."

Mae complained loudly, obviously unconvinced.

It was almost ten o'clock. Erie went straight to bed. Mae and Goldie went with him. They'd spent the day in the TV room. Now it was time to spend the night in the bedroom. That had been the routine of their days for months. For all three of them.

It took Erie a long time to fall asleep. Goldie was curled up near his feet. Mae was snuggled up under the sheets with him, her small chest moving up and down, pressing against him with each breath. That motion, the in and out of life, both comforted and haunted Erie. If it were to stop—just *stop*—there would be nothing he could do about it. He knew that because it had happened before, fourteen months ago, in a different bed. A hospital bed. All he could do when his wife died was watch. Maybe all he could do now was wait.

And somewhere out in the night, maybe somewhere nearby, Ginger was lying, alone, maybe dead, maybe sleeping, but either way waiting. Waiting for him.

By eight the next morning Erie was back in his car driving up and down the same streets he'd toured the night before. Nothing had changed, except now instead of flickering blue-white TV light in every window he saw moms and dads going off to work, kids going off to school. And still no brown or black vans.

He tried to fight off frustration by switching on a talk radio station and looking on his fruitless circling as a chance to catch up on current affairs. After half an hour, he grew so angry with the idiots he heard on the radio he switched over to an oldies station. That got him through another hour. He'd always hated the song "Splish Splash, I Was Taking a Bath," and when it came on he turned off the radio rather than subject himself to it.

For a few minutes, the only things he heard were the steady purr of his tires rolling over pavement and the voice in his head telling him he was wasting his time. The voice was interrupted by the burping of a police siren.

Erie looked in his rearview mirror. A patrol car was gliding along behind him, the officer at the wheel stony faced behind his sunglasses. Erie pulled over. He turned off the engine and sat there the way he knew a cop would want him to—perfectly still, hands on the wheel where they could be seen.

He was in Briarwood Grove, a newish neighborhood crammed with large, boxy, nearly identical homes. The curtains fluttered in a nearby window. You didn't hear sirens much around here.

The cop stayed in his patrol car for a minute, checking Erie's plates. When he finally got out of his car, the lips beneath his sunglasses were twisted into a smirk.

Erie rolled down his window as the cop approached. He recognized the man as he drew closer. His name was Reggie Loftus. He was a young guy, not around long enough for Erie to know well, just another one of the uniforms on the street, neither friend nor enemy.

Loftus put his hand on the top of the car and leaned over to shine his smirk at Erie like a flashlight. "Good morning, Mr. Erie."

"Good to see you, Reg."

"Why didn't you just get out and let me know it was you?"

"I couldn't see who it was back there. I didn't want to spook some rookie and get my head blown off."

Loftus nodded, still amused but not laughing.

"So is there some kind of problem?" Erie asked him.

"We got a call from one of the local soccer moms. Seems a mysterious stranger's been spotted checking out the neighborhood."

"Driving a brown van?"

Loftus's face mixed puzzlement with his amusement. "No. Driving a tan Toyota Corolla."

"Oh," Erie said. His car.

"So what's the story, Mr. Erie?" Loftus asked. His smile stretched wider, a dam barely able to hold back laughter.

Erie finally understood. He felt his face flushing.

River City's cops, his old comrades, knew he'd started a detective agency. And they thought it was funny.

"There's no story. I'm just house hunting."

Loftus's expression turned skeptical. "House hunting?"

"Sure. I'm thinking about buying something bigger."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. My daughter might be moving back to town, and we're thinking about sharing a place. You know—top floor for me, bottom floor for her. That kind of thing."

"Sure you're not looking for a brown van?"

It was Erie's turn to smile. The grin felt wobbly, as if it might tilt right off his face at any moment. "Oh, that. Just the old instincts acting up, I guess. I saw a brown van creeping around, and it seemed a little suspicious. No one's called in about it?"

Loftus shook his head, condescending bemusement once more ruling his features. He knew what Erie was doing. "Nope. Not that I know about," he said. "Mr. Erie, are you sure you're not up to something else here?"

"What do you mean? What would I be 'up to'?"

"Oh, working on a case maybe." Loftus snickered.

"No. Just house hunting, like I said."

"Okay," Loftus said, stretching the word out, making it musical and sardonic. "Well, if you're going to keep at it around here, you might want to pick up the pace a little. This lady that called thought you were some kind of pervert on the prowl."

"No problem. I was just about done for today anyway."

"All right then. You take care, Mr. Erie. Don't get into any trouble now."

"Okay, Reg. Same to you."

Loftus gave him a little two-fingered salute and walked back to his car. Erie didn't have to look in his rearview mirror to know the cop was still smirking. What a great story he had to tell over lunch with the troops at Peppy's Diner. He got a call about a molester cruising the streets of Briarwood Grove . . . and it was old Larry Erie, private eye! Probably out trying to crack The Case of the Missing Dentures, or maybe The Adventure of the Lost Car Keys.

Erie started his car and drove straight to Bass's place. He was through roaming aimlessly around River City like one of those senile coots who goes out for toothpaste and ends up running out of gas in Alaska. Maybe he was through with everything. He'd bumped into a real cop and all Erie had done was *amuse* the son of a bitch. He hadn't accomplished a thing, except get a little girl's hopes up.

"Forget it, Bass," he was going to say when he got to his friend's house. "Let's go fishing. Isn't that what old farts like us are supposed to do?"

But when Bass came to the door, the slender little man was in such a dither Erie's words died in his throat.

"Well, there you are!" Bass proclaimed rapturously, as if Erie himself wasn't aware of that fact. "Finally! I've been trying to get you on the phone all morning!"

"I've been out looking for that van I told you about."

Bass waved his hands dismissively. "Awww, don't worry about looking out there. They're coming right here!"

"What do you mean?"

"The ad in the paper! I got three calls about it this morning! One of 'em had to be from the bad guy."

Bass's enthusiasm was not infectious.

"Yeah, well, maybe," Erie said. "And maybe we're going to have three families drive out here and then drive away crushed because they had their hearts set on a couple of dogs we don't have."

"Well, we'll find out soon enough!" Bass countered, unwilling to let his glum buddy suck the thrill out of his first undercover operation.

Erie cocked an eyebrow at Bass. "How soon?"

"Any minute now! That's why I was so desperate to get ahold of you. The first guy's comin' 'round at ten."

Erie looked at his watch. It was nine fifty-six.

Erie had just enough time to jump back in his car and circle the block. As he pulled to the curb five doors down from Bass's house, a red pickup truck rolled up the street from the opposite direction. It stopped across from Bass's place, and a pot-bellied, gray-haired man got out. He walked to the house slowly, taking small steps, as if he didn't want to scuff the blindingly white sneakers that covered his feet.

He rang the bell, Bass answered, and the two of them chatted for a moment. Then the gray-haired man shuffle-stepped back to his truck and drove away. Erie didn't bother following him. Instead, he got out of his car and walked to Bass's house. Bass met him on the porch.

"Well?" Erie said.

Bass shrugged, looking chagrined. "Oh, he was a retired fella, like us. Said he wanted them dogs for his grandkids. You believe that?"

"Um-hmm."

"Yeah, me too. When I told him I'd already given the dogs away, I thought he was gonna cry."

"Um-hmm."

"You see the way he walked? I can't see him grabbin' dogs and cats off the street. The man could barely walk a dog, let alone steal one."

"Um-hmm."

Bass peered into Erie's tight, grim face. "Oh, now don't be like that. Come on in and have some coffee. The next suspect isn't supposed to show up for another half hour."

Erie followed Bass into the house without saying a word.

"You hear that?" Bass said as he poured their coffee. He looked up, put a hand to one ear, grinned. "Nothin', right? Peace and quiet. Beautiful, wonderful peace and quiet."

Erie nodded, humoring Bass with a small smile.

Earlier that year, Bass had turned his basement over to a neighborhood kid who'd been having problems with his father. The kid had the typical teenage boy's love for industrial strength rock 'n'

roll blasting from nuclear-powered speakers. But now the summer was over and school was back in session, so during the day Bass got a temporary break from the musical stylings of the Misfits and the Suicide Machines.

"So how are things with Andrew these days?"

Bass plunked the coffee cups on the kitchen table and sat down across from Erie. "Oh, fine. I don't see him much anymore now that he's back in school. When he is here, he's usually downstairs messin' around on his computer with the stereo cranked up to 'earthquake.' "

"Ever regret taking him in?"

Bass blew on his steaming black coffee, looking thoughtful. "I don't know. We don't always talk a lot, me and Andrew, but it means somethin' just havin' him around. It feels like there's a family here again, even if it's just the two of us. You could use a dose of that, Larry. Creepin' around that house of yours all alone ain't healthy."

"I'm not alone. I've got Goldie and Mae."

Bass made a sour face.

"I'm serious," Erie said.

"I know you are. That's why I'm disgusted. They're just dumb animals, Larry. It's not the same as havin' people around."

"You're right. It's a lot easier."

Bass rolled his eyes, but didn't challenge Erie further. They'd already had this debate too many times. Erie changed the subject to politics, and twenty minutes later he was back in his car, waiting.

It wasn't a brown van that pulled up in front of the house. It was an ancient white Buick Skylark. The woman who got out looked to be about forty years old. She was wiry, with long, stringy black hair. She was wearing faded jeans and a denim jacket.

She rang Bass's bell, he came to the door, they talked, she left.

It was quick, but not exactly painless. The woman looked annoyed. Bass looked disappointed. Erie felt guilty.

Their next "suspect"—Erie was beginning to think of them as their "victims"—wasn't coming until six o'clock. What was Erie supposed to do until then? Drive in circles the rest of the day? Frighten more housewives?

The white Skylark lurched from the curb. Erie watched it roll away, wondering why the woman had come. Maybe she wanted the dogs for her kids, maybe for her lonely old mother, maybe for her lonely not-so-old self. He wished her happy hunting.

He was just about to climb out of his car to go commiserate with Bass when the Skylark slowed to a halt. It began to back up, and for a moment Erie was afraid the woman had changed her mind about leaving quietly. She was going to come back and throw some kind of fit on Bass's porch. But her car stopped before it reached the house.

The woman got out, moved quickly to the side of the road, and leaned down over something dark and lumpy nestled against the curb. She picked it up, carried it to her car, and put it in the trunk. When she started the engine and pulled away, Erie followed her.

He got a good look at the thing she'd stopped to grab as she hustled it to her car. She held it by the tail, the torso and legs dangling, stiff.

It was a dead cat.

There was little danger Erie would lose the woman. She was heading out to the edge of town, into the farmland that corralled River City on three sides. The roads out there were narrow and straight. Perfect for a nice, easy tail, if you knew what you were doing. Every so often, Erie even let a car or two get in between him and the Skylark. He wasn't worried. If the woman turned, he'd see it.

Whenever he was directly behind her, he kept his eyes on her rearview mirror, waiting for that long look, that twitchy squint that would tell him he'd been spotted. He never saw it. She wasn't looking for him. She was looking for something else.

About ten miles outside town, he saw what it was. The woman hit her brakes and craned her neck to look at something in a ditch by the road.

It was a doe, a big one, lying there looking perfect, beautiful, except that her tongue was hanging out, and she was dead. The woman took the next half mile slowly, as if she were trying to burn that stretch of road into her memory.

She was going to come back after dark. That told Erie something. And she was going to need help with that deer. That told him something else.

This wasn't what he thought it was. Bunchers, pet thieves, they have clients. And those clients want their animals alive. You can't test drugs on a dead dog. And you can't keep a fighting dog sharp with a dead cat.

This woman was involved in something he'd never seen before. And she wasn't alone.

For the first time since he'd retired, Erie missed his gun.

About ten minutes later, the woman finally turned. A field of corn ran along one side of the new road. Trees and houses and mobile homes dotted the other side. Erie kept going straight.

The woman was home, Erie could feel it. It wouldn't be smart to stay stuck to her bumper all the way to her doorstep. He drove another hundred yards, pulled into a farm's dirt access road, circled around, headed back.

He turned where the woman had turned, taking it slow, but not too slow. He spotted the Skylark about a quarter mile up the road. It was perched on top of a low rise next to a dilapidated ranch house the color of a month-old lime. Broad, scruffy pine trees circled the property, swaying in the breeze like a lineup of tipsy green giants. A wilting paper NO TRESPASSING sign was nailed to the mailbox.

Erie drove a little farther before pulling over. He sat in his car for a moment, reviewing his options. Or, as he quickly came to see it, his *option*. He was there, she was there. What choice did he really have?

Before starting toward the house, Erie propped up the hood of his car. Anyone driving by was supposed to think, *Car trouble? Ha! Good luck gettin' a tow out here!*

The woman's neighbors to the east didn't seem to be home. There were no cars parked in the drive next to the house, and as Erie got closer he didn't hear the telltale clamor of daytime television. There were no neighbors in back, just trees and beyond that more farmland.

Somewhere nearby an engine roared to life. Erie froze. A dog began barking, then howling. Another joined it, then another, then another.

"Shut up!"

A man's voice. Close.

A car door slammed shut.

Erie crouched down and slowly pushed his way through the pine trees' clinging branches. He stopped when he could see into the woman's yard.

There was the Skylark. Beyond it, parked on the grass in back of the house, was a mud-brown van. It had no side windows. The paint along the side was scratched and discolored where some corporate logo had resided long ago. No one was behind the wheel, but the engine was running.

The van was sitting next to a crude structure made from cement blocks and corrugated metal. It was only slightly longer and

broader than the van, and not as tall. The howling was coming from inside.

A long black shape curled between the van and the cement bunker. Erie pushed a little closer, knowing he was getting too close. But he had to see what the black thing was. He had a hunch. And he didn't like it.

He reached the edge of the trees, took a step beyond. He was close enough now to hear scratching coming from the other side of those cement blocks. And close enough to see that his hunch was right.

A length of black plastic pipe had been tied tight to the van's exhaust. The other end disappeared into the ground next to the bunker. Erie was sure that it reappeared on the inside.

It was a do-it-yourself gas chamber.

A year before, Erie could have simply pulled out his gun and his badge, called in backup, and put an end to this. But he had no gun or badge or backup. What could he do now?

Erie didn't let himself think about it. There was no time to work through his choices, no time to dream up a plan. He had left his hiding place. He was in the open, where he could see and be seen. He couldn't hide again—not from what he was facing now.

He stood and walked to the bunker. There was a latch on the flimsy wooden door. A small combination lock hung from it. The woman and her partner hadn't bothered to bolt it. They were going to be back in a few minutes to check on their handiwork.

Erie opened the door.

A cloud of gray vapor billowed out, swirling past his face. A foul smell came with it. The stench of ammonia and feces. The howls turned to barks—lots of them.

As the exhaust fumes cleared, Erie could see cages, one stacked on top of the other along the sides of the building. Inside were dogs and cats, more than twenty, all staring at him. The end of the black plastic hose jutted from the ground near the door, puffing out a steady stream of deadly fog. At the far end of the bunker was a small mound of loose coiled shapes, like a pile of dead snakes.

Collars. Dozens of them.

Erie felt something he hadn't felt in a long time. Raw, animal rage. He whirled around, not sure what he was going to do next but almost hoping the woman and her helper would get in his way.

He got his wish sooner than he'd expected. A thick-armed, fiery-eyed man was facing Erie. The shovel in his dirty hands was already swinging toward Erie's head.

Erie instinctively threw up his left arm and pivoted away from the blow, but it was too late. The shovel's handle cracked into his forearm, and the flat surface of its metal blade smacked against the back of his head.

Erie stumbled a few steps, his feet willing to run but his knees not cooperating. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

There were no hallucinations or fever dreams for Erie as his mind clawed its way out of the darkness. Just pain. And more darkness.

He was lying face down in the dirt, that he could tell. But when he opened his eyes, he saw nothing.

He pulled his hands under his chest and tried to push himself up. His left arm protested with a bolt of searing pain, and he dropped back down to the ground.

He blinked hard, but no vision came. Sounds and smells registered though. The whining and whimpering of dogs, the hum of an engine, the nauseating odor of animal waste mingled with a whiff of rotting flesh.

Erie stopped worrying about whether the blow had blinded him. He had other things to worry about. He knew where he was now—inside the little cement bunker. He forced himself up on his right elbow and craned his neck around, scanning the void that surrounded him.

He saw what he was looking for just beyond his feet, a faint rectangle of light glowing in the darkness. The door.

One of the dogs began panting heavily. Another retched. The sounds came from up high, a few feet above Erie's head.

The cages were stacked up to the ceiling. Carbon monoxide rises. The animals on top would be affected first.

It was beginning. Erie didn't have much time.

He wriggled around and began crawling slowly toward the doorway, the throbbing in his head growing worse every second. Was it because of the blow he'd taken? Or were the fumes starting to affect him? The first sign is a headache . . .

He made it to the door, reached up for the knob . . . and stopped.

The lock. Surely it had been bolted now.

The door was little more than plywood. He could easily kick through it—if he had all his strength back. But how long would he last outside? The man and woman would be just beyond the door, waiting, watching. Stumble out groggy and weak and they'd

just use the shovel to finish what they'd started. He needed time to recover, think.

More animals were wheezing now, hacking and fighting for breath.

Erie groped along the floor, his hand brushing over loose soil, the cool metal of a cage, the warm fur of a dog or cat pressed up against the bars. Then he found it—the end of the black tube that was filling the shack with fumes. He sat up and pulled off his cardigan, wincing as the movement sparked fresh pain in his left arm. When he had the sweater off, he stuffed as much of it as he could down into the tube. The soft material of the sweater packed in firmly.

He turned and crawled to the opposite end of the shack, where the air would be a little clearer—he hoped. He spread out his hands and put his head down low, his forehead resting on the ground. He breathed in deeply, trying to suck up as much oxygen as possible. He would need all his strength when he got outside.

Something moist and rough raked the back of Erie's right hand. He pulled the hand back, startled. Then he thought for a moment and pushed the hand out to where it had been.

The tongue found his hand again. He stretched the hand out further, reaching a cage and the panting muzzle just beyond the bars. The dog licked his hand harder, whimpered, pleading. *Let me out.*

Erie petted the dog as best he could. "Hold on," he whispered. "Hold on." Somehow it seemed to comfort him as much as it comforted the dog.

A few yards away, on the other side of the cement blocks, the van's engine sputtered. It revved, coughed, revved, coughed.

The van's exhaust was blocked. The engine was choking on its own noxious fumes.

Erie heard cursing, arguing just beyond the door. The engine hacked, roared, then died. The curses grew louder, moving.

They were going to check the van. Erie had to move now. He stroked the dog one last time, then groped in the dark for the one weapon he could find. When he had it, he took two deep breaths and pushed himself to his feet, fighting a wave of dizziness and nausea as he stood. When he felt steady enough, he walked to the door.

The van's engine screeched, grinding, then whimpered and died. They were trying to start it up again. Perfect.

Erie waited for them to turn the key again. It didn't take long.

The engine screamed in protest. Erie kicked. The door flew open.

There was no one on the other side. The engine rattled into silence.

A woman's voice: "Did you hear that?"

A man's voice: "Hear what?"

"I heard somethin' from the shed."

No answer. Then footsteps.

They were close. The trees, Erie's car—too far away. Erie still felt woozy. He knew he wouldn't make it if he ran. So it had to be fight, not flight. He pressed himself back into the darkness, against the cement blocks next to the doorway.

The footsteps grew louder.

"Awww, hell!"

It was the man. Erie could see his shadow in the doorway. He was so close Erie could smell the man's sweat, feel the electric crackle of his anger.

"He's gone!"

"You sure?"

Erie heard noises, the rustling of clothes, the scrape of boot leather over gravel, that told him the man had turned around to face his partner.

"What do you mean, am I sure?"

Something buried deep in Erie's soul screamed "Now!" Erie obeyed.

He stepped out behind the man, bringing up the dog collar he'd grabbed in the dark. He wrapped it around the man's thick neck, crossing the leather in back, forming a crude noose. He pulled tight.

The woman screamed. The man staggered back a step, gurgling, clawing at his throat, trying to work his fingers under the collar. The woman rushed forward, bringing up her hands like claws. But the man was struggling, kicking in the doorway, and she couldn't reach Erie.

"I'll kill you!" the woman shrieked. "I'll kill you!"

Her snarling face disappeared for a second, breaking into a million tiny black dots. Erie's wounds, the fumes, the smell, the fight--they were all taking their toll. Erie was blacking out. His fingers loosened on the leather strap.

The man bucked hard, throwing all his weight back at once. Erie lost his footing, and the two men tumbled to the ground. Erie's left hand lost its grip on the collar.

The man rolled to the side, away from Erie, retching. Erie was stretched out on his back, stunned by the fall. The woman stepped into the doorway and called him an obscene name. Erie lifted his head, blinked her sneering face into focus, and threw the collar at

it. He knew it was pretty feeble as a last act of defiance, but she was too far away to spit on.

The woman batted the collar away with another curse, then repeated her threat, quieter now, making it a promise. "I'll kill you."

"I don't think so, lady."

The woman froze. The voice had come from behind her.

"I've got me a gun in my hand, so I think I get to say who kills who around here."

When the woman turned around, Erie caught a glimpse of Bass Anderson a few yards beyond her. He was clutching a snub-nosed revolver in his right hand.

Erie recognized the gun immediately. He'd been trying to talk Bass into getting rid of it for months. He'd been afraid his friend would hurt someone with it.

When Bass got a glimpse of Erie and the dogs and cats in their filthy cages, he suddenly looked like he wanted to do just that. His jaw jutted out and his brow furrowed, the way they did whenever he lost his formidable temper. He brought his other hand up to steady the gun. It was pointed at the woman's stomach.

"It's okay, Bass." Erie sat up slowly. "I'm fine." He grabbed a nearby cage and used it to pull himself up. A broad tongue lapped at his fingers. Erie looked down at the dog he'd petted in the dark just a few minutes before. It was a chocolate Lab.

"Ginger?" he said.

She wagged her tail.

Erie had two questions. He got the answer to one almost immediately. The other didn't come so easily.

"How'd you find me?" he asked Bass after he'd called the police. He'd used the phone in the cluttered, smelly ranch house. There were more dogs and cats inside, roaming free. Maybe they were pets. Maybe they were patiently waiting their turn in the bunker.

"I followed you," Bass answered, not taking his eyes—or his gun—off his prisoners. They were huddled together in the half-dark next to the cages, glaring sullenly at Bass and Erie. "When I saw you take off after Miss Sunshine here, I figured you might need some backup."

Erie nodded, not letting himself feel annoyed. Yes, Bass could've blown the whole thing. But he hadn't. The woman hadn't spotted him. And, to his shame, neither had Erie.

"You know, followin' people's a tricky business. It's not as easy as you'd think it would be," Bass mused philosophically. "I lost

you when you turned around at that farm back there. I had to go a little farther up the road before I could turn around too, and by the time I got back I didn't know where you'd disappeared to. I was drivin' up and down all these side roads out here maybe twenty minutes before I saw your car. When I got out to take a look, I heard this Screamin' Mimi sayin' she's gonna kill somebody. Well, naturally I grabbed The Peacemaker and came to take a look."

That was the first time Erie had heard Bass refer to his gun as "The Peacemaker." Bass was really enjoying himself.

"You did good, Bass," Erie said. "Thanks."

Bass tried to give him a dismissive, manly shrug, as if he saved lives every day and didn't need any thanks for it. But he couldn't keep the grin off his face.

"Can ya' believe this?" the woman hissed at her partner. "It's Matlock and Barney Fife."

Erie turned to face the man and the woman again. The sight of them made him sick with rage. He asked his other question, spitting it out, not expecting an answer.

"Just what kind of monsters are you?"

The woman suggested a lewd, physiologically improbable activity he could go engage in. The man didn't say anything.

Erie knew that was all he was going to get out of them. He'd have to wait for someone else to supply the answer. He closed the door to the bunker, leaving them in the hell they'd created until the police arrived.

There were several reunions in the days that followed. First came Erie's reunion with the River City Police Department. There were handshakes and slaps on the back and promises to "crucify those sickos." That was the first day. But after that, the camaraderie became strained and tentative as Erie pushed for updates on the investigation—and didn't get any.

Happier and simpler were the family reunions. Erie's neighbors Buster the cat and Sweetie the dog soon went home with their owners, who called to thank Erie, tell him he was their "hero." When it came time for Ginger to leave the animal shelter where the impounded dogs and cats were being kept, Erie was there to see it. He said he just couldn't miss the sight of Jodi Marksberry together with her "sister" once again. But that was just an excuse. He really wanted to see Kent Cox, the police detective handling the case. They'd never been friends, but they'd been friendly. And now he wasn't returning Erie's phone calls.

Cox and Erie were a step behind Jodi and John Marksberry as they walked through the shelter, down the row of cages, past one wagging tail after another. An impatient bark echoed down the corridor, and Jodi broke from the herd, dashing to one of the last cages.

"Here she is! It's Ginger!" She got down on her knees and pressed her face up against the bars. "Hello, baby! Hello! I'm so glad to see you!" Out came Ginger's tongue, slapping against Jodi's chin. The girl giggled.

"Are you sure that's your dog?" Cox asked Marksberry, smiling.

Marksberry smiled back. "Yes," he said. "I'm sure."

There were forms to fill out, a statement to make, a quick, quiet conference with Cox away from Erie, but then it was over for Jodi and John Marksberry. On their way out, Jodi's father offered again to pay Erie. Erie again refused.

"Neighbors, remember?"

Marksberry nodded. "Right."

They shook hands.

Erie nodded his head toward Cox. "So what did he have to say to you over there?"

"Oh, not much. He just asked us to be 'discreet.' You know. While the investigation's still going on."

"Discreet?"

"That's what the man said."

"You know," Erie was about to reply, "he told the Greeks and the Wingates the same thing. And I don't know why."

But before Erie could get the words out of his mouth, Jodi Marksberry ran up and gave him a hug. Then she was dragging her father toward the door, anxious to get Ginger home. Marksberry chuckled and let his daughter haul him away.

When they were gone, the sound of laughter went with them. The Marksberrys had left with one animal out of forty-three at the shelter. Erie recognized several of the dogs and cats still in cages. He walked up to one, a cat, and waved his fingers at her. She watched him with big, yellow, impassive eyes. She looked exactly like his cat Goldie, minus Goldie's substantial girth.

"What about these guys?" Erie asked Cox.

Cox shrugged. "We haven't been able to track down all the owners. We went through that pile of collars, but a lot of 'em didn't have tags. The ones we can't place . . . I guess they stay here."

"Why don't you make some kind of announcement? The press would eat up a story like this. I'm surprised they haven't been all over it already."

Cox shrugged again, looking uncomfortable.

"Come on, Kent. What's going on?"

"What are you talking about? Nothing's 'going on.' " Cox tried to put some snap in his voice, but his heart didn't seem to be in it.

"This investigation's screwy somehow. I can smell it. *What is going on?*"

Cox scowled and shrugged and shook his head all at once, resentment and frustration and regret battling to dominate his reaction.

"Just drop it, Erie. Drop it."

The snap was really there this time. So Erie dropped it. For a few hours.

Erie didn't have to get out of his car and flag down Hal Allen. He didn't even have to watch for his old boss too closely. He simply parked across the street from Allen's house and waited.

Allen had been doing his police work from behind a desk for almost a decade, but he'd still have the eye. Without even trying to, without even wanting to, he would notice something different in his neighborhood—something like a man sitting in an unfamiliar car in the dusky gloom alone.

Allen pulled into his driveway a little before seven. Erie watched him get out of his car, walk around to the back, pretend to look for something in the trunk. He was trying to get a better look at the strange car across the street.

Erie brought up his right hand, the back of the hand to Allen, and curled his fingers twice—the international gesture for "come 'ere."

Allen's eye was sharp indeed. He slammed the trunk closed and walked over to Erie's car. Erie rolled down his window. Neither man spoke until Allen was just a few feet from the car.

"Larry. It's you. Hi." Allen's expression was pleasant, his voice soft. But something underneath was neither. "Sorry I haven't gotten back to you. You wouldn't believe how crazy things have been downtown the last few days."

"Maybe I would."

Allen tried to give him a puzzled look, as if he had no idea what Erie was talking about. Erie didn't buy it. Allen wasn't a game player by nature. It was one of the reasons Erie liked him.

"Come on, Hal. Let's not b.s. each other. I want to talk to you about this case of mine."

Allen smiled quizzically. "What? The dog thing?" His acting wasn't getting any better.

"You know it's 'the dog thing.' Just get in the car and talk to me about it for five minutes. That's all I'm asking."

Allen acknowledged defeat with a sigh, then walked around the car to the passenger door. It was already unlocked. He slid in next to Erie.

"Listen, Larry," he said, "everyone was hoping this conversation wouldn't have to happen. And as far as the rest of the world is concerned, it didn't. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Hal. I'm not trying to get anyone in trouble here. I just want to know why you guys are acting like these nickel-and-dime bunchers shot Kennedy or something."

"Don't 'you guys' me on this, Larry. This isn't Homicide's show. The Special Investigations guys are the ones in the hot seat."

Erie groaned. "Oh, geez. Is that what this is about? Politics? Did I embarrass somebody in S.I. by doing his job for him?"

"Yeah, it's politics. But not inside the department. It's bigger than that."

Erie was getting wound up, ready to rail about egos and petty rivalries in the RCPD, when Allen's words sunk in. "Bigger? Over a couple of redneck psychos? How could they have any political juice?"

"They don't. They don't need any."

Erie frowned. "I don't get it."

Allen stared out the window, obviously debating whether to go on or simply go.

"You might as well tell me, Hal. If you don't, I'll just dig it out some other way."

"I know you would. That's why you should've been brought in on this. But some people aren't sure if you're still . . . trustworthy."

Erie rewound the words in his head, played them over, unable to believe he'd heard them right. "What do you mean?"

"Look," Allen said, his voice softer now—so soft Erie knew his next words were really going to sting. "After you retired, you dropped off the face of the earth. Nobody saw you or heard from you for months. Then you pop back up calling yourself a P.I., driving around chasing lost dogs. I guess people aren't sure what to make of you anymore."

"People don't have to make anything of me. I'm still me."

"Larry, you are still a friend, okay? But you're not a cop. Not anymore. That changes things."

The words stabbed Erie so deeply he almost winced.

You're not one of us now, Allen was saying. *You're one of them.*

Erie hid the wound by going on the offensive. "Forget the

excuses," he snapped. "I just want to know if this case is gonna get buried."

"Not entirely."

"For God's sake, talk straight."

"Shut up for a second and I will!"

Erie opened his mouth to say something, closed it, nodded.

Allen took a deep breath before speaking again. "Believe me, a couple of days ago, S.I. was all pumped up about nailing these creeps. Kent Cox kept hammering away at 'em until one of 'em—the guy—opened up, blabbed out the whole scam. That's when things got screwy."

Erie raised his eyebrows. *Scam?* the gesture said.

"They were grabbing animals, whatever they could find," Allen explained, "and selling them to the zoo."

Erie stared at Allen for a quiet moment, his brain unable to make the leap. "Wait a second," he said. "The Hoosier Zoo was buying dogs and cats?"

Allen nodded wordlessly, letting Erie work it out.

A missing pet. And he was supposed to roam the countryside with a leash and a box of Milkbones.

The Hoosier Zoological Garden and Wildlife Refuge was River City's one and only tourist attraction. But there wasn't much that was attractive about it. Run down, perennially strapped for cash, it had been on the verge of closing for years. So many corners had been cut there it was a wonder there was anything left in the middle.

Erie had heard a hundred stories about the place. Every cop in town had. After all, it was the cops who had to come chase down kangaroos when they hopped over fences that were too low. It was the cops who had to come root out the teenage vandals who broke into the place every other weekend. And it was the cops—by unspoken order of the mayor—who stayed quiet about all of it.

And now the zoo was buying dogs and cats? *Dead* dogs and cats? It didn't make any sense. Unless . . .

"Oh, no. No, you've gotta be kidding."

Erie looked at Allen. He wasn't kidding.

At first, Bass couldn't believe it either. Erie waited a while to talk to him about it, unsure if he was going to tell anyone that his last question about the case had been answered. He finally decided to tell two people, and Bass was the first.

Erie could've timed it better. Bass was behind the wheel of his pickup when Erie told him. He took his eyes off the road to stare in disbelief at Erie for an uncomfortably long time.

"Am I hearin' what I think I'm hearin'?"

Erie wrapped his arms around the cat carrier in his lap and stomped on the invisible air brakes on the passenger side of Bass's pickup. Bass turned back to his driving and stepped on the real brakes just in time to avoid rear-ending a semi trailer. When they'd come to a complete stop, Erie lifted the carrier and looked inside. Goldie's miniature doppelgänger from the shelter meowed at him. Bass checked the rearview mirror. The dog tied up in the back of the pickup—his dog, the one Erie had browbeat him into adopting at the shelter—was fine, too.

"Sorry 'bout that," Bass mumbled quickly. "So you're sayin' the zoo's feedin' all them lions and tigers and such people's *pets?*"

"Apparently they're buying all the roadkill they can get their hands on," Erie said. "Twenty-five cents a pound."

"And those two blankety-blank unmentionables we met—roadkill just wasn't bringing in enough money for 'em?"

"That's it. Their contact at the zoo didn't ask a lot of questions. He was desperate. Another budget crunch. The zoo can't afford all the slaughterhouse meat it needs, so he had to supplement. As long as it was an animal and it was dead, he bought it."

Bass shook his head in disgust. "That's . . . it's . . . I can't even think of a word for it. If people found out about this—"

"It would finish the zoo off for good. Exactly. That's why no one's supposed to find out. The D.A.'s working on a quiet little deal right now. There'll be no animal cruelty charges, no attempted murder charges. Those two psychos will plead no contest to everything else, so there won't be a messy trial. They'll do their two years while everyone else forgets this ever happened."

"Well, maybe not *everyone.* We're goin' on this little detour for a reason, am I right?"

Bass looked over to give Erie a significant look. Erie acknowledged it with a nod, then tilted his head toward the road.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm drivin', I'm drivin'," Bass grumbled.

A few minutes later, they were pulling into the parking lot of the Hoosier Zoological Garden and Wildlife Refuge.

Erie wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to keep his head down and his mouth shut, show that he could still be trusted, that he was still a team player. That's what Hal Allen had implied.

But Erie didn't particularly care if the RCPD saw him as a team player. He wasn't on that team anymore.

There were only about a dozen cars in the parking lot. Another slow, uneventful day for the Hoosier Zoo. Well, maybe Erie was about to change that. He was going to have a word with the executive director.

Maybe the cops and the D.A. were going to shut their eyes, but Erie was keeping his open. He was going to keep on looking. And if he saw something he didn't like, he was going to do more than watch.

"This won't take long," Erie said as he climbed out of the truck.

"You want me to tag along?"

Erie gave his friend a small, grateful smile. "I'll be fine."

"Okay. Well, I'll be waitin' for you right here."

"Thanks."

Erie closed the door and started to walk away, but the sound of whimpering drew him to the back of the truck. Bass's new dog was staring at him, whining. Erie reached out and stroked the sad-eyed mutt's sleek fur. She tried to jump up to lick his face.

She wasn't one of the animals he'd saved. She'd already been at the shelter for nearly two weeks. If she'd gone unadopted one more day, she would have been euthanized.

"All right, settle down, we'll have you home soon," Erie told her.

She wailed mournfully when he headed toward the entrance to the zoo. "Calm down! I'll be back!" he called to her over his shoulder.

Talking to animals again. Crazy.

The dog was watching him intently, her tail wagging.

No, it wasn't so crazy. She understood him. Not the words maybe. But friendship, kindness, compassion—that she understood. Better than some people.

Erie told the sleepy-eyed woman behind the ticket window that he was there on business. She waved him on, uninterested, and he pushed his way through the turnstile into the zoo, not worried about being alone when he came back out.

Who needs a team? He had a pack.

THE CAMPING TRIP

EVE FISHER

Bob Olson and I went, as usual, on our annual fall camping trip this September. Since both of us had recently gotten divorced (Bob's third, my first), many of our friends expected to hear of romance crackling away along with the campfire. Maybe with two other people. Our camping trips have never been known for romance, even when we were young and our hormones were percolating. Instead, they were known for their disasters: the time we got lost in the Badlands for two days and I tore my knee out in a rainstorm, the time our gear got washed away in a flash flood, the time Sam came along and brought his .45 (a fact we only found out after he fired it in the middle of the night), the time . . . you get the picture.

This time we made it into the papers: "Local man arrested for murder on Mickelson Trail." Luckily, the only one they mentioned by name was Elsie. They described her as a hero, which proves they didn't get the grammar or the story right.

Elsie is Bob's latest companion. She moved in with him in August. Elsie—a beautiful, exuberant, devoted, affectionate, brown-eyed, redhaired aristocrat—pure bred Irish setter. Don't get me wrong, Elsie's a sweetheart, she really is, but the thought of taking her out on the trails made me almost as nervous as she was. Back when we were planning our trip, I made it clear that she wasn't staying in my tent.

"Nor am I carrying her food in my backpack," I'd told Bob. "Don't worry," Bob had replied. "I'm going to make her her own backpack." And he did. I watched him. I absolutely refused to help, not that I could have even if I'd wanted to. I was laughing too hard to be allowed near sharp objects, such as needles. The kit came with the words "Sew Your Own Quality" written on it and Bob certainly did that. Let's just say it took longer to make the pack than it did to destroy it.

Elsie was a problem from the beginning. For one thing, she was way too big for the back seat of Bob's Toyota, and I kept having intimate experiences with either her nose (surprisingly cold) or her tail (surprisingly active). And she had poor bladder control. We stopped the car for her about ten times on the way out to the Hills, which meant we got in much too late to hit the trail that night. We dropped Elsie off at a motel where she curled up on the bed and happily watched PBS and munched dog biscuits while we went into Deadwood for dinner. Or at least that's what she was doing when we left her. Who knows what dogs do when you go out?

We got up early the next morning and hit the trail, each of us wearing our packs. Elsie didn't think too much of hers. She tried, in the first three hours we were on the trail, twenty-five different ways of dislodging it, twenty of which worked. What with finding the pack, finding Elsie, holding Elsie still, finding the pack again, and putting the pack back on Elsie we covered about one mile in those three hours. Then it was lunchtime. We had six more hiking hours and nineteen miles to go before we reached our proposed campsite. Elsie was fresh as a daisy and I was pooped.

We camped that night in a crowded public campground. Elsie did her best to make friends with everyone there, especially a heavyset man wearing a Sturgis Motorcycle Rally T-shirt and jeans. He was not a happy camper. He was ticked off about something, perhaps everything, and yelled at anybody and everybody who seemed to be invading his space, with the result that all of us avoided him. Except Elsie. Don't tell me that dogs understand your emotions. She loved him. She invaded his campsite, his tent, his dinner, and his pants, all with equal abandon. All his shouting was just another form of affection to her. Things got so bad that Bob finally had to tie her up for the night, which embarrassed both of them.

"I don't understand why he's being so hostile," Bob said. "She's just being affectionate."

"Some people don't like a cold wet nose in their belly button," I said. "Or muddy paws in their chili."

"Well, he didn't have to be such a jerk about it," Bob muttered.

"Oh, shut up and go to sleep," I muttered back.

Tying Elsie up did give Bob an idea—he'd tie the pack onto Elsie so she couldn't get it off. So the next morning, he and the dog and some rope all wrestled around together until he and the rope won. By this time, all our fellow campers, including Elsie's new best friend, had left, and we had the trail pretty much to ourselves. We made much better time even though Elsie stopped and sat down every five minutes, trying to figure out what had happened. After

a while she became distracted by the wildlife. She chased squirrels, birds, ominous rocks, threatening sticks, and innumerable leaves. She also routed out two skunks and a porcupine. You'd be surprised how hard porcupine quills are to remove from a large, active dog. I was just thankful the skunks had ignored us.

Once Elsie got her nose back, she headed off in pursuit of more prey. I had already mentioned a leash: Bob was against it.

"Linda, I brought her out here so she could run free."

"She's running into everything in the neighborhood."

"She's having fun."

"Whatever."

By this time my opinion of life, the universe, and Elsie was low, to put it mildly. But we went on, and my spirits rose. It was a beautiful sunny day. We were on a remote, pristine, ribbon-thin trail that ribboned around steep slopes covered with glistening, slippery leaves. Elsie had bounded far ahead of us—far enough ahead, I hoped, that we might finally see some deer. We came around a steep switchback and there he was.

It was our fellow camper, the one to whom Elsie had taken such a fancy. He was just as angry, and she was just as affectionate. She was leaping all over him and trying to lick him in a frenzy of joy that completely overlooked the fact that he had a rifle in his hand. Nor had she seemed to notice the body that was lying by the trail, half covered in leaves and sticks.

"Can't you control this freaking dog?" the man barked, trying to shove Elsie away.

"Yeah," Bob said. "Elsie? Here, Elsie! Come here, girl!"

Elsie bounded toward Bob, then back toward the man, then back toward Bob. She couldn't make up her mind.

"Elsie, come here!" Bob said. This time when Elsie bounded toward him, Bob caught hold of the pack and held her as she strained toward this new man in her life. "Sorry."

"You need to keep her on a freaking leash," the man growled.

"We will from now on," I said. "Come on, Bob. Let's go back to the campsite." Bob looked at me like I was crazy, which is when I realized that he hadn't noticed the body any more than Elsie had. "We can have an early dinner and watch the sunset." By now I was nudging Bob backwards, which was irritating him. He doesn't like to be nudged. "Come on, Bob."

I was almost getting away with it when Elsie broke loose from Bob and ran back toward the man, only to stop and start sniffing the body. The man looked at Elsie, Bob looked at Elsie, I looked at the man, and watched as the rifle came up in his hand, toward us.

"I think maybe you'll spend the night here," the man said.

And all I could do was swallow. What they say about your life flashing by is nonsense, but boy, what they say about events moving in slow motion is TRUE. That rifle, arcing in the light. Elsie's nose, scattering leaves. Bob's face, going white. The rifle. Elsie, turning to gnaw at the pack. The man's other hand, gripping the front of the rifle. Elsie, sitting down to get a better chew. And then, out of nowhere, came a magnificent, aching howl that at first I thought I'd made, until I realized it had come from Elsie, who leaped up—and we were now in fast-forward—and plunged straight down the mountain. Behind her rose a buzzing, yellow-black cloud.

I don't care what sort of weapon or threat anyone is holding over you, when a hive of hornets is after you, YOU RUN. I ran like the wind, screaming the whole time. The only threat to my life I recognized were the kamikaze hornets, stinging me for all they were worth. When I saw three of them crawling on my hat, I went into hysterics, during which I almost died and the hornets did. The hat remains on the trail to this day. Anyone who finds it is welcome to it.

Some time passed, and Bob finally caught up with me.

"Where's Elsie?" he asked.

"The hell with her," I snapped. "Where's the man with the gun?"

We looked around. There was no sign of the man, but Elsie was huddled by a tree fifty yards down the mountain. She looked lost, forlorn, and miserable enough to break your heart. "What should we do?" he asked.

"Leave her," I said, and we did.

Oh, quit worrying. She caught up with us.

We went on, if you'll pardon the expression, at a dog trot. We would have moved faster—an angry man with a rifle and a dead body lay behind us, after all—but we were tired and getting sick from all the stings we'd received. Bob had been stung about ten times on his face and was swelling visibly, like a bad horror movie. I'd gotten all my stings in my hand, which had already doubled in size. We finally stopped by a small stream and were bathing our wounds when Bob asked, "Is there anything good for stings?"

"Tobacco," I said. I was looking at my hand and waiting for the skin to break.

"Do we have any?"

"You made me leave my cigarettes at home. You said my lungs would collapse out here."

"Well, I didn't know this would happen." My look must have been unfriendly, because he quickly said, "It's not my fault."

"You brought the dog."

A sullen silence followed, during which I remembered the pancake mix. At the time it seemed perfectly logical: pancake mix has baking powder and soda in it; baking powder or soda (I couldn't remember which at the time) was supposed to draw the poison out of the stings. I mixed up a thick batch of it and we plastered it all over ourselves. We even put a thick layer of it on Elsie's rear, but she just licked it off so I can't say whether it helped her or not. Then we sat in more silence and watched the bright yellow pancake batter swell and dry and crack.

And then we went on. It was almost dark when we finally came out on the highway. Bob started trying to wave down a car immediately. He had no idea what he looked like: a nuclear mutant from a Japanese horror movie. No wonder the only person who stopped for us was a highway patrol officer, and he looked nervous. He looked even more nervous when we told him our story.

"So let me get this straight," he said. "You're saying that the two of you—"

"And Elsie," Bob interrupted.

"The dog," I added, helpfully.

"The three of you ran across somebody who was burying a body up on the trail, and the only thing that saved you was that the dog sat on a hornets' nest?"

"That's about it."

"You do look like you got stung awfully bad," he said. "You feeling all right?"

"No," Bob said.

"Actually, I think it kind of evened up his head," I said. Bob swatted at me.

"You know you got a bunch of yellow stuff all over your face and arms?" the patrolman asked uneasily.

"Pancake batter," I said. "For the stings. Draw out the poison."

"What happened to the man who was burying the body, Mrs. . . . ?" By this time we were in the car, and Bob and Elsie were in the back.

"Miss," I said. "Linda Thompson. This is Bob Olson. We're just friends."

"Miss Thompson. What happened to the other man?"

"No idea," I said. "Those hornets came up and I started running. He probably did, too."

"He could be anywhere," Bob said, struck with the thought.

"You two been drinking any?"

"Just water," I said.

"But we have plans," Bob added.

Luckily, Bob knew a couple of the cops down at the Deadwood courthouse, and our story began to be listened to with less disbelief, although far more humor. We got Bob's car and eventually found a six-pack, a pizza, a pack of cigarettes, and a motel that would take dogs and had a smoking room for me.

The next morning we all went back out on the trail, along with two policemen and a couple of forest rangers. It's amazing how much one section of wooded trail looks like another. I was beginning to wonder if we'd even been in this part of the state when suddenly Elsie bounded ahead of us and started worrying a flat, dirty, green object with energy and conviction. It was, of course, my hat.

"It'll be about a mile up the trail," I said proudly.

"Try five hundred feet," said a ranger, who was looking through a pair of binoculars.

I threw the hat away—like I said, it's still on the trail—and looked ahead. There were those boots . . .

"Maybe you should stay here," Bob said.

I said a word he's heard many times from me, and we went on. The body was still half covered with leaves and sticks, thank God. The policemen started working on it. The forest rangers fanned out, looking for where the man might have gone. I lit a cigarette and watched as Elsie bounded and gamboled and slid after them. I strolled a little up the trail—just far enough away so that I wouldn't see what was under all those leaves and sticks and dirt. Elsie came running back up to me, sticky and dirty and happy. Then she bounded off again, down the slope. I heard Bob say something and everyone laugh. And then Elsie let out a loud bark, and there was a loud gunshot, and as I hit the ground all I could think of was, "Oh, Lord, please don't let there be another hornets' nest here."

Elsie had found him. Murderers run from hornets just like the rest of us, only he'd slipped and ended up at the bottom of the slope with a broken ankle and a lot more stings than Bob or I had gotten. And no pancake batter. He'd spent a long, cold, lonely night out in the woods, until Elsie showed up and then he shot her.

Oh, don't worry. He didn't even wing her, just scared her half to death. She yelped and went running as fast as she could to Bob, who cradled her like a baby. Meanwhile, the police went down and told him to throw down his weapon or they'd shoot him, and he did.

LOCAL MAN ARRESTED FOR MURDER ON MICKELSON TRAIL

John Milford of Deadwood was arrested for the killing of David Johnson on Saturday, September 25. Milford and

Johnson were on the George F. Mickelson Trail when they continued a fight that had started in a Deadwood bar earlier in the week over a motorcycle belonging to the defendant. According to Milford, Johnson had borrowed and crashed the motorcycle and refused to pay for the damages. "It just got out of hand," Milford said. The defendant shot Johnson in the chest. He was trying to bury the body by the side of the trail when he slipped and broke his ankle. Milford was forced to spend the night in the woods and was discovered the next day by a dog belonging to a pair of hikers. The heroic animal, an Irish setter named Elsie, led police to Milford, despite being shot at by the defendant. Milford is being held without bond . . .

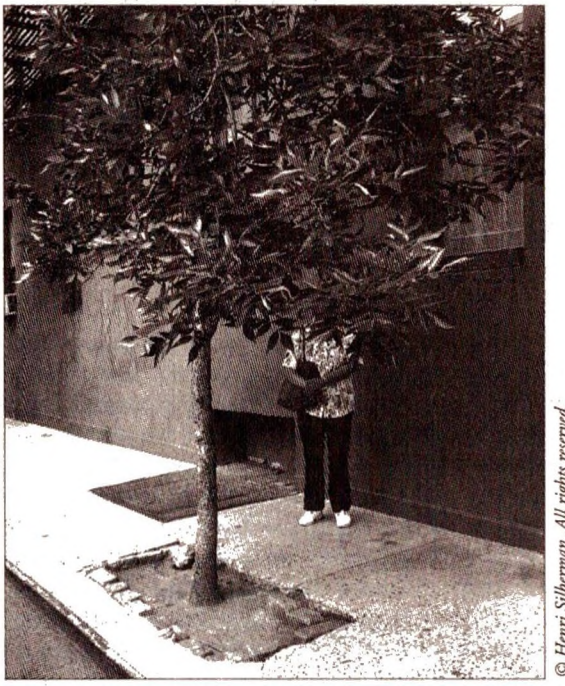
Heroic animal. You know what she did on the way out that day? She routed out a rattlesnake.

Bob called me last night. "Hey, how about Wyoming next year? We could go out to the Grand Tetons, do some fishing, hiking, camping."

"What about Elsie?" I asked.

"Now, Linda, I can't leave her at home."

Mysterious Photograph



Leaf Peeper

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 "July/August 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 February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 235.

DEATH AT OLYMPIA

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

We arrived at Olympia in Elis two days before the full moon, in magnificent weather. Cooling winds had blown over the Olympian plain, dispersing the usually intense heat. The games would be comfortable this year, though as crowded as ever.

Tents and huts were sprawled everywhere on the plains and hills surrounding the sacred game area. Already the food vendors had sold a fortune in tuna, anchovies, and even outrageously expensive eels. The acrobats were entertaining the crowds; the painters and sculptors were displaying their art. Vendors, men and women, the latter on pain of death, kept out of the confines of the sacred game area, but on the periphery were doing a brisk business in wool capes and headbands for the cool weather, lucky charms, small votive statues, and sandals, both well and poorly made. Poets and historians were reading their works to anyone who would listen; merchants and politicians were making deals; singers were reciting Homer and Hesiod, hoping for paid engagements from the wealthy attendees; servants and slaves were fetching water from the nine fresh streams and from the Fountain of Piera; everyone was relieving himself in the Kladeos and Alpheus Rivers. A typical beginning for this, the eighty-first Olympiad, the eighth for me since I began attending with my father at age ten.

At this Olympiad, I, Kleides, came as a representative from Athens, along with Pericles; his friend Phidias, who already had his statue of Zeus in the planning for Olympia; Sophocles, who eyed all the athletes; Diocles, a Sophist like myself; and Epidides, who hoped someday to rival Phidias' great art. With such company, and even in the absence of Socrates, who, as always, refused to leave Athens, I expected very stimulating talk at the evening symposium in the villa of Pericles' friend, Critias, who was providing us all with very comfortable quarters where we hoped to celebrate

a victory of his horses in the chariot race. Even Pericles, who seldom attended symposia, had agreed to attend.

I was not disappointed. That evening, after the opening great procession of judges, heralds, and athletes to the altar of Zeus for sacrifices and oaths not to take bribes or attempt victory by unfair means, we argued about the purpose of the games. Critias, no supporter of our Athenian democracy despite his friendship with Pericles, criticized what he saw as the growing commercialism and corruption of the games.

"We let anyone participate now," he lamented, signaling for a servant to pour more fine Chian wine into our cups. "The purpose of the games is not to entertain. It is to prepare men for warfare."

"But that is still the case," Pericles argued. "Only now all male citizens help defend their city-state, not just those who can afford armor. If all our male citizens are needed to defend the state, then all should participate in what prepares them for that defense. They should take pride in all that Athens does and in all it can achieve. All Athenians should strive for perfect beauty of body and manly virtue of soul."

"Perhaps the common man can run, or wrestle, or throw the discus as well as any of aristocratic birth," Critias argued. "But the common man is a specialist, not like Callias who won twelve of the wrestling and boxing contests on the games' circuit. And look what has happened since we let all male citizens participate. The race in full armor has become a matter for laughter."

"The purpose of the games is not to entertain. It is to prepare men for warfare."

Pericles chuckled. "You must admit, it can be funny. All that clanging and tripping and bumping."

"Not funny," Critias mumbled into his cup of wine. "Next thing, we'll be letting women participate. Bad enough we have the Heraea, that damned race for girls. Give them olive branches and everything."

Pericles smiled. "Well, my dear Critias, perhaps if they run well, we should allow women in the games."

I knew that Pericles uttered this heresy only to tease Critias, but I was thankful that everyone here was a friend of Pericles'. His enemies would have seen his statement as proof of the influence his beautiful mistress, Aspasia, had on him.

I expressed the idea that talent should be nurtured in all classes,

then turned to Sophocles to get his opinion. But he hadn't been listening. He was absorbed in a picture Epidides had sketched on a waxed surface.

"A magnificent boy," he said, leaning over the edge of his couch to look over Epidides' left arm. "So slender, so graceful, so fluid, as if the arm and leg joints themselves floated in olive oil. A lovely straight forehead and full lips. I must know who he is."

"I don't know his name," Epidides said. "I saw him today, watching the practice for the stadion."

"Ah, the stadion," Sophocles sighed. "In my opinion, the most beautiful of the sports. The runners are long limbed, but not too long; they are neither too tall, like the discus throwers, nor too short or heavy, like the wrestlers. Their shoulders and hips are symmetrical, their buttocks small and in proportion with their backs. They are beautiful. So, it is a crime that you have drawn this youth with a cape wrapped round his torso. Why?"

"Because he wore that cape when I saw him. I wanted to draw him as I saw him. Later, I will draw him nude. I'm hoping to see him again if he participates in the boys' races, if not here, then at Delphi. I would go just to see him. I judge him to be, perhaps, twelve or fourteen. Old enough to participate. And to learn from his brother."

"His brother?" Sophocles said, sitting upright so fast he almost spilled his wine and upset his plate of eels and olives. "Then you do know who he is?"

"I know who he is. I said that I do not know his name. A man at the stadion practice said that he must be the younger brother of Aptimus of Melos."

I stopped in the midst of raising a bit of honeyed bread to my mouth. "Aptimus. Ah, yes. I have heard his name again and again today. At the vendors, at the fountain, at the treasuries. Today, while athletes were presenting their offerings at the treasure houses, they talked of Aptimus. They say that his running technique is utter perfection, even better than before his injury two years ago. They say that he moves his arms like wings and that he has learned to move from the balls of his feet with his torso gently forward as if he were a young girl dancing."

"But who is his trainer?" Pericles had stopped arguing with Critias and was listening to our conversation.

"His father, or so I was told," Epidides said, holding out his drawing to Phidias.

"His father, Xanthius?" Pericles exclaimed. "Hard to believe."

"Why?" I asked. "His father won the stadion once." I drank the

last of my wine and smiled at the painting in my cup of Atalanta, the female runner in the old myth. "Oh, yes, and I believe the older daughter won the Heraea once."

"Yes," Pericles said, "but that was some years ago, and the father was a runner of strength, not grace. How would he have taught his son to run like a dancer?"

"Who knows?" Sophocles said, shrugging. "But if we have Aptimus and this young brother of his to watch, I intend to be at Delphi, Corinth, Nemea, and Olympia for all the games."

Pericles smiled. "But you will be very busy in Athens, my friend. We all expect another play as great as *Antigone* was a year ago. We want to know if you feel that democracy can be as efficient as tyranny."

Pericles had loved the play because one of the characters spoke for democracy.

"Well," Sophocles began. "A tyranny . . ."

My friend Diocles rushed into the room, nearly knocking over a servant who had just carried in a plate of goat cheese, artichokes, and honeyed garlic. "I've just heard the most extraordinary gossip," he said, with his usual hyperbole.

"The most extraordinary? Truly, Diocles?" I was about to ask him to define extraordinary, as the increasingly inquisitive Socrates would have asked, but Diocles rushed on.

"We must be living in the most corrupt age ever," he announced. "I've just heard that one of the judges, a judge of the stadion, has been accused of charges of bribery."

We were all struck silent. This was indeed extraordinary. Not that judges had never before accepted bribes, but it was rare indeed. The judges took very seriously their oath before the altar of Zeus to refuse any bribe and to keep secret the reason for their decisions.

"A judge from where?" Pericles asked, sitting up and swinging his legs down to the mosaic floor. I knew how much he cared for the honor and glory of Athens.

"Not from Athens. Our council chose our judges well. But the judge in question is one of the most knowledgeable. Tysander of Corinth. He denies the charge."

"Ah, Corinth. Of course. A corrupt city," Sophocles pronounced.

"But a city of the most beautiful prostitutes in all of Hellas," Phidias declared.

"Ah," I said, "so beauty and virtue do not necessarily live within the same vessel. But this is no time to argue the point. Who made the charge against Tysander?" I asked Diocles.

"The Spartan delegation. They say that one of their judges saw Tysander on the hill of Cronos, behind the treasure houses, talking with an athlete. Of course, Tysander is known for talking to many of the athletes, even before the games. He knows many of the athletes well. He travels about a good deal to see the top athletes."

Pericles lay back on his couch.

"Well, the charges may well be true," Phidias said. "The Spartans are crude, and entirely lacking in artistic taste, but they are honest."

"Or, at least, not clever enough to be dishonest," I said, Sophist that I was. "I presume the Elians will investigate?"

"Indeed, the men of Elis pride themselves on keeping the games pure. But," Diocles said, accepting a cup of wine from a servant, "that is not all. There is even worse news."

"More extraordinary than the most extraordinary, my friend?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed," Diocles said. He took a sip of wine. "The Spartans say that some small statues of fine Scythian gold are missing from their treasury. Stolen, they say, a day or two ago, when the practices were at their most intense and a Spartan got careless with his guard duty. He has already been sent back to Sparta."

"Do the Spartans have any idea who stole the statues?" I asked.

"The Spartans blame the judge Tysander. They say if he would accept bribes, he would also steal."

"Ah, Spartan logic," I said.

"You see," Critias said, turning to Pericles, "the games have been corrupted. This is what comes of your democracy. If one does not have a long, honorable family history, one cannot have honor."

"Ah, aristocratic logic," Pericles said. "Well, tomorrow should prove most interesting. Everyone will be at the opening chariot races. We shall, no doubt, hear many theories about the theft. You, as usual, Kleides, will keep your counsel until you hear all the theories?"

"Until I know more," I said. "Much more. Facts, not theories."

"Well," Sophocles said, "I shall look for this young man at the practice for the stadion." He picked up Epidides' drawing and stared at it. "Beautiful," he murmured.

Pericles smiled. "Beauty, as Socrates claims, should be one with virtue. But beauty, in whatever form, is irresistible. That is why the bribery charge, if true, is more serious than the theft. The athlete who runs with the greatest beauty of form, not just distance, must win. Nothing must interfere with the judging of the beauty of form."

I took the picture from Sophocles and studied the slender arms and legs of the young athlete wrapped in his cloak. I decided that I, too, would look for the young man tomorrow.

Thirty-eight chariots raced on the second day of the eighty-first Olympiad. For twelve laps of the hippodrome the chariots raced, colliding and scraping, with the horses sweating and foaming and the hubs of the wheels just clearing the turning posts. We Athenians roared when the trumpeter blew for the last one-half lap, and Critias' chariot flew toward the finishing post. We knew the judges would confirm his victory, for from the moment the bronze eagle was swung into the air to start the race, Critias' chariot leapt from its part of the starting gate, as if driven by Helios, the sun god, himself. Pericles clapped me on the back; Diocles and I raised our fists to the skies; Epidides threw down his stylus and wooden tablet and clasped his hands over his head.

Another Athenian, a commoner, in spite of Critias' opinions, won the pentathlon, taking three events: the discus, the javelin throw, and the long jump. Our hopes for a clean sweep of the day's events had been dashed in the late morning when a Spartan won the horse race, but we all agreed that, anyway, the celebration at Critias' villa that evening would be a feast fit for the gods. Phidias declared his intent to sting Critias' aristocratic conservatism with the commoner's pentathlon victory, but Pericles, ever even tempered and well mannered, cautioned him against provoking our host too much.

I decided to buy a gift for my mistress Selkine, and for Lamicus, my two-year-old nephew, before I headed over to see the stadion practice. Pericles accompanied me to the vendors' area to buy something for Aspasia.

He bought a brooch, a flower fashioned of gold with touches of blue enamel on the petals, a blue that would match the blue-black of Aspasia's eyes and hair.

Lacking Pericles' money, I parted from my friend and wandered over to the area of less expensive vendors. I found a terracotta pig with pebbles inside, just perfect for my nephew Lamicus to drive his father mad with the noise. I made my way through the crowds of men to a vendor selling headbands. I was riffling through the headbands hanging from a pole, trying to decide between a blue or a red one, when the man next to me gave the vendor half an obol and stepped aside to make room for the next customer. I recognized the customer immediately. The slender arms and legs, the

perfect forehead were unmistakable. It was the boy of Epidides' drawing. He reached for a headband of gold and blue, a lovely one that could grace the head of a goddess.

I watched as he lifted the headband to gaze at the dyes, checking, I presumed, to see how evenly they flowed through the wool. His slim fingers stroked the material until, apparently feeling my gaze upon him, he turned his head to me, gave me a sharp look, dropped the headband, turned, and pulling his cloak tighter about himself, moved away, his long powerful strides breaking easily and speedily through the crowd.

I understood Epidides' artistic interest in the boy, and for a moment, I even understood Sophocles' more prurient interest.

I quickly purchased the blue headband for Selkine, but by the time the vendor took my half obol the boy had disappeared. I made my way back into the altis, past its temples, up by the treasury houses, noticing that the Spartan house was now well guarded by five armored men. At the stadium, I watched the practices, noting the beauty with which Aptimus ran. I watched the narrow entrance arch to the stadium carefully, but Aptimus' young brother did not show up.

I spent the rest of the day listening to some rather mediocre poetry, regretting that Pindar was too ill to attend the games. No one could match his great odes to past Olympians: his tribute to the "never-tiring hooves" of Theron's winning horses in the chariot races, to the splendor of Ergoteles' long-distance run, to Egiges who ran like a hound flying across the hills. I gossiped about the decadent Persians and the great pyramids, as Herodotus described them and which I hoped to see someday myself.

As I gossiped I turned the talk inexorably to the current scandals. Tysander, gossip had it, was arrogant and extravagant, but knowledgeable about the runners and scrupulous about his judging.

By the end of the day, I found out that the Spartans had dropped the charges against Tysander and the Elians had identified Gigos of Aegina, a graceful but unsuccessful runner, as the thief of the Spartan statues. Everyone was shocked since Gigos had been training with Aptimus and had improved his form and speed. Now he had disappeared from Olympia in disgrace, perhaps cynical, angry, and unwilling to bear yet another defeat at the games, particularly after his intensified training. I made my way to the Alpheus River to wash, refreshed myself with a clay jar of water purchased from a vendor, and started for the celebration at Critias' villa, assuming that the scandals were over and the purity of the games preserved. I was wrong.

We feasted through half the night on succulent eels, poppyseed loaves dipped in rich olive oil, roasted garlic, and the ultimate delicacy, a sow's womb. Of course, Critias also provided abundant Chian wine.

He and Pericles continued to debate who should participate in the games. Critias fretted over the gifts given to successful athletes: the freedom from taxes, the free meals, on the state, for a year, and the vases of olive oil. He maintained that the olive wreath given at Olympia should be enough.

Pericles argued that athletes should be rewarded for their hard work, and I argued that pride and the desire for fame could corrupt as easily as the desire for wealth.

We were enjoying the talents of some flute girls when, again, Diocles burst in, his cheeks practically exploding with the news he had held inside while he'd run up to the villa.

"What is it now?" Critias, annoyed at the interruption, asked.

"The most . . ." Diocles stopped and looked at me. "It is truly extraordinary, Kleides. An athlete has been murdered." His face drooped with the release of his news, then perked up with pride at being the carrier of such dramatic news.

We all sat still, shocked. The games were sacred. All were guaranteed safe passage to the games and all were forbidden to bring arms.

"Who was murdered?" Pericles asked, calm as usual.

"Cleon of Aegina. Another runner. A talented runner."

I sat up. The flute girl I'd been holding gripped my arm. "Murdered how? Where?" I asked.

Diocles lifted his hands. "I don't know where. Some men found him. He was floating in the Kladeos River."

"Probably drowned then," Critias said. "Too much drinking to celebrate the start of the games. Even athletes drink too much these days."

"No, no," Diocles said. "He has been dead for several days. His head. The back of his head. It was bashed in. Everyone believes that it was Gigos, the thief of the statues, who must have done it. Perhaps Cleon realized that Gigos was planning to steal the statues and so Gigos killed him. It is logical."

Pericles rose. "What is logical is not always true. We must seek the truth. We are Greeks. All of us here at Olympia. We cannot allow such a crime to go unpunished. We cannot allow any crime here, even the theft of Spartan statues, to go unpunished."

Phidias shrugged. "No great crime," he muttered.

"Maybe not up to your artistic standards, Phidias," Diocles

said, "but apparently statues of high-quality Scythian gold."

Pericles ignored them both. "Kleides, you have found the truth of such matters for us in the past. You must do it again."

I nodded. But this was Olympia, not Athens. I had thousands of suspects. I decided to start with the Spartan delegation and Tysander of Corinth. This collection of scandals involving the stadion could not be coincidence alone.

The next day we all attended the great sacrifice to Zeus. The procession was magnificent, with the judges and priests in purple and white robes, the mound of ashes glowing on Zeus' altar, the bulls bellowing before their sacrifice, the burning meat filling the air with a thick odor. We would all eat well at the victory celebrations when the games ended.

In the early afternoon, after a light snack of bread from a vendor, I made my way up to the treasure houses. The Spartan guards refused to speak to me, but the Athenians, the Corinthians, and the Thebans were brimming with gossip, most of it useless. One Corinthian gave me a solemn bit of information. He said that he'd been told by a Spartan guard that the careless guard had never made it back to Sparta. He had been executed that morning.

I prowled around the Spartan camps to confirm the information. I was well aware of the harshness of the Spartans, but this, even for them, seemed excessive. I started to add up the incidents. Tysander had been seen near the treasure houses. Gold statues had been stolen from the Spartan treasure house. The Spartans had accused Tysander of accepting a bribe because he had met with an athlete on the hill near the treasure houses. But what if it had not been Tysander, but the Spartan guard who had accepted a bribe to turn his head the other way when the robbery took place. It was rare for Spartan guards to take bribes, but even rarer, given their training, to be careless. It seemed to me that the guard in question might well have been bribed. This disgrace, especially given the Spartan accusation against Tysander and the Spartan reputation for honesty, would account for why the Spartans had dropped the bribery charges against Tysander and executed the guard.

I decided to test my idea. I sought out whatever Spartan delegation member looked as if he'd drunk too much wine the night before and encouraged him to talk about the horse race and the horse, Wind, who had won. As always, the Spartans turned garrulous when talking about their own strength or the strength of their horses. After a while, I slipped in a comment on the stolen statues and the guard taking a bribe. Most of the Spartans shut up

fast, but one asked how I knew the guard had been executed for his crime. Not wanting to implicate the Corinthian guard who had given out the information, I said that the Elians had let it out. The Elians, in charge of the games, pretty much knew everything that went on anyway, so I figured the Spartan would accept my story.

I headed again to the stadium. The boys' races were on that afternoon, and I hoped to see Epidides' young racer in action. Besides, if Tysander were judging that race, I might get a chance to talk to him, though I couldn't think of any way of asking if he'd taken a bribe, bribed a guard, or killed the Aeginian runner without having him punch me in my eyes.

I was disappointed that the young runner wasn't there and rather puzzled as to why he wasn't. But I didn't think about it too much. At least, not then. I saw Tysander standing among the other purple-robed judges. I watched the races, pleased to see that we would have fine racers for the next Olympiad. Once the winners had been announced and the palm leaves awarded, I pushed through the crowd to talk to Tysander.

He had sharp, pugnacious eyes and a long nose that bulged out at the nostrils. He had the look of an intelligent wrestler, but the paunch that bulged slightly from beneath his robe gave away his indulgent nature. His eyes told me that he might be fairly easily provoked, so I started with a harmless question. I started by asking him about Aptimus' little brother, but he just shrugged.

"Yes, there is a younger brother," he said, eyeing the big olives a vendor was selling. "He is not competing."

"I suppose you've heard about Cleon of Aegina," I said.

"Of course. Everyone's heard."

"Did you know him?"

Tysander eyed the olives again, then pulled out a pouch. He dug inside and extracted a Melian coin, dropped it back inside, and extracted a Corinthian coin. The vendor asked for an Athenian coin. Tysander growled something about not understanding why only Athenian coins were widely accepted, since everyone knew the Athenian reputation for deception.

I bit my tongue. "So you knew Cleon." I said.

Tysander glared. "But of course. As a judge of the stadion, I would know him, as would the other judges." Tysander sniffed at his olives, his nostrils bulging out even more. He picked up one of the olives.

"What did you think of him?"

Tysander dropped the olive back into the cup. "You want to know what he was like? He was superstitious like all the athletes." He turned and strode away.

"You knew Gigos, didn't you?" I yelled. "Was he the athlete you were talking to on the Hill of Cronos?"

He turned. I thought he was going to throw his olives at me.

"I thought maybe you could help to recover the statues," I said, trying to sound innocent.

"Of course I knew Gigos, you empty storage jar. And I have talked to him and other athletes here at the games and elsewhere. I have watched them practice from the Hill of Cronos, from near the treasuries, and from every other part of Olympia. As for the statues, let the Spartans solve their own problems." He swung around again and stalked off.

I sighed. It would be as hard to trap Tysander as it would be to hold an eel. Tysander had covered his tracks well by producing enough tracks to justify his presence anywhere.

Knowing that many of the athletes were superstitious, I decided to go down by the river where the seers had their tents set up to see if any of them knew anything about Cleon. Athletes, trainers, spectators all lined up to consult the seers, some out of superstition, some out of any desperate means to assure a successful bet on the athletic events. I didn't put much stock in seers, but I knew that they were an observant lot. Their reputations depended on it. I wasn't unsympathetic. Mine did, too.

Looking among the many seers Cleon had consulted for one who would talk cost me six obols, a full drachma, and an earful of nonsense about my future love life, my future economic life, and my future health. One seer told me that a beautiful woman would soon dote on me. I gave him two obols. I knew that Pericles would reimburse me and more. After all, he didn't know that I was hoping, no doubt futilely, that the beautiful woman would be Aspasia. At least, I don't think he knew.

I finally found the right man, a thin fellow, but with impressively bushy eyebrows, round eyes, and tufts of hair that gave him the look of an owl—rather an asset, I thought, to his profession. He was from Melos, Aptimus' home. He threw some wooden dice with letters carved into them to tell me that I would father seven sons. My mistress Selkine would have shoved the dice into his ears. Then, in answer to my question, he gazed into a terracotta bowl of water to tell me that Aptimus would win the stadion. Given all the talk about Aptimus' ability, my little nephew Lamicus could have told me that. I pretended to be impressed,

produced my last two obols, and asked if he had spoken with Cleon of Aegina.

"He consulted me, yes." The seer sighed. "I foresaw his death."

I swallowed a large dose of sarcasm. I didn't care about any "after the fact" claims of foreknowledge, but I didn't want to offend the seer. I wanted information. "Did you?" I said, trying to sound impressed. "What had Cleon come to consult you about?"

"Whether or not he would win the stadion."

"And you predicted he would not?"

"Of course. I saw his death in the waters." He gestured to the terracotta bowl.

I didn't think anybody could see much in that water besides some dirt. The only death one could have predicted might have been that of the poor little dead bug that floated on the water. "You are skilled, indeed, to have seen his death in those waters," I said, keeping a straight face. "I can see why Cleon consulted you." I thought that I could feel oil gathering on my tongue. "Was he worried about dying when he came in to you?"

"No, no," the seer said, shifting on the rope chair on which he sat. With his right hand, he flicked the bug out of the bowl, trying to cover the action with his left hand. "He was worried about losing the stadion."

"Did you tell him Aptimus would win?"

"Indeed, I did. I told him that unless Aptimus fell ill or hurt himself or was disqualified, he would win. I told him that Aptimus was in perfect health."

"Did that upset Cleon?"

The seer shrugged. "Of course, but I assured Cleon that he would win at the Delphian game, provided he had the right charms and prayers."

I looked at the bundles of herbs, the rabbits' feet, and the poorly made statues of the god Hermes and wondered how much Cleon had paid and how much he wanted to see Aptimus injured. Had he fought with Aptimus? Had Aptimus killed him? Or was the gossip right? Had Cleon discovered Gigos' plans for theft and died for his discovery? I was a bit discouraged. The seer hadn't yet given me much useful information. "Did you and Cleon talk of anything else or anyone else?" I asked.

The seer shook his head. "Not of an athlete, no."

I perked up. "Of whom, then?"

He shrugged again. "It is difficult to remember."

"Let me help your memory," I said. "You spoke of Tysander of

Corinth." I was guessing, of course, but I was damn sure of my guess. "Perhaps another obol or two would help you remember what was said."

The seer smiled and accepted the coins. "Cleon told me that Tysander knew of some possible violation by Aptimus that would disqualify him from the Olympics and worse. He wanted to know if I could see the violation to verify it."

"And?"

The seer shrugged. "I told him that I felt something: that perhaps Aptimus was not born of both a Greek mother and father."

It was a standard guess. I didn't believe it. If Tysander suspected something about Aptimus, that something had to be much more grave, grave enough for him to have Cleon try to verify it.

"Did Cleon tell you what the supposed violation was?"

The seer looked disgruntled. "No. He said he came to get information, not to give it."

So, I thought, Tysander didn't want the slander made public. Why not? I would have to talk with Aptimus and with Tysander again, though I doubted that I would get much out of him.

I wandered about again and found that Aptimus and his father were staying, not at the bathhouses, but at the home of a friend across the Alpheus River. I knew better than to try to talk to Aptimus the evening before the stadion, so I headed for Critias' villa for more feasting.

I took a circuitous route up past the bathhouses, where many of the athletes stayed, keeping my eyes open just in case Tysander was still wandering about. I walked up past Hera's temple and the precinct of the Earth goddess, Demeter, where a priestess, the only female allowed at the games, chanted her prayers. (The taboo against females at the games was very strict. Aspasia thought the taboo foolish.) I spotted Phidias, who was lecturing on the perfect proportions for statues of athletes. I didn't think Tysander would be interested enough to be here, so I wandered on, making my way along the Kladeos River, where some of the most costly vendors had set up shop.

I had guessed correctly. Tysander was still shopping. I followed at a discreet distance, ready to move up fast if he pulled out his pouch of money. I wanted to see as much as I could of the variety of coins he carried.

He found a vendor of jars and examined several oil jars and perfume flasks. Finally, he seemed to settle on a lovely powder jar, lustrous black with a lovely figure of a kneeling girl washing her hair. Unheeding of the accusations of being a stinking boar, I shoved my

way through the crowd to Tysander's left side to get a clear view of his hands. I couldn't be entirely sure, but the coin he offered the vendor appeared to be from Aegina, Cleon's home. The vendor rejected the coin, just as the olive seller had rejected the Melian coin.

Tysander had quite a collection of coins. I was pretty sure I knew why. My guess was that he offered information to the athletes, for a price, of course: how a given athlete practiced, how another raced, what made one nervous and another angry, what violations might disqualify a rival. I wondered if Cleon had been able to verify Tysander's suspicions about Aptimus and if that verification had put Cleon, now knowing too much, in danger. I wondered, too, if Tysander had sold the thief Gigos the information that one of the Spartan guards could be bribed to look the other way, or if he had bribed both athlete and guard to do his dirty work.

The vendors were closing up shop as the sun set over the Kladeos River, gilding the columns of Hera's temple. I headed for Critias' villa.

The stadion race proved most exciting. Aptimus raced gloriously, his body glistening with oil and powder, his long legs lifting gracefully off the balls of his feet, his arms swinging up and back so rhythmically they seemed, indeed, like wings. Three other racers nipped at his back for a time, but he soared ahead twice to win the stade and the double stade, running the two lengths of the stadium as easily as he had run the single length. With Aptimus' father leading the way, the Melians lifted the athlete to their shoulders for a run down the stadium. They cheered wildly, as we all did, so beautiful was Aptimus' form.

After the races, remembering that I had a task, I asked Sophocles if he had spotted the young brother. Not as interested in the race as myself, he had kept a sharp eye out for the young man, who had, Sophocles said, hung back near the edge of the crowd jammed on the Hill of Cronos.

But the young brother had disappeared. I looked for Tysander at the Pankration, figuring that the biting, gouging wrestling and boxing event would appeal to him, but he had disappeared too.

Seeing that I had little chance of even approaching Aptimus in his triumph, I decided to go over to the home where Aptimus and his family were staying. I headed to the Alpheus River to hire a boatman to take me across. I had no idea what I would ask the young brother when I found him, but I realized that his apparent

desire for solitude was troubling and that he might know something about Cleon's search for Aptimus' supposed violation.

I paid for my passage across the river and made my way on the path up the hills above the spot where the two rivers meet. The waters of the wilder Kladeos River flowed swiftly down a gorge, sliding over clumps of rocks and racing toward the meeting point with the Alpheus. Sniffing the odor of pine and wild olive trees, I stood for several moments staring down into the gorge, an idea forming in my mind. I thought of Epidides' sketch of the young athlete, of the headband of many colors that I had seen him purchase, and of the painting in my wine cup at the symposium. I sat on a clump of grass, horrified. If what I now suspected were true, I faced a most difficult decision. The games had already been violated by murder. Were they violated in another way? If so, I had an obligation to reveal it. Otherwise, I could fall into disgrace.

I thought of Epidides' sketch again. I thought about my mistress, Selkine, and I thought about Aspasia and how she might react. I stood up, wiping perspiration from my face though the sun was mild and the breeze cooling. I turned toward Olympia, determined now to pursue the matter no further.

But I could see the stadium in the distance and the temple of Hera, with its old and stately columns, and I remembered that Tysander had also disappeared after Aptimus had won the stade.

I feared now for the life of the young athlete, if what I suspected was true. I had to find Tysander and the athlete.

I hurried along the path, rising higher up the gorge, knowing now why Aptimus and his father had chosen to stay at a spot distant from the bathhouses and the crowds in the valley. Here and there poppies were still in bloom, their blood red petals waving gently in the breeze. I could smell bitter rue in the air, and from the valley below I could hear in the distance the shouts of triumph and celebration from the games. Had they been so violated that the gods would be angry? I reminded myself that I was a Sophist, that rain and thunder were natural occurrences, not the revenge of Zeus, that eclipses, as Pericles always pointed out, hurt no one and meant only that one heavenly body passed before

In the distance the shouts of triumph and celebration from the games—Had they been so violated that the gods would be angry?

another, as one might pass a cloak before one's eyes and blot out the light.

I still could not see the villa and slowed to get my bearings. I could not afford to lose my way, though neither, if my guess was right, did I have time to spare. Ahead, the path seemed to curve and disappear into a grove of plane trees. I glanced toward the river to check direction and stopped in my tracks.

I was face to face with a young man who had emerged from the grove of trees at the edge of the gorge. It was Gigos of Aegina. He stared at me wild eyed then leapt into a fast run, moving over the path and around the curve as if his very life depended on it.

I stood for a moment with my mouth open, but no words emerged, an unenviable situation for a Sophist. I had expected to see Tysander up here, not Gigos, his partner in theft, but I was sure that I was still right about the danger to the young athlete. Perhaps death had already struck. I had little hope of catching Gigos, so I turned toward the gorge. I cut through the trees and stopped when I spotted a figure sitting, bent over, at the edge of the gorge.

I crept closer, treading as lightly as possible on the dry undergrowth. Here and there I snapped a twig and sent a small stone rolling toward the gorge, but the bent figure showed no signs of having heard me. Perhaps the sobbing covered my noises.

I listened to the sobs, heart-rending gulps of sorrow breaking from the figure's throat. Fear, I thought, fear of discovery and death.

I approached, my mind swirling with plans to avert death.

"Perhaps I can help," I said softly from ten footsteps away, hoping to lessen the fear I knew the figure would feel upon my appearance.

The athlete jumped up and whirled to face me.

I looked into the large, deep brown eyes of a woman, the proportions of whose high broad forehead and beautifully rounded chin were as beautiful as the mythical Atalanta.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "At least, not of me. I am from Athens, not Sparta where women are freer, but I won't betray you. You are Aptimus' trainer, aren't you? Not your father. And you wanted, understandably, to see your brother's victory."

She nodded and wrapped her arms round her shoulders as if to protect herself.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

She shook her head. The gold glinted in the blue headband, a headband Selkine would have loved. "No," she said in a low voice, "but now it is too late. I am doomed." She lifted a slender arm and gestured toward the gorge.

"No," I said. "No one but Tysander and Gigos know that you, a female, violated the sacred games by your presence. But I can stop them from revealing your sex. I know that they are thieves and Tysander a bribe taker."

She shook her head vigorously. "No," she said. "He is not a thief. Gigos is not a thief. Not really."

My mouth opened again and shut. I gave myself time to think. "He, with Tysander, stole the Spartan statues, did they not?" I thought some more. "No. Not with Tysander. For Tysander. To protect you?"

She nodded and kept her head down, looking miserably at the gorge.

"Tysander found out about you, didn't he? And he threatened to reveal your presence unless you helped him steal those Scythian gold statues, didn't he?"

She nodded again.

"But why did Gigos . . ." I stopped. Of course. I saw it now. Gigos had trained with Aptimus and fallen in love with his sister, a graceful, beautiful runner in her own right. "So Gigos did it for you, because if you had gotten caught, it would have meant instant death."

I am ashamed to admit that only then did it occur to me why Gigos had raced away from the gorge. I stepped to the edge and looked down. Tysander's body lay crumpled on the rocky edge of the Kladeos River.

"So, he came up here to get the statues from Gigos," I said. "And knowing Tysander, he asked for more."

"He asked for me," the girl said, her head coming up with pride and dignity. I thought of Aspasia.

"Swine belly," I muttered. "And so Gigos pushed him over the gorge."

"No, I did."

I, a Sophist, was shocked. "By all the gods. And Gigos left you? Ran away?"

"I sent him to get Aptimus. So that we could all escape. I was to go to the house where we are staying. But I could not leave immediately. I killed a man here." She looked at the gorge.

I stared at her. In admiration. We in Athens recognize that one must sometimes kill to defend oneself. Most Athenians would not have recognized this woman's right to defend herself, but I was not among most Athenians. Neither was Pericles. He had a fine sense of justice. Very fine. He would help.

But I needed to know one more thing. "Cleon of Aegina?

Tysander set him upon you, didn't he?" I said. "Tysander perhaps recognized you from your days in the Heraea and he sent Cleon around to consult a dozen seers to see if anyone else knew about you, since blackmail works only with a secret. Then he sent Cleon where you were staying to verify that indeed you were here."

She sighed. "Yes. At night, Cleon came to the river where Aptimus and I were practicing. My father was there, too. He fought with Cleon to save me. He killed him."

"And when Cleon didn't return to report to Tysander, Tysander knew that his guess was correct."

The girl held her head and sobbed again. "He said he would bring charges against my father. My father is old and ill. He will not survive this horror."

"But you will," I said. "Come. I have a good friend who will see to it that you get safe passage to one of our colonies. He will see to it, too, that Gigos is sent to be with you." I looked toward the gorge. "I will convince everyone that Tysander committed suicide because I discovered that he was the thief. I am a Sophist. I can talk of the evidence of his coins until everyone is so confused that they cannot think about the matter any longer. Except for Pericles. We will, of course, tell him the truth. He will be satisfied with nothing less."

Pericles listened quietly. When I finished, he sat, still quiet, for a few moments. "She is safe enough for now?" he asked finally. "No one knows enough to attack her? Physically or verbally?"

I knew that he was thinking of the attacks on Aspasia, accusations of everything from running a brothel to procuring women for Pericles. "Yes," I said. "Their host has protected the family and will continue to do so. He will help."

Pericles looked pleased. "Then all will be well. Aspasia has many friends yet in Ionia. The girl and her lover will be safe there. And you, Kleides? Can you can expose Tysander's bribery and theft?"

"No, not without endangering Aptimus' family. But I can do something. You see, the Spartan guard was paid in Corinthian coins, the coins of Tysander's city. I will spread that word. The Spartans will not admit openly that one of their guards took a bribe, but they will not contradict me, particularly since I can retrieve the gold statues. And I will spread word of Tysander's inexplicable collection of coins of many cities. I can make the implications clear. It will be enough to discredit him."

Pericles smiled. "And so the winner of the stade was trained by a female. A pity we cannot tell Critias."

ALWAYS ANOTHER WAR

BRENDAN DuBOIS

In Pinette, Maine, there are exactly three streetlights, all clustered around the town hall and common, which is why I almost sideswiped the parked R.V.

We were on Timberswamp Road on an early October evening and I had just made a tight curve on the dark road, when I spotted an oversized R.V. pulled over to the side like a beached whale. I swore and hit the brakes on my pickup truck, swerving to the left. Miriam Woods gasped and grabbed my arm. I glanced at the rearview mirror, my heart thumping. "If that guy had been out one inch farther, we'd be picking windshield glass out of our teeth."

She looked back. "We should check it out. Maybe they need help."

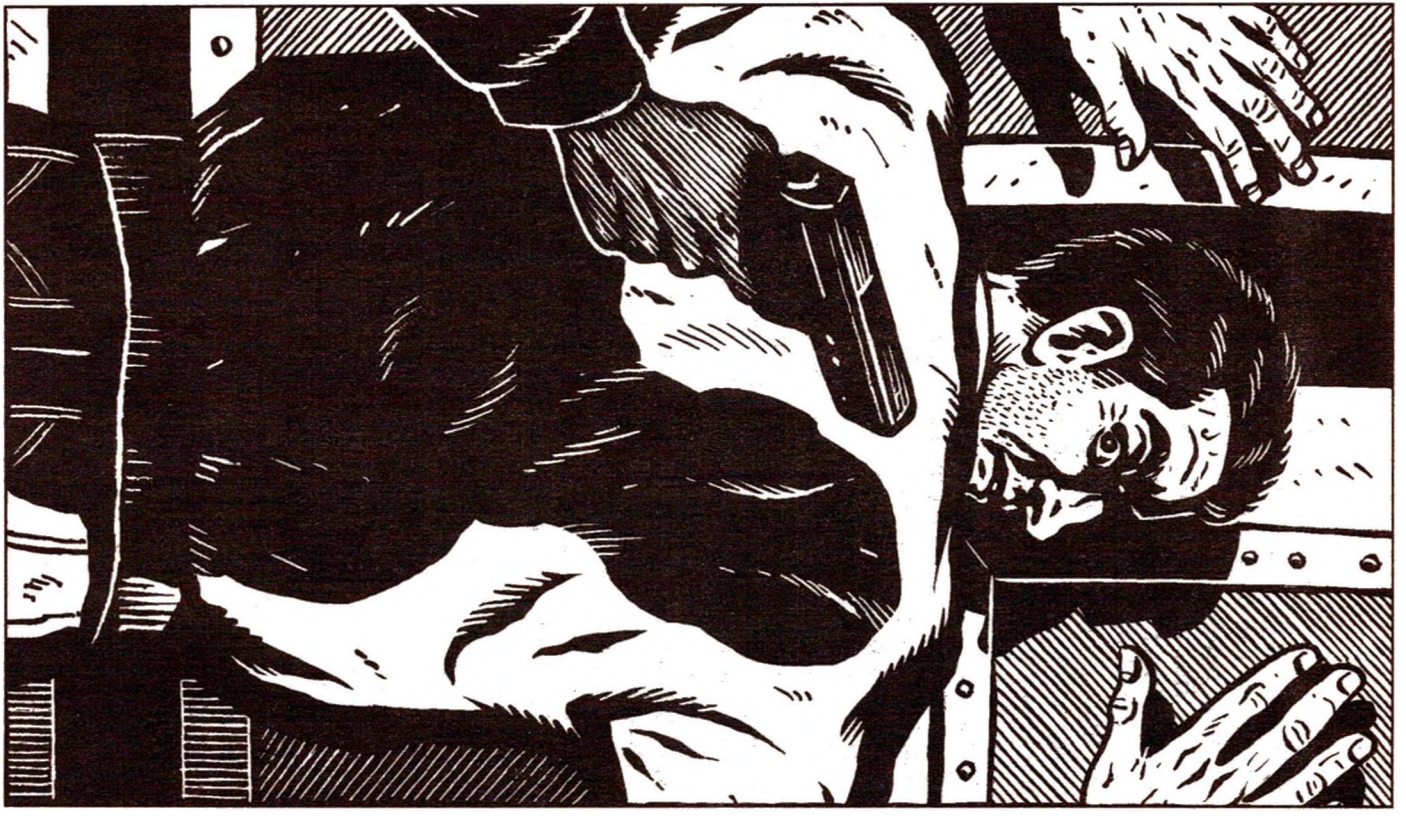
I started to speed up. "Looks fine to me, and if we don't get you home soon, your son will be wondering what I'm doing to you."

"Owen," she said, her voice now that of the leading town selectman, which she is. "It's what we do up here."

Another lesson on how things are done in rural Maine. You help your neighbor raise a barn. You let other neighbors hunt on your property during deer season. I had been exiled to this small town some years ago and was still learning how to fit in.

Within a minute I made a U-turn and, with another U-turn, parked behind the R.V., my high beams illuminating its rear. And then all of a sudden, everything looked wrong. This wasn't a typical R.V., with bicycles and lawn chairs bundled at the rear. No decals from the Florida Keys, Niagara Falls, or Monterey, or bumper stickers that announced I'M SPENDING MY CHILDREN'S INHERITANCE. The rear of this huge R.V. was smooth gunmetal gray. No rear windows. The only decorations were an Ohio license plate and the blinking red hazard lights. Before I could say anything Miriam was out of the truck, and I cursed again, under my

Dan Krovatin



breath. I joined her and spotted the problem: the R.V.'s heavy right wheels had sunk into the soft shoulder.

"It looks like they just got stuck or something," Miriam said.

"Or something," I said, looking over the vehicle with a critical eye. No side windows, either. Just the windshield and the windows for the driver and passenger doors. I stepped out onto the empty road, noted the antennas clustered about the rear of the R.V. and the little portals marking where closed-circuit cameras gave the driver a 360 degree view of what was going on. Definitely not grandma and grandpa's vacation home. In the woods there was a rustle and then the low, urgent hoo-hoo of an owl out hunting.

I was just about to tell Miriam to get the hell back in the truck when the man came out of the woods.

Miriam drew in her breath, startled, and I stepped beside her. The guy was tall, easily six feet, and had on dungarees, a heavy white turtleneck sweater, and a short leather jacket. His black hair was short and even. In the truck's headlights, I could make out the flicker of his eyes. I knew that look quite well. He was evaluating potential threats. Having that look near Miriam unsettled me.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, his voice flat.

"We were driving home and saw your R.V. pulled over," Miriam said. "We stopped to see if you needed any help."

Then the man smiled, as if a tiny computer inside his head had quickly been ordered to download Smile #4. "Gee, thanks," he said. "I was just driving through and I had to swerve to avoid a deer." He made a motion with his hand. "You can see what happened next. Stuck."

"Do you need a tow truck?" Miriam asked. "I know—"

"Oh, that's okay," he said. "Call's already been made. And while I was waiting, I went into the woods to borrow a tree, if you know what I mean. Toilet in there hasn't worked right all week."

"Oh, all right," Miriam said. I said nothing, keeping an eye on the man, on his eyes, and especially his hands. His jacket didn't hang right, and if either one of his hands went under it, I was going to rush him and take him out by the knees.

Instead, he said, "Well, I think I'll go wait inside. It's getting chilly."

I spoke up. "It certainly is. Miriam, let's get going."

And this time she didn't argue with me.

When we got back into the truck I almost told her to lock her door, but I just backed up and sped away. The look in that guy's eyes had been that of a hungry hunter; it reminded me of a time not so long ago when I saw the same look, every morning, in the mirror when I shaved.

At Miriam's home, she offered me some coffee and apple pie, and I went upstairs to use the bathroom while she was doing her kitchen magic. Then I dropped in to see her son Eric. His room was small, with a bed along one side, a homemade desk made from scrap lumber, and other handmade bookshelves. A computer and printer nearly overwhelmed the small desk. Posters of basketball stars and the space shuttle adorned the walls. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at me. "How goes the fall festival?"

"It goes well."

He smirked in that way teenagers do when they think their elders are being silly. "I never thought you'd be doing that, Owen. Working with Mom on the fall festival committee. Deciding how to decorate the town hall. Deciding who's going to be on the cookie committee. Stuff like that must keep you up nights."

"Some day when you're older, I'll let you in on what keeps me up nights," I said. "Look, care to impress me again with computer tricks?"

The smirk on his face turned to an eager smile. "What's going on?"

I went to his desk, scribbled a scrap of paper and handed it to him. "License plate number from Ohio. Any chance you could find out who it belongs to?"

He powered up his computer. "When do you need it?"

"How about an hour?"

He shrugged as he looked at the computer screen. "Doable."

I was glad he couldn't see the expression on my face. "Eric, I was joking."

He shrugged, a little self-confident gesture. "I wasn't."

When the pie and coffee had been enthusiastically consumed, I did the dishes. Just as Eric had observed, Miriam and I were discussing all the details of trying to lure tourists to Pinette's fall festival to admire the foliage and leave a little bit of themselves behind—hopefully in the form of green currency.

Out in the living room, I sat down on the couch and Miriam tripped—over what, I couldn't see—and she ended up sitting in my lap. After a few minutes of nuzzling she said, "Eric's going out tomorrow night for a sleepover. Care for a visitor?"

I held her tight around her waist, enjoying the feel of her hair against my face. "I'd like that very much." There came a cough from upstairs, a door slammed too loudly, and then the loud clomping noise of feet descending the stairway.

"My thoughtful son and his dependable early warning system," she said, getting up.

"May it never go out of service," I said, as Eric joined us. When his mother went to the kitchen to get a piece of pie for my ride home, he said, "Sorry."

"Going to take longer than an hour?"

"Nope. It's not going to take, period."

"I don't understand."

"The license plate number you gave me, Owen. It doesn't exist."

It was a cool night, and my old farmhouse was creaking and groaning as the timbers settled. Usually this sound is comforting but tonight it made me jumpy. It made me think of trespassers hiding out in the woods. It made me think of whispers over a radio. And it made me think of a tall man with a leather jacket by a large R.V. with fake license plates, roaming free in my adopted hometown.

In my bedroom, I took a 9 millimeter Smith & Wesson Model 915 out of the nightstand. I keep it loaded, with a round in the chamber. Not recommended for parents. Highly recommended for small-town exiles with a bloody past.

I went back outside, gun in hand. It made me feel better, but not by much.

Back on Timberswamp Road, the R.V. was gone. The area where it had been was churned and muddied, as though a herd of moose had trooped through. I rolled down the window, letting the cold air in, and looked down at the cracked asphalt of the roadway. I saw some mud ahead. I eased up on the brake and started slowly down the road, with my head out the window. Every few feet or so, there was a splotch of mud on the road, where the soiled wheels marked the R.V.'s progression.

It took about a half hour of slow traveling, with the mud splatters getting fainter and fainter. Once I pulled over as a carful of kids swooped by, honking and yelling at me for poking along and getting in the way of their God-given right to beer, butts, and broads. I rounded one curve and surprised a red fox in the headlights, its thick bushy tail held out proudly. The fox paused for a moment at the side of the road, its eyes bright, and then it dove into the woods. It didn't look scared at all. Soon after that, I lost the trail of mud. I went ahead for a few miles, then turned back, and when I did, spotted something I had missed because of overhanging brush.

A dirt road headed off to one side, and on it were fresh tire marks.

I pulled up closer, saw a metal fence about five feet up the road. A large reflecting sign in the center said NO TRESPASSING. What lay beyond was hidden in the shadows of trees and high brush. I waited, rubbed at my cold face. I was suddenly tired and my hips were beginning to ache, but I switched off the truck's engine and listened.

At first, all I heard were clicking noises as the engine began to cool, and the sound of tree branches rubbing together in the chilly breeze.

Then I heard something else—the hum of machinery, working late.

I looked again at the sign. NO TRESPASSING.

"Sure," I said. "I can take a hint."

The next day, I pulled out a topographical map of Pinette and its three neighboring towns before I went to breakfast at the Pinette General Store. It was crowded inside the store and I was lucky to find a spare stool at the counter. The place was filled with out-of-towners with binoculars and cameras hanging from around their necks and waists. Foliage season, when tourists come to appreciate the brilliant orange, reds, and yellows from our hardwood trees, had just started. Then they leave and we get to spend the next couple of weeks raking up the damn things from our yards.

Miriam gave me a quick smile and, within a few minutes, scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast were placed before me. Besides being the head selectman for the town, she owned this store, did the cooking, and was Pinette's postmistress. During a brief lull, she refilled my coffee cup, her eyes bright and happy at having a busy day. As she turned to start another pot of coffee, I admired the way she filled out her jeans. Then she came back and I said, "Quick question."

"Quick answer," she said. "I am, in fact, wearing a bra."

I think I flushed. I said, "Up beyond Timberswamp Road. There's a place there called Abrams Peak. Any reason why some machinery would be running up there?"

She picked up my empty plate. "Sure. We approved a project there a couple of months ago. There's an abandoned quartz mine about halfway up the hill. Some non-profit New York outfit is building a records storage facility there. You know, climate controlled, for old papers and books and microfilm."

"I don't remember you telling me that," I said.

She gave me an exasperated look. "Well, last week we talked about a bond issue for road construction, and I didn't tell you that either. If you're so eager to be in on the know, why don't you attend a meeting, find out for yourself?"

I raised up my hands in mock surrender. "Okay, I get the

point. This quartz mine, why was it abandoned?"

"Hold on," she said, and went to clear a set of dishes down the counter. When she came back, she said, "Hal Beecher. Started the mine up around 1910. Had problems with a stream that kept flooding him out. Finally got approval to have it blocked, which gave us Beecher's Pond. You know where that is, right? And when that was done and he could finally work the mine, he died of influenza. It was then abandoned. Hell of a story."

"Yes," I said. "That's a hell of a story. This records place, does it mean a bigger budget from the town? You know, all that increased property tax revenue."

A small frown. "Being non-profit, it means we can't tax squat. Which means we need to squeeze another year out of our ten-year-old police cruiser. Ain't government grand?"

I left some money for breakfast and a large tip. As I left, she grabbed me and kissed my ear. "Tonight, okay?"

I smiled. "I can hardly wait."

I decided to play leaf-peeper myself, complete with binoculars, knapsack, water bottle, ham sandwich, and an Audubon nature guide. With the help of the topo map, I walked around Abrams Peak, really just an overgrown hill, filled with hardwoods. I got stuck in a swampy area, watched a few red-winged blackbirds racing around, and I startled a moose, who made a chuffing noise like an old locomotive as he plodded through the mud, heading away from me.

Every now and then, as the wind shifted, I could make out the hum of machinery. At those moments, I regretted leaving my pistol at home. But leaf-peepers, as a rule, don't carry high-powered semi-automatic weapons, and I had a part to play.

I found myself at Beecher's Pond, and walked along the shore, heading east, where I noted that the land leveled. I looked down. For about twelve feet, the ground was narrow and was bounded on one side by the pond, and the other side by a steep drop-off. I got down on my knees and scraped away moss and mud, to find old concrete. A tiny little dam had created Beecher's Pond almost a century ago and made a perfectly lovely picnic spot. Through the overgrowth, I could make out the dried-out streambed, descending down a steep incline. I went on, every now and then using my binoculars to look at birds or leaves, till I reached the paved road. Checking the map, I ambled south, whistling the theme from *Bridge on the River Kwai*. After about fifteen minutes, I reached the place where a dirt road ascended up into the trees, its way blocked by a gate that said NO TRESPASSING.

I kept on whistling as I walked up and around the gate, and then up the dirt road.

There are dirt roads around Pinette that become lanes of knee-deep mud in spring, but this road wouldn't be one of them. It had a nice firm base and was wide, with good drainage on both sides. The sound of machinery grew louder as I went up the road, and then the trees thinned until I was in a large, busy clearing. The ground had been scraped down to dirt and gravel. To my left were about a half-dozen construction vehicles—dump trucks, earth movers, bulldozers—and a number of pickup trucks. Beyond these was a line of trailers that looked like barracks. A line of laundry fluttered in the breeze from one of them. Another, toward the center, was marked LUNCHROOM, and off to the right, a larger trailer was set up with a wooden porch. A sign there said OFFICE. Beyond that, the R.V. from the other night, its wheels no longer muddy, was parked next to a black Jeep Cherokee.

Leading into the hill was a large hole, big enough to drive the construction equipment in and out with no problem. As I advanced, the door to the lunch trailer opened up and about a dozen men came out, laughing and smoking. Most had on hard hats, gray sweatshirts, and muddy dungarees, with equally muddy boots, and they started walking toward the mine's entrance. They looked my way and then ignored me. I did the same to them. I was more interested in the two men who followed the workers out of the lunch trailer. They wore no muddy boots, had no hard hats, but they did have long satchels slung over their backs, as if they were carrying short, stubby skis.

Plus, they both suffered from what appeared to be the same type of hearing loss, since both had little earplugs in their left ear and a wire that disappeared behind their coats. When they spotted me, I smiled and waved. They didn't wave back. Obviously, they hadn't been here long enough to know our Maine ways. One of them talked into his coat sleeve, and then the door to the office trailer flew open.

"Hey there!" came the voice. "Can I help you?"

I turned and walked over, keeping a steady smile on my face, missing my pistol. Standing on the wooden porch of the office trailer was the man from the R.V. He had on jeans and a flannel shirt and sheepskin vest, and he looked mighty pissed off. Then, as I got closer, he recognized me and the little computer inside his head downloaded Smile #3.

"I remember you," he said, leaning over the little porch. "The guy who stopped to help. Thanks again."

I waved a hand. "No problem. I was out doing some birdwatching and decided to check your project. Records storage. Wow, that sounds fascinating. Can you tell me more?"

I could sense the struggle behind that cheerful fake smile. He wanted to tell me to get the hell out of there. He probably wished those two grim men with the weapons would dispose of me in some nearby abandoned cellar. But I was sure one of his many jobs here was not to cause a fuss, so he merely said, "Come on up. The name is Conrad."

"And mine is Owen."

I stepped up onto the porch, making a production of it, using the railing and puffing for breath. I went inside and the sound of the door slamming behind me made me jump.

For the next fifteen minutes Conrad went on about the project, a venture from something called the New England Vital Records Research Foundation, and how records from colonial times to modern microfilm needed a climate-controlled and safe storage area. He gave me a press kit with snappy black and white photos, and a pencil that had NEW ENGLAND VITAL RECORDS RESEARCH embossed on the side. I nodded in the right places, asked a couple of questions, and looked at the trailer.

It was pretty plush for the Maine woods. I could see a tidy little kitchen toward the rear. We were sitting in the office, with desks and chairs, wall clock, and even a little water cooler. Behind Conrad's desk was a communications setup with at least four telephones, an elaborate radio console, and a computer with a flying fish screensaver. At his feet was an overflowing trash basket, and behind me were rows of filing cabinets, all padlocked. Beside them was a shredding machine, with a clear plastic bag that was half full of chewed-up paper scraps.

Quite a setup, but I didn't overdo the surveillance. Conrad was about twenty years younger than me, strong looking, and when we had earlier shaken hands, he gave me one of those testing, macho squeezes that I allowed him to win. I didn't think he was carrying a weapon, but I was confident his desk drawers didn't just contain paper clips and pens.

Then, suddenly, there was a pause in the conversation. I tried to think of another question, but my mind went blank. It was time to go, but I felt as though I'd missed something. "Well," Conrad said, clapping his hands together. "If you'll excuse me, Owen—"

Then one of the phones rang and he muttered, "Hold on," and swiveled around.

Thank you, I thought to the unknown caller. I bent down to unzip my knapsack, so I could shove in the press kit and the photos and the pencil. As I did this I glanced into the wastebasket, at a half-crumpled memo on top. Maybe it would be something extraordinary, something that would reveal what was actually going on here in this abandoned quartz mine. Instead, it concerned an overtime adjustment to a laborer named Edin.

Damn.

I sat up just as Conrad said, "Look, I'll call you back, I can't get into it right now."

Then I gave him my best near-senility smile and said, "Thanks for everything. I should be leaving you be."

It felt good to be outside again. Conrad said, "Sure you know your way back?"

"Yes, I do," I said, noting that the machinery sound from inside the mine was louder.

"Well, in case you've forgotten, it's down that road, past the sign. The sign that says 'No Trespassing.' All right?"

"Sure," I said, shouldering my knapsack. "Thanks for the pencil."

By now his smile was gone. "Not a problem, Mr. Taylor."

Not till I was halfway down the dirt road was I sure they would allow me to live to go home. As I went around the gate, I thought about two things. The first was Conrad's clumsy attempt to startle me by calling me Mr. Taylor, when I had not given him my last name. That was dumb, because it told me—as if I hadn't known—that this was much more than just a job for a research foundation. The second thing was that memo from the wastebasket. It had been pretty innocuous. But nothing on the heading of the memo said anything about the New England Vital Records Research Foundation.

It had been headed Project Argus.

When I got back to the road, I started whistling again. This time, it was the theme from *The Great Escape.*

That afternoon I drove over to Belmont and found Eric out by the high school football field decorating a float for the fall festival. In this part of rural Maine, floats are flatbed trailers, hauled by tractor rigs normally used to bring out logs to the paper mills.

I honked and Eric waved and ambled over from his trailer, which so far boasted only a chicken wire framework. About a half-dozen students clustered around it. The football field was scraggly and the wooden bleachers sagged in the middle and needed paint,

but this high school had at least been spared the wave of violence and idiocy that had washed over parts of this land.

Eric came up and said, "Checking on the floats, festival committee man?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said, letting my elbow rest on the window frame. "You guys going to be ready in time for the parade?"

He grinned. "We're having have fun putting it together even if we don't. What's up?"

I started to speak and then halted. His eyes looked so young, happy. Perhaps it was just paranoia clawing its way to the surface, but why was I involving this kid?

I cleared my throat. Maybe a half second had passed. But even in that brief moment, his face changed. Eric beat me to it. "Another info search?"

"If you've got the time."

"I do, but from your expression, it looks important."

"It is," I said. "But it could be dangerous."

A young grin. "I'll be okay." Young and energetic and confident that nothing could ever happen to him.

"You've got to convince me first," I said. "You can't do this in a way that can be traced back to you. And you've got to work fast. No spending hours online, poking around. How would you do that?"

His eyes left me, staring out in the distance, and his voice changed. "A couple of ways I know can work pretty fast. And untraceable . . . well, I could ride my bike over to Toland. The library's got some terminals. I can log on using their account." He smiled.

"Won't the library know your name?"

His eyes snapped back to me, but the smile was still there. "The librarian there's an old guy. Hates kids, hates computers even more. I have to sign in, but I'll use a fake name. I'll be in and out so quick, he won't remember me or what I was doing. Okay? Convinced?"

No, I thought. Aloud, I said, "All right. Just as long as you do exactly as you say. Make it quick, use a fake name, and don't do anything from your home."

Some voices called out to Eric from the float. I went on. "I need a search on something called Project Argus. Probably government-related, no doubt classified. But sometimes things leak out here and there. During budget hearings. Or from the alternative press."

Eric nodded. "Cool. I'll give it a shot. This afternoon, in fact. Come back around six. There's a pizza party then for us float guys. Okay?"

"That'll be fine."

"Wanna tell me what this all about?"

"No," I said.

Eric grinned again, slapped me on the arm, and strolled toward the float. I reached over to start up the truck, but my fingers had a hard time holding the keys.

The afternoon dragged on like a bout of two A.M. insomnia. I was home for a while, cleaning my guns, then I went over to the general store, but Miriam was having another busy afternoon with the tourists. All I got from her was a quick whisper of "Looking forward to tonight" and a cup of coffee.

When it was near six P.M., all I could give her was a smile as I headed out to see what her son had for me.

What he had wasn't much. I parked in the rear lot of the school and Eric spotted me, shaking his head as he trotted over. Lights from the parking lot made everything look slightly damp. He stood by the window and said, "Spent close to two hours there, which is about as much as I could spare, Owen. If you want, I can do something at home tonight—"

I held up my hand. "Absolutely not. I mean it. Did you get anything?"

He looked a bit ashamed, the boy wizard unmasked. "I went deep, man, I went very deep, and all I got was two words. It was on some government conspiracy web page and there was a listing of different things, and I found a reference to Project Argus. But after that reference, just two words. Here, I wrote it down."

Eric handed over a piece of paper, and I unfolded it and read it by the truck's dome light:

Seathree Survival.

That was it.

Seathree Survival.

I felt as though the truck was moving up and down in a slow-moving earthquake. I crumpled the piece of paper and said, "That's great, Eric. Thanks a lot. Now go inside and enjoy your pizza."

"Sure," he said. "And tell Mom I said hi."

I looked at him. "How do you know I'm seeing her?"

He laughed. "I'm not coming home tonight, that's why. How dumb do you think I am?"

"Not very," I said, and he walked away and into the school, looking young and confident and cheerful again. As he went through the glass doors, I noticed a faded placard on the side of the school wall. It showed a triangular symbol, black and yel-

low. I could barely make out the words. FALLOUT SHELTER.

Damn, I thought. Here we go again.

Later that night my bedroom was filled with the scents of candles, clean sheets, and the particular scent of one special woman. Miriam cuddled at my side. I stared up at the darkened ceiling.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said, squeezing me. "Or ten percent of the Pinette General Store. Whichever is worth more."

"You won't believe me."

"Try me," she said, her voice a bit more insistent.

"Well . . . congratulations, I guess. That's what I was thinking."

She raised herself up on the elbow. The only illumination in my bedroom was starlight, making her look smooth and polished in the night. "Congratulations? Now, that I didn't expect to hear. Perhaps 'Nicely done,' or 'That was great, hope we didn't wake the neighbors,' or even the popular, 'What did you say your name was?' But not congratulations. What's the deal with that?"

I pulled her down and kissed her, then said, "Congratulations. On being a veteran. A veteran of a long and dirty war."

"What war? The one being fought against single moms with kids?"

"No, the Cold War."

"The Cold War!" She giggled and grabbed an ear and twisted it until I yelped. "What brought that on?"

"Oh," I said, trying to keep my voice light. "Sometimes odd memories just pop up. I remember as a kid visiting my uncle out in North Dakota. Out in the middle of his fields were Air Force missile silos. To a kid, it seemed exciting—working a dairy farm and sharing the pastures with nuclear weapons, ready to be launched against the Evil Empire. The front lines of freedom, blah blah blah. Then one night, I was mucking out stalls and talking to my uncle about the missiles. He just stood there, real quiet. Then he talked about how the Air Force came to the county back in the early sixties to ask for property for the national defense, that sort of thing. This was a patriotic part of the country and the Air Force had no problems. But at one of the public meetings, my uncle got up to ask a simple question. If the missiles did launch, how would his cows be affected? Would they be off their milking? And the Air Force guy laughed at him, just laughed at him."

Miriam's breathing was slow and even, but she was listening. I went on. "The Air Force guy said something like, sir, if the missiles launch, your cows will be the least of your worries, because your nation will be at war. That's when it struck him. By doing his patriotic duty, he had just drawn a big target circle around his

farm. A place that had been in his family for over a century. And he told me he had regretted that every minute and every hour since that day. I didn't sleep well that summer. Every time there was a thunderstorm, I imagined the silos opening up and the missiles being launched, and that in a matter of minutes everything would disappear as the ground melted around us."

"You know," she whispered, "one summer I was at Girl Scout camp, up north near Limestone. A beautiful place, on a lake with lots of woods around, and plenty to do, like arts and crafts and canoeing and campfires at night. But the place was a mile or so away from an Air Force base that had a wing of B-52s, and sometimes we'd see one of those big bombers gliding in or taking off. One of the girls, her dad had been a navigator on one of the bombers. She told us that sometimes the Air Force base would have a practice alert, where all the bombers would take off, one right after another, and she said we should check the time. Fifteen minutes, she said, fifteen minutes would be all we would have."

"Fifteen minutes for what?" I asked.

"To know if we would live or die," she said simply. "You see, if it was a real scramble, then that meant missiles had been detected coming in, and that they had fifteen minutes to launch all of their aircraft. Fifteen minutes until the world ended. And if the world didn't end in fifteen minutes, then you knew it was a practice drill. Sure enough, late one night, we heard the jets going overhead, flying low and fast, making the plywood walls of our cabins shake. I was on a cot and looked at my glow-in-the-dark watch, and I counted down the minutes. An eleven-year-old girl, counting down the minutes to the end of the world, tears running down her cheeks. Can you believe that? Eleven years old and worrying about a nuclear war."

I said nothing, just gently rubbed her back. Miriam said, "That's what you meant by congratulations, right? Congratulations that we all made it, made it through all of those fifteen-minute countdowns, all through the past decades."

"C'ose enough," I said, remembering what Eric had found. Seathree Survival.

As if she were reading my mind, she said, her voice now sleepy, "Even with what's going on with terrorism, thank God we and Eric don't have to worry about that anymore. Fallout shelters and civil defense and duck under the school desk. All that horrible stuff you and I had to grow up with. The end of the world. All those cities destroyed. Thank God it's gone."

"Yes," I whispered. "Thank God."

Later, the bedroom grew warm and stuffy, and I got up to open a window. Some of the leaves were beginning to fall early and I could see farther into the distance. I could make out the shape of Abrams Peak to the north. I stood there, feeling the cool air drift across my skin, staring at the lights up there on the dark hill. As the wind shifted, I could even make out the thumping and grinding machinery, hard at work through the night.

I stared until I couldn't stand it any more, then crawled back into what was once a safe and quiet bed and listened to the gentle slumber of Miriam next to me.

The noise of the machinery throbbed in my head for hours.

Now that I've adjusted to rural life, I know that fall is the time to cut and split wood for next winter, fix the holes and washouts in the gravel driveway, and get the yard ready for the first heavy snows.

It's also a frequent time for the routine visits I get from my handlers.

The day after Miriam's visit, a dark blue Ford LTD came up the gravel driveway, as I sat on the granite steps leading into the house, sharpening the teeth of my chain saw, and thinking over the previous day. A man in a dark gray suit got out carrying a briefcase. His white hair looked thinner from the last time I had seen him and I nodded in his direction as he came to me.

"Special Agent Cameron, Federal Bureau of Investigation," I said. "There, I saved you about ten seconds. Is it time for your inspection, so soon?"

He stood there, and I looked up again and saw that he was almost embarrassed. "Sorry, Owen," he said. "I was asked to bring someone along. Not my call."

I put down my tools, and a black Jeep Cherokee came up the gravel driveway and parked behind the LTD. The door opened up and the man who called himself Conrad stepped out, dressed as before, in jeans and sheepskin vest.

I looked over at Agent Cameron. "If I made a wild-ass guess and assumed that you two are paid by the same government, would I be wrong?"

Agent Cameron said, "Listen to what he has to say, Owen. That's all I ask. Listen."

With that, Agent Cameron returned to his LTD. Conrad walked right past me, into the house. If I had been younger and stronger, I might have killed him before he got to the kitchen.

But I let him live and followed him inside.

Once inside, he sat down and sprawled his muddy boots on my clean floor. "My, my," Conrad said, smiling with not a hint of warmth on his face. "I wondered why you were sniffing around my little project—imagine how surprised I was when the trail led to the FBI."

"Yeah, imagine," I said, sitting down across from him. "What do you want?"

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"I don't think so," I said.

That damn plastic smile was still there. "I've read your record, Owen." He looked around at the cluttered counter and the cracked linoleum. "Must have been a hell of a thing, at the top of your game, traveling around the world, solving problems here and there with heavy weaponry. And then to end up in East Buttocks, growing older and older, in a sentencing deal with the Feds. Is this what you dreamed retirement would be?"

"Whatever it is, it's a hell of a lot better than yours will be."

"Oh, I doubt that. Look. See this?"

He reached into the sheepskin and pulled out a small photo, which he slid across the table. I picked it up. Three stark brick buildings stood on a narrow road, large, flat fields behind them. The photo was somewhat overexposed. "Your childhood home?"

"Nope. It's a place called Arena, Texas. Average temperature during the summer, more than a hundred degrees. Average temperature in the winter, about ten. Population, about twenty. Nearest large town, two hours away. Get the picture, Owen?"

I gently put the photo down. "What are you doing up there?"

"Why do you care?" he said. "What matters is that you butt out. Understood?"

"Command, communications, control," I said. "Known in defense circles as C-Three, the three essential elements in managing a conflict. That's what you're building up there in the mine shaft, right? A secret C-Three facility. A survival bunker in case of nuclear war. And while it's being built, you need a backup communications system. Like that enormous van you were driving the other night."

The smile flickered, as if the computer inside his mind had received a temporary power surge. I felt a tiny victory.

"Nicely done," he said. "That FBI guy said you were sharp."

"What's the point, Conrad?" I asked. "Why are you guys here? Aren't there enough shelters already spread around the country?"

Without the smile, his face looked harsh. "Sure," he snapped. "Dozens of them, everywhere from Alaska to Alabama. Highly classified, prepared to do their job. Then the Soviet Union broke

up and the White House idiots a few years back thought the world would now sit in a circle and sing Kumbaya, so they were declassified. Years of work gone in seconds. One shelter in Virginia, hidden at a resort, was designed to protect the entire Congress in case of war. And it appears on the nightly news! Before that night was over, how many foreign missiles and bombers had their targeting shifted to that resort, do you think? How many terrorists laughed at us and started working on scenarios?"

I looked at his face, mottled with anger. "So you're building new ones," I said. "Who's the enemy this time? The Chinese? The Saudis? The Russians, again?"

He raised a hand. "Or the French. Who cares? Just look at the headlines. China. North Korea. Somalia. The war on terror will get wrapped up one of these years, and when that happens, it'll be time for the usual nation-state conflict to come back to the fore. In the real world, it's high time to rebuild the shelter system. You, of all people, should know what's required for defense."

"Maybe so," I said. "But what about the people in this town? What about their rights? Maybe they don't want to live in a place that's a potential target. Maybe they don't want a government bomb shelter up the road, a shelter that might have a missile or bomber aimed at it. When did the people here have a choice?"

"If you live in this country, you've got to expect to put up with defense."

"Even if that means waking up to find out you're living on ground zero? When it means slick guys like you come in and lie through your teeth about what's really going on?"

He shrugged as though an irritating insect had buzzed past him. "Not my problem. My problem is making sure that this project is completed on time. And if you get an urge to do something rash, like writing a letter to the local paper or your congressman, just remember this, okay?"

With that, he tapped the photo of Arena, Texas, and departed, leaving his muddy tracks behind on my kitchen floor. I should have cleaned them up before they dried, but instead I picked up the photo and stared at it for a long while.

A couple of days later, the First Annual Pinette Fall Festival got off to a rousing start, and I stood next to Miriam, holding her hand, looking at the crowds around us. She had on a black, ankle-length wool coat and a red scarf, and a cold breeze made the color of her cheeks almost as bright as the scarf. Her eyes were laughing and she squeezed my hand tight as the small parade went by,

announcing the start of the festival. Someone must have done a terrific job in publicizing the event. More people crowded the town common than I had ever seen before, and I recognized only a few locals among the tourists and out-of-towners.

The parade was led by the solitary and rusting police cruiser in Pinette, driven by Chief Gramby, who's perpetually a month away from retiring. Behind him was the loud and wonderfully out-of-tune regional high school band, followed by the high school sports teams. Miriam leaned in and said, "Look! There's Eric! Right there!"

As captain of the basketball team he was in the front row, wearing his letter jacket with the white C sewn into the collar, and then a group of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts followed. All about the common, little stalls sold hot cider and woodcarvings, blown glass and hand-knit gloves and mittens. It was a pretty sight. I should have felt content with being part of this small town, fighting its way into the new century, striving to make a good living for its residents. But I didn't feel content, not at all, and every now and then I would look up to the north, thinking of the lies, the deceit, the underhanded way those people had come into my town.

The floats went by, hauled by huge dump trucks that smelled of diesel oil and pine tree sap, and children from a nursery school followed. They were dressed for Halloween and most of the costumes were too long, dragging along the pavement. There was applause and laughter from the crowd, as the young witches and scarecrows and clowns went by. Bringing up the rear, holding a trick-or-treat bag almost as big as she was, a little girl dressed as a skeleton struggled to catch up. She looked up and caught my eye and waved, and I waved back, and suddenly I had to close my eyes.

My eyes remained closed, but behind my lids I still saw the common. Such a nice day. A small-town fair.

A day with no warning.

In my mind, from the north came a flash, brighter than the sun. The bright clothing on people's bodies burst into flames. The wooden houses and the little stalls smoldered and burned, but they didn't burn for long, as the shockwave blasted through. The town hall collapsed in a pile of brick rubble. The steeple of the Congregational church swayed, then splintered as it fell over. Windows shattered, broken glass scything through helpless bodies. Cars overturned, telephone poles shuddered and snapped as the gale force from the shockwave increased. The smoke grew thicker and thicker, obscuring everything, as trees on hills and mountains miles away burned and burned. The smoke seemed to last forever.

When the smoke did finally clear, it was snowing, but the snow was a hellish combination of soot and ashes. Fallout, a tiny part of my mind observed. Fallout from the blast site. Around me were piles of burnt wood and scorched bricks and crumpled vehicles. The snow turned to a thick sleet that made a small creek down Main Street, a black ooze. A scrawny, mangy dog came limping through with a bone in its bloody mouth, a bone that looked like a human tibia, but small, as if it belonged to a child, a very young girl.

A squeeze of the hand brought me back.

Engine One of the Pinette Volunteer Fire Department, sirens blasting, brought up the rear as the parade came to a noisy end. People streamed away from the sidewalks, heading over to the stalls on the common. I looked for the girl in the skeleton costume, but she was gone. Miriam squeezed my hand again. She leaned in, her face concerned.

"Are you all right?"

I couldn't answer. I smiled and nodded. She smiled back at me and then rested her head on my shoulder. "When you're around, I feel so safe," she said.

I found my voice. "Really?"

"Really."

"I'm glad," I said.

She kissed my ear. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to cut a ribbon or some damn thing."

And I watched her until she was lost in the crowd.

Later, Miriam threw a celebratory party for the festival committee, but I begged off, saying I had a headache, which was partly true. Instead, I went down to my basement to rummage through the contents of a well-hidden safe that held souvenirs from my previous life. While I was there, I thought about the parade and the town and what Miriam had said.

When you're around, I feel so safe.

Safe.

I gathered some supplies, and went back upstairs. When I let myself out the kitchen door the last thing that caught my eye, lying on the table, was the photo of a town in Texas.

It was a cold night, and my knees and hips ached as I moved as quietly as I could through the woods around Abrams Peak. I had a flashlight in my knapsack but left it there, knowing that there had to be guards. Instead, I used night-vision goggles, which

allowed me to see through a ghostly green glow. I bumped into trees a few times—I had no peripheral vision with them on. Once I disturbed a deer resting in a shallow depression on a slight slope, and she bounded away, her white tail up.

When I got to the thin line of woods near the clearing where the construction trailers and vehicles were parked, I put away the night-vision goggles. Glaring floodlights lit everything with an odd yellow glow. The throbbing of the machinery inside the mine seemed to make my feet quiver, and I realized my hands were shaking. Maybe it was the cold. Sure. Maybe Conrad, planning for another doomsday, always planning another war, was right. Maybe I should stay home, and pretend nothing was going on.

Then I closed my eyes. Saw that girl again in the parade, and then I heard Miriam's voice. *With you around, I feel so safe.*

I took a deep breath and ran across the opening of the clearing, heading to the line of vehicles.

When I got there I threw myself underneath one of the dump trucks, waiting, breathing hard. The ground was cold and hard against my chest and hands, and there was a strong smell of diesel fuel. I waited and looked out across the clearing as best as I could. Nobody moved. Except for the lights and the sound of the machinery, the place seemed deserted. Maybe everyone was asleep. After all, this was the deep backwoods of Maine. What could possibly go wrong?

"Lots," I whispered, and eased myself out. I was between two parked dump trucks, out of direct view. I felt my way down to the side of the truck and found the fuel cap. I started to untwist it, but it wouldn't budge. I looked closer.

Locked.

All right, maybe they had planned for a few eventualities. So had I. I went to work on the lock with an instrument that is illegal in most states, and within a few seconds I had the cap undone. When I reached into my open knapsack, I heard a faint crunching sound. I looked up, saw nothing, but when I went back into the knapsack, something cold and metallic pressed against the back of my neck.

"Freeze," came a confident voice. "Move and we'll whack the shit out of you."

"Huh?" I said, turning my head just a bit, and the voice said, "Okay, you asked for it," and I fell to my hands and knees as something pounded into my back. I tried to roll over to protect myself, but I didn't move fast enough, and the blows kept on coming, each one harder and harder.

Long, bloody, painful minutes later, I was in the office trailer handcuffed to a chair, my feet manacled. I could feel blood trickling down my chin and I couldn't breathe through my nose. Conrad was sitting before me, rummaging through my knapsack, pulling items out and placing them on his office desk. I looked up at the clock. It was ten minutes to three in the morning.

Conrad looked over at me, made a production of sighing. "I warned you, Owen. I warned you specifically. Leave us alone or you'll be sent to that shithole in Texas. Well, I hope you packed your bags, because you'll be leaving at first light. Guaranteed."

I said nothing, breathed through my mouth. My teeth seemed okay, but I'd bitten my tongue. Conrad said, "We had you the minute you went past the treeline. Videotaped you. Did you think you could really stop us?"

I swallowed blood and saliva, thought for a moment about dear Miriam. "I had to do something. Had to protect the people here from the likes of you."

He grinned. "With this? Some tampons and bags of sugar? To dump in the fuel tanks? Old man, you could have disabled those trucks and every earthmover out there, and it wouldn't have made a difference. Not a bit. We're here to stay, and there's nothing you can do about it." He leaned forward to look me over. "I guess our security force was a bit overeager, but you can't blame them. They don't have much to do, day in and day out."

"I guess not." I looked up at the clock. It was now five minutes to three.

Conrad laughed and said, "I can hardly wait to—"

"Shut up, will you?"

He was still smiling. "What did you say?"

"I said shut up. And you need to answer an important question. Do you have people working the mine right now?"

"Of course, and why do you care?"

I nodded up to the clock. "Because you have five minutes to get everybody out, that's why."

He wasn't smiling any more. "Go on."

"In five minutes, the entire contents of Beecher's Pond is going to be coming through what's left of a dam up there, and right into the mouth of your mine and brand-new bomb shelter. Several million gallons of water. All coming here in . . . well, now, it's about four minutes."

His face seemed to pale. "You're bluffing. You shit, you're bluffing."

I tried to shrug but it was too painful. "You said you read my

records. Surely you noticed that in addition to firearms and knives, I've also worked with explosives."

He stared at me, and I was sure that if he had a knife or a gun or a knitting needle handy, he would have killed me on the spot. Instead he swore and swung in his chair and pounded a round red switch on the radio console with his fist, and as he got out of the chair and ran to the door, a horn started blaring, over and over again, a deep-pitched wail that raised the hair on the back of my neck.

I suppose it was too much to think about Conrad unlocking me from the chair, so I yelled out after him, but by then he was gone. Damn. This hadn't been part of the plan. The horn was blaring so loud I couldn't make out the sound of the explosive charges, set so carefully in and around that nearly century-old concrete dam.

But when I looked up at the clock and saw that it was now one minute past three o'clock in the morning, another sound started. It started first as a vibration against the soles of my feet, and then it escalated, a rumbling that sounded like a train barreling down the side of the hill. Soon the entire trailer was shaking and I was trying hard to free myself from the chains and handcuffs, but I had been too well fastened. I tried to think about where the trailer was located, if it was in the path of the old streambed, how high off the ground it was, and how securely it had been placed, and while I was thinking that, the water struck.

The creaking of timbers and metal made my teeth ache, and then the trailer tilted and began a slow spin, and my chair slid to the left, striking a table, and the water cooler tumbled into my lap. I yelped as the water splashed over me and yelped again as something flew off the wall and struck my head. I bit my tongue for the second time and tried to shake off the pain while the trailer creaked and groaned. Then it stopped moving, still upright.

The horn was still blaring, over and over again. The rumbling noise eased out, until it was just the sound of water rushing by. The trailer door slammed open and Conrad strode in, fists clenched, eyes narrowed, his pants soaked up to the waist. He slammed another switch, and the alarm stopped. The sound of water rushing grew more distinct. I smiled up at him.

"Gee, look at that," I said. "I've done gone and wet myself."

He didn't smile back. He came over and slammed his fist into me, and I made a production of falling on the floor.

It didn't work. He started kicking again and only stopped when I called out, "How brave, how noble, to beat up a chained man."

He hauled me upright in the chair, and I grunted as the chains bit into my wrists and ankles. He was breathing hard. He said, "If

it wasn't for witnesses who saw you come in here, you'd be dead right now."

"Let's hear it for witnesses," I said, touching my teeth with my bleeding tongue. Another small victory. All my teeth seemed accounted for.

"You . . . you realize what's going to happen to you, don't you? You'll be lucky if you end up in that Texas shithole, my friend, because I'm going to see that—"

I spat some blood, aiming for him, but I missed. "Oh, shut up and let me go. It's the only thing you can do, and you know it."

He folded his arms, gave me a cheery little smile, like a guy who goes to Newfoundland on vacation just so he can club baby seals. "And what makes you think that, old man?"

"Because I'm an old man. Look. You have a choice of two stories coming out of this trailer when you give your report. The first story is about an old man you let onto this property twice without reprimand. And this old man, under your nose, destroyed a government project worth . . . well, millions. Right? How's your career going to look after that story gets out, Conrad? That's story number one."

By now I had his attention so completely that his eyes looked as though they could bore holes through my skull. "And story number two?"

"Story number two is much easier for all concerned. An old dam weakened and burst and flooded you guys out. I came to warn you. And you got the warning in time to sound the alarm. See? You're a hero. Your career gets a boost and you find some other town to target. Not this one And I stay here, because if I stay here story number two remains our little secret."

"You bastard," he said simply.

There were more threats and harsh words and even another fist in my face, but at daybreak I found myself limping down the dirt access road, heading for home.

I tried to whistle something appropriate, but my mouth hurt too much.

A week later Miriam came to dinner. She clucked over my healing wounds—a nasty tumble down the cellar stairs, I told her. And she mentioned that the New England Vital Records Research Foundation had abandoned their work site after the dam at Beecher's Pond had failed. She said the property owners around the pond were understandably upset to find out that their waterfront lots now fronted a field of mud, and I said, "You know, all that excavation work they were doing undoubtedly weakened the

dam and caused the flood. Your town attorney might want to look into that. You could almost certainly get those guys to pay for a new dam plus damages."

"Really?" she had said. "You think so?"

I said, "I can practically guarantee it." And I smiled, though my mouth still hurt.

Now we were in my bedroom and she slumbered behind me, as I went over to the window, looking out. It was warm in the room and I had just opened the window, when Miriam came behind me and gave me a hug. Her hair tickled my ear and she said, "You know, that fall festival was so successful, we were thinking about a Christmas festival in a couple of months. What do you think about that?"

"Christmas?" I asked.

"Sure, Christmas," she said, laughing. "You know, peace on earth, good will to men, all that great stuff. You know what I mean?"

I looked up at the shape of Abrams Peak, now empty and quiet, not a light to be seen or a sound of machinery to be heard. Nothing was there now, nothing at all. I reached my arms to the rear and gave her a quick hug.

"Sure," I said. "Peak on earth. Good will to men. I know exactly what you mean."

CONVERSATION WITH

BRENDAN DUBOIS

New Hampshire writer Brendan DuBois has been publishing in AHMM and our sister magazine, EQMM, for more than fifteen years. His novels include both stand-alone thrillers and a series featuring Lewis Cole, a former agent for the Department of Defense now settled in a small, seaside New Hampshire town, who, says DuBois, "has a thirst for justice that sometimes gets him into trouble." For information about Mr. DuBois, go to www.BrendanDubois.com.

AHMM: You have two books coming out almost back to back, a stand alone and another in the Lewis Cole series. Tell us about them.

BD: *Betrayed* is my third stand-alone thriller, following *Resurrection Day* and *Six Days*. It features Jason Harper, a forty-something small-town newspaper editor in Maine, with a wife, a young boy, and pet Labrador retriever. His life is near-perfect, except late one night, the doorbell rings, and at the door, dressed in ragged clothes and with a dirty hair and full beard, is a man claiming to be his brother Roy. Roy had been a B–52 pilot who was shot down

over North Vietnam, and ever since he has been reported missing in action. Now, not only has Roy shown up alive, nearly three decades later, but he also has an incredible tale concerning the ultimate fate of some of America's missing in action from the Vietnam War.

My new Lewis Cole novel, *Buried Dreams*—the fifth in the series—is completed and in the hands of my editor at St. Martin's Press. This novel features a mystery involving long-hidden Viking artifacts found on the coastline of New Hampshire, their subsequent discovery and disappearance, and the murder of the amateur archaeologist who found them.

AHMM: How did the character of Lewis Cole come about?

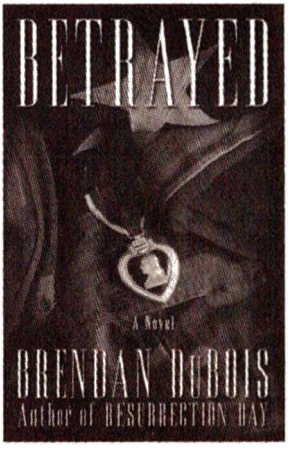
BD: While some readers have suggested that Lewis is based on myself, I always say that he's taller than me, better looking, and more brave. Having said that, he and I do share similar interests, in history, science, and justice. As a survivor of a secret government biowarfare experiment years earlier, Cole's left with a long-term disability, and a long-term thirst for justice.

AHMM: Many of your stories are set in your native New Hampshire and exhibit a strong sense of place. How is place significant for you as a writer?

BD: As a native New Hampshire writer, I've always been in love with my home state. Though it's still fairly rural, it's close enough to Boston to sometimes experience the stresses and challenges of "big city" life. Yet I find that some of my best stories take place in small communities, where the conflicts of people take on an added punch: one wouldn't expect criminal activities to take place in such beautiful and scenic places, but they do . . . and I enjoy writing about it.

AHMM: And space exploration seems to be a running theme in many of your novels. Why?

BD: I've been interested in astronomy and space exploration for as long as I can remember. These themes often crop up in my novels and short stories, and I own a nice telescope that I take out on occasion to observe the moon, planets, and other astronomical objects. I'm also a strong advocate of manned space exploration, and was quite saddened earlier this year by the loss of the space shuttle Columbia and her crew.



THE LESSER EVIL

L. A. WILSON, JR.

The wind was relentless. It was always relentless in September when tropical depressions, born in the Caribbean, howled up the East Coast. Buildings trembled from explosions of thunder, and families hid in darkness illuminated only by searing bursts of lightning. Marble-sized hail peppered windows, cracked some, and shattered others. The rain was a blessing. It signaled that the worst of the storm had passed over. The torrential downpour would also soon pass, and the fiery heat of the sun would, once again, make everything as it was.

The cascading waters rushed across the streets and the empty parking lot of the deserted strip mall nestled close to I-95. There was no one to see the waters merge into an expanding stream covering the streets and soaking into the adjacent fields. There was no one to see the tiny river of red that merged into the larger flow of water until it was diluted into nothingness. The water washed away the dirt and debris that accumulated during the dry season. It washed away secrets. It washed away sins.

Regina Ivey was a pretty young woman. Sometimes I wondered where the hell she had come from. Nobody else in our family was that beautiful. I sat in the North Carolina church with the remnants of my family, who had gathered from hundreds of miles for the marriage of my youngest cousin. Impatient rumblings murmured throughout the church. The groom and best man had entered the sanctuary, left, re-entered, and left again. The wedding was over an hour late. Finally, a visibly shaken gentleman made his way to the pulpit.

"Something terrible has happened," he announced. "Something . . . terrible has happened," he repeated. His voice cracked and he sobbed, bringing the congregation to rigid attention.

Reverend Benjamin Rhodes had been killed, his battered body

found in an alley behind a local strip mall. Initial appearances indicated that he had been beaten to death.

"Hey, Albert. What's your cousin gon' do about the wedding?" Sheriff Isaac Johnson asked when he saw me approaching.

"They're gonna postpone it until after Ben's funeral. Is this where they found him?"

"Yeah. Looks like he met somebody here. That's his car over there. It's clean. Not much here. The storm probably washed away anything that might help us. You want to take a look? I'm always happy to get the help of a big city policeman."

Isaac always deadpanned his lines so it was difficult to tell if he was serious or just being sarcastic. I couldn't escape who I was—Big Al Ivey from the Atlanta Police Department. Here in Roanoke Rapids, I sought the comfort of returning to the identity of Albert Lee, whose only demand was the affection of friends and family. Such fortune seemed beyond my grasp, however.

Isaac was right. There was nothing much to see, just a few bloodstains on the pavement that had been directly under the body and untouched by the rain.

"I didn't know he was a minister until I got the invitation," I said.

"Well, yeah, he said he found God about five years ago," Isaac replied with a humorless chuckle. "I know what you're thinking. I said the same thing. He's the last man on earth you would expect to end up preaching after all that wine he used to drink when we were growing up. I think he really did turn his life around. He married Susie Hampton, you know, our yearbook queen."

"I thought she was already married."

"Widow. Husband died from prostate cancer. Ben had fifty dollars in his wallet, Albert. Nobody tried to rob him. They beat the crap out of him. I mean they wanted to kill him, and they wanted him to hurt before he died."

Ben Rhodes and I were in the first grade together. Isaac was there along with a host of others, most of whom left Roanoke Rapids in search of better opportunities. Some came back after a time when segregation had ended and newer generations were more civil to each other. A few stayed in this rural community and tried to make life better here. Ben Rhodes had been one of the latter. He went through a drunken, brawling, womanizing phase in his youth, then he became a farmer, a brick mason, a carpenter, a mechanic, and finally a preacher.

"Who found the body, Isaac?" I asked.

"Roanoke Rapids police."

I responded with a frown, and he apparently felt the need to explain.

"This is technically outside their jurisdiction, but the city limits stop about fifty feet over there, so sometimes they just cruise through to make sure everything's all right. As soon as they found the body, they called me. We don't have any real jurisdictional conflicts."

Ben's car was unlocked and seemed to harbor nothing unusual except an open glove compartment. It was a 1955 Chevy Bel Air that he had apparently spent a lot of time refurbishing. The glove compartment held an ancient owner's manual, registration card, various coupons, and some crumpled pastel church stationery with praying hands on the letterhead. I shut the compartment and it fell open again. After slamming it shut three times, it finally caught.

The rain was a blessing. It washed away secrets. It washed away sins.

After spending an hour perusing the scene, I had to give Isaac the bad news. He needed the state crime lab desperately. He was going to need fibers, chemical analysis, and anything else they could come up with to get him through this one.

Susie Rhodes hugged me warmly. She smiled, but her eyes were red from crying. We sat in Isaac's office reminiscing because neither of us wanted to talk about death. I said something lame about how she hadn't changed since high school, and it let us both know that we had run out of ploys to avoid the real issue.

"I don't know if I can take any more, Albert Lee. I've lost two husbands. You remember Rabbit, don't you. We got married right after you left for college. Cancer ate him up. He didn't even look like himself when he died. Poor Ben. Did you see him, Albert?" Her voice broke into pitiful sobs. "I couldn't even tell it was his face."

Isaac came in and consoled her. He was better at that than I was. He had a uniformed officer with him who looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't recall a name.

"You remember Randall Coleman, don't you, Albert? He found Ben's body."

"A lot of years and fifty pounds ago," Randall grinned as he stuck out his hand.

He was a big man with salt-and-pepper hair and one of those

painfully gregarious handshakes. I still struggled to remember him, and my face must have reflected it.

"You were about four years ahead of me in school," he explained. "You were one of the big boys. Didn't have much for us youngsters to do."

I tried to retrieve the memory, but it was hopeless.

"You find anything at the scene?" I asked.

"I didn't touch anything. I called county as soon as I saw the body. I just stuck around until they got there to make sure nothing was disturbed. He must have been killed after-hours because nobody around there heard or saw anything."

Randall gave his condolences to Susie, spoke briefly to Isaac, then left.

"You got something on your mind?" Isaac asked. He apparently watched my eyes follow Randall out of the building.

"Isn't he wearing a bit too much brass to be patrolling strip malls?"

"Shorthanded," Isaac explained. "This ain't Atlanta. Nobody's chomping at the bit to be a small-town cop. Besides, Randall ain't that swift; he owes a lot of favors to be where he is. That'll keep you doin' things you wouldn't ordinarily do."

"Hmmph." Grunting was an acceptable way of acknowledging a remark without committing to its veracity. Isaac looked at me with a raised eyebrow but left it alone. "I'm going over to the mall and talk to the store owners."

"Randall already said nobody saw anything," Isaac reminded me.

"Yeah, I heard him."

Extracting information from acquaintances is an exercise in frustration. Every conversation is preceded by memories of distant events and childhood recollections. It saps time in prolonged gulps.

"Lawd, I remember when your mama was teaching over at Chaloner. My daughter finished there. You probably don't remember her."

"Mrs. Jackson . . ." I attempted to interrupt.

"You got to take a plate of this barbecue. You don't owe me nothin'. You just like one of my children."

"What time did you leave last night?" I tried again.

"Oh, I left early—about six o'clock. I didn't want to get caught in that storm. I opened up early, though. I was here when Randall Coleman found him. It's the worst thing I ever saw."

"So the city police usually checks on you all."

"Sure, for what it's worth. Nothin' ever happens, so there's nothin' to check on. At least that's the way it was until now. I'm sure glad it was Mr. Coleman that found him instead of them young boys that usually come around. Y'all probably gon' catch 'em quick, cause he was thorough. Went through the car and everything, just like on television."

I ate the barbecue and let her ramble. She was a nonstop motormouth. When I finally left, I noticed a city police car at a service station just inside the city limits sign. Maybe he was buying gas, but he wasn't pumping any. I drove past slowly and checked my rearview mirror. The car didn't move. Maybe I was getting paranoid. I reminded myself that in a town this small it wasn't necessary to follow a person to find out where he was going.

There was peace in the world after all. It floated around me, lifted me up, and cradled me gently in clouds of slumber. Then something painful pushed away the clouds, reminding me that peace never lasts.

"Albert! Wake up!"

The pounding at my motel door was constant and unyielding. It was three A.M., and if I had a gun I would have shot Isaac.

"I thought you big city boys liked this hard-core police work," he deadpanned. "You remember Leon Watkins? I'm going to pick him up. Thought you'd like to ride with me."

Two people sat in the back of his car. Isaac introduced them as Walter Clay and his sister Ina. Ina had a black eye and scattered facial bruises interspersed among the scars from prior altercations. She looked hard and uncompromising and rode with her arms folded across her chest defensively. Walter wanted Leon arrested for assaulting his sister. He said Ina had been seeing Leon for the past few months and that he beat her up and threw her out for no reason at all. I thought her appearance was enough to throw her out.

I had known Leon since high school, and he had no problem at all beating up women. Leon was destined to be a criminal, trained for it, and looked forward to it. I had never had a problem with Leon growing up. I suspect I was always too big for him to intimidate. I looked at Ina again and unconsciously shook my head in disbelief. Maybe Leon's standards had plummeted over the years, but I was just along for the ride. I really didn't care.

Isaac pulled into The Pines, a little nightclub out in the middle of nowhere, and I knew immediately why he was there.

Leon had been selling dope for years, but kept his base of operations inside the city limits in a section that used to be called Colored Town during the era of segregation. The kinder, gentler government of the nineties still didn't care enough about that section of town to waste any resources on cleaning it up. As the county's first black sheriff, Isaac felt an obligation to eradicate trash like Leon. Leon, however, was certainly not short on intelligence and floated between the county and city jurisdictions without leaving any incriminating trails. Now it looked like Leon had made a mistake. He allegedly assaulted a woman in Isaac's domain.

The club was dimly lit with only a few scattered couples occupying the tables. A cluster of regulars hunched over drinks at the bar while the jukebox blared out gut-bucket blues.

Isaac walked in and gestured for Walter and his sister to stay behind him. Leon was seated at a table at the far end of the room. He stood as he saw Isaac approach, and his two male companions moved away from him and to the bar. I walked to the side and flanked Leon, keeping a direct line of vision on his two associates at the bar.

"You got a gun on you, Leon?" Isaac asked as he allowed his hand to rest on the butt of his pistol.

Leon didn't answer.

"You better put it on the table," Isaac said.

"What's this about, Isaac?" Leon asked. His eyes darted from Isaac to me as I moved closer to him.

"That you, Albert?" He squinted at me in the dim light, and a curious smile crept across his face. "Goddamn! I heard you was a big-time policeman in Hotlanta!"

"Yeah, that's right, Leon."

"You have the right to remain silent . . ." Isaac began reading him his rights.

Walter stood behind Isaac and glowered. Ina still kept her arms folded.

"I'm arresting you, Leon." Isaac threw the cuffs on the table beside him. "Cuff him for me, Albert."

"You done lost your damn mind, Isaac," Leon complained.

"Walter says you've been going with his sister, beat her up and threw her out."

"You believe that?" Leon laughed. "What the hell you charging me with?"

"It ought to be hunting booga-bears out of season if you've been screwing that bitch," I said.

Leon was suddenly speechless. Isaac's jaw went slack.

"What the hell do you mean, you sonuvabitch!" Walter pushed past Isaac and rushed toward me. I picked up Leon's gun when he was only four feet away.

"Don't make me put a bullet in your ass," I warned.

"This piece of trash beat my little sister. Look at her! Look at what he did!"

"Take Ina home before somebody decides to search her and bust her for possession."

Maybe Walter didn't know what I was getting at, but Ina sure did. She started to back toward the door, but she still didn't unfold her arms.

"When you get her in the light, take a look at her arms."

"You goin' along with this, Isaac?" he asked.

Isaac looked bewildered, and I felt guilty. I had made a play on Isaac and left him hanging. He wanted some hard-core police work, so I let him see some. He whispered some type of apology to Walter and had them wait at the entrance.

He was seething when he approached me and about two seconds from chewing my ass out.

"I ain't screwed an ugly woman in at least twenty years, Albert," Leon smirked. "I see you picked up on that."

"But you'll sell 'em dope, won't you?"

"Everybody knows I sell dope, Albert. That ain't no news. Hey, I heard you was in town, man. Your cousin was getting married. She a sweet woman, Albert. You know I been watchin' her."

"Watch your mouth now."

"Naw, naw. It ain't like that."

Isaac picked up the handcuffs and started toward Leon, but I waved him off.

"You can't arrest me for nothin', Isaac. I'm just talking. You ain't got no evidence."

"I just cut you some slack, Leon," I said. "You'd better chill. You know everything going on around here. Who do you think killed Ben Rhodes?"

Isaac's jaw went slack again. Leon's face tightened.

"Why you askin' me?"

"I just told you."

"I didn't do it."

"I didn't say you did."

Leon sat down and started fidgeting, wringing his hands.

"Ben was a wild sonuvabitch before he found Jesus," Leon began. "Maybe he left some loose ends."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, man! Damn!"

"You know, Leon, Isaac can probably bust Ina on possession. Don't give me that crap-eating grin. I promise you I can find some dope on her if I want to. If Ina has to choose between doing time and telling where she bought her dope, I'm betting she will happily call your name."

"We been knowing each other since grade school, Albert. I thought you were my friend," Leon pleaded.

"I ain't your friend, Leon. You're just somebody I know. Don't let it go to your head."

"I can't talk about this, Albert. I don't know nothin' no way. Ben was drowning. Once he found Jesus, he spent all of his time trying to repent. That boy was repenting so much, he started repenting other people's sins."

"You gonna have to explain that one to me, Leon."

In a town this small it wasn't necessary to follow a person to find out where he was going.

He sat down and stared at me intently without a semblance of a smile. His voice became serious and subdued.

"I been in business around here a long time, Albert. I know I ain't the biggest dog on the block, but I know my place. Now if you want to bust me, screw me up, come on with it. I got to stay here after you're back down in Atlanta chillin'. So if you and Isaac want to bust my balls, go ahead. I've said all I'm gonna say."

Leon was not a loyalist. He was an opportunist. It was hard to read him, but I suspected that he was afraid. Career criminals didn't fear jail time. Maybe he feared repentance or those who had received repentance. Isaac finished reading him his rights. He was like a pit bull. He had hated Leon so long, he was going to arrest him for something—carrying a gun, selling Ina dope, anything. I looked at Leon's eyes and understood that anything I wanted to know was not going to be forthcoming, but I also understood that there was something else out there, and he knew it.

Isaac's investigation quickly reached a lull. Information had dried up, and the state lab was taking its time returning an evaluation of the meager evidence.

My mother still lived in Roanoke Rapids and was responsible for

most of my trips back home. I was surprised to see that she was not dressed when I arrived to take her to Ben Rhodes's funeral.

"Ben Rhodes." She repeated the name when I reminded her. "Hmmph."

She was in the first stages of Alzheimer's disease, and her lucidity waxed and waned.

"This might not be a good day, Albert," my cousin Alice, who had become her caregiver, informed me. "Why don't you go on without her?"

In small towns funerals are like social events. They are reunions, representing opportunities to meet people and see long-lost friends who would not have ventured back to this small community under any other circumstances, so I tried again.

"Mom, Ben Rhodes was killed a few days ago. They're having his funeral today. Why don't you get dressed, and I'll take you."

"I don't care nothing about Ben Rhodes. What happened to him anyway?"

"Somebody killed him," I answered bluntly.

"What goes around, comes around," she said in an almost matter-of-fact manner.

Most people just ignored my mother's off-the-wall comments, but I felt an obligation to humor her. I suppose it was a part of my guilt for not being there most of the time.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," she explained.

"What's that got to do with Ben Rhodes?"

"He got what he deserved!" She replied in a forceful outburst.

"Mom, what are you talking about?" My impatience was beginning to show.

"Otis. You remember Otis, don't you?"

"Otis who?" I was thoroughly perplexed by now and pissed that I had started down this road of humoring her.

"Otis Powell. He was a year behind you in high school."

"So?"

"You don't remember when he got killed? They say he fell out of a car. Back tire squished his head like a watermelon. They couldn't even open the casket at the funeral."

A wave of embarrassment rolled over me. This senile old lady's remote memories were sharper than mine, and she was connecting dots quicker than I was. I leaned back in my chair as vague recollections began to coalesce in my mind.

Otis Powell was in his sophomore year when he fell out of a speeding car. A carload of kids had been drinking and carousing.

They said Otis was fooling around with the door and fell out. This was an era before seatbelts and enforced drinking laws, and it was ruled a tragic accident.

"I still don't see what this has to do with Ben Rhodes's funeral," I said.

"Ben Rhodes was driving the car," she answered. "How many people do you know who just fall out of a car? His mama told me that she never did believe that story."

"Didn't the police rule it an accident?"

"What do you think they cared about a bunch of black teenagers? That's back when they were saying that the only good nigger is a dead nigger."

"You think Ben Rhodes had something to do with Otis's death?"

"If he was driving the car, he did or he knew who did. Hmmph . . . and I'm the one who's supposed to be senile."

"Watch out, Albert Lee! She's on point today," my cousin laughed.

"Who else was in the car?" I asked. All of a sudden I had lapsed back into the policeman mode. I was taking my mother seriously—every word.

"I don't remember. They say it was that little clique he used to run with. It was Clinton Spaulding and that bunch. I don't remember all of them."

"Oh, now you're gonna get memory problems."

"I'm old," she protested. "I'm supposed to have memory problems. I'll tell you one thing. I remember enough not to waste my time at a funeral for the likes of Ben Rhodes."

How do you follow up on the flawed, forty-plus-year-old memories of a demented octogenarian? I posed the question to Isaac, and he responded as expected.

"You as crazy as your mama is. What am I supposed to do with that? Who the hell knows what happened back then? Clinton Spaulding! Do you know who Clinton Spaulding is? He's judge over the Halifax County Superior Court."

Some memories aren't so difficult to confirm as long as there is someone with enough tenacity to pursue them. Two ladies at the *Daily Herald* tried their best to project Southern hospitality in spite of my stubborn insistence that they keep searching forty-year-old archived reports for me. One of them stayed after hours and hugged me, probably with relief, when we finally hit pay dirt.

They were all there, crowded in a tiny column on the back page that was relegated for news of importance to colored citizens in

1958. CITY POLICE QUESTION AND RELEASE COLORED HIGH SCHOOL BOYS INVOLVED IN TRAGIC AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT RESULTING IN THE DEATH OF THEIR CLASSMATE. There were no pictures, but the names were all listed—Benjamin Rhodes, Clinton Spaulding, Aubrey Watson, Vernon Carter. The article went on to mention the possibility of alcohol being involved, then ended abruptly without further details, except for noting that the victim, Otis Powell, was a student at the local colored high school.

"Five teenage boys riding in a car. One falls out and gets killed."

The look on Isaac's face told me that he didn't want to hear this, but I had trapped him in his office, and he had nowhere to run.

"Four decades later, one of them finds Jesus, and somebody beats him to death," I continued.

"That's a damn stretch," Isaac protested. "You can't make that connection."

"If he had been beaten to death in Atlanta, I'd say so what? How many people get beaten to death up here, Isaac, say in a year?"

He didn't answer.

"Maybe when Ben found Jesus he felt a need to confess his sins. If his sins were connected to someone else's sins, he's got a problem."

"If a frog had wings he wouldn't bump his ass on the ground," Isaac retorted. "You got nothing. You got speculation."

"I've seen you rattle people's cages on the basis of speculation."

"You know about Spaulding. Aubrey Watson is deputy police chief in Roanoke Rapids." His voice was soft, introspective, and deadly serious. "Vernon Carter is probably the biggest attorney in Halifax County. He's been making noises like he wants to run for mayor for the last six months." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You know, it's taken all this time to get a black county sheriff, and this is a predominantly black county. These men mean a lot to this county and the city. Roanoke Rapids could have a black mayor in a year, Albert."

"So what are you saying, Isaac? You asked me in on this. Now you want me to shut my mouth and leave? You got a dead body—an obvious murder. You're looking for a motive? There's no statute of limitations on murder. I'll leave it alone if you want, Isaac. It's your call. You tell me what you want to do."

It was several seconds before Isaac spoke. He rolled his eyes at me. "Ever since we were children, whenever we got into something, it ended up being a pain in my ass," he complained.

I grinned at his discomfort, and he was a miserable failure at suppressing his smile.

"Meet me here tomorrow, and we'll go talk to these guys."

A Roanoke Rapids city police car had become a too frequent visitor to my field of vision to be a coincidental presence. The police car slowed when I slowed and accelerated when I accelerated. The driver was clearly a novice at tailing another car, and when I braked suddenly he approached sufficiently close for me to see his face. It was Randall Coleman. I stepped on the accelerator before he could recover and slid around two corners before he knew what had happened.

Small towns never change. Tom Fields's corner store had been in the same place for thirty years even though Tom had died over a decade ago. Phyllis Compton's dilapidated shack was still unpainted, and the narrow lane still ran past her back yard where teenagers clustered on dark nights to smoke cigarettes and drink beer out of their parents' eyesight. I knew these streets as well as anyone and better than most. Two more turns and I was on Randall's bumper. I saw the surprise that registered in his eyes reflected in his rearview mirror. He started to accelerate but must have realized how ridiculous it must have appeared for a cop to be running away from somebody. He slowed, pulled to the curb, exited his car and waited for me.

He gave me that cop stance—wide-legged with his right hand resting on his pistol.

"You're pushing your luck, Albert. You might be Isaac's friend, but you got no right to be involved in any police matters down here. We've been trying to cut you some slack because you're a local boy, but there's a limit to our patience."

"Who's *we*, Randall?" I stepped close enough to him to make him uncomfortable. "Who's got you trying to follow me? You can't be that stupid."

He just stared at me without answering.

"You know, Randall, I've got a theory."

His eyes widened in anticipation of my remarks.

"You know, I bet I could slap the crap out of you, and you wouldn't do a damn thing."

The blood drained quickly out of his face as his muscles tightened. He tried to move away, but his butt bumped against the side of his car.

"You better watch yourself, Albert." He was trying to sound tough, but it wasn't working for him.

"You won't do a damn thing because nobody wants to hear any more questions. Isn't that right?"

His expression changed from toughness to apprehension. That's when I slapped him. His face reddened and his chin trembled with rage, but his hand never left his gun. I slapped him again, and a tiny smear of blood painted his lower lip. He started to say something, and I slapped him again. His back slammed hard against his car. Passing drivers slowed to watch the curious scene. I stepped away from him. He was trying to hold himself together. I could tell he wanted to kill me, but he didn't have the nerve. Urban battlegrounds breed badasses. Too much time in a place like this could make a man soft, and Randall was about as confrontational as putty.

"I didn't think so." I nodded a confirmation of my earlier theory as I walked away. His eyes followed me all the way to my car and beyond. I knew he wouldn't do anything, but a message had been sent. Those who would eventually receive the message might not be so passive.

A few minutes later I pulled into a familiar yard and greeted an old friend.

"I was wondering when you'd get by here," Briscoe Falcon said. He was seated on his back steps with his constant companion, a half pint of whiskey. Briscoe seemed to have the peculiar ability to resist aging. He was ancient—eighties, nineties, nobody knew for sure. I had speculated that the alcohol content of his skin kept him preserved. His appearance was essentially unchanged from the last time I had seen him a few years ago, except someone had braided his shock of long white nappy hair into neat cornrows. He offered me a swig before I could say anything, and I accepted.

"You still got that old .45?" I asked.

"Hmmph, you done stirred up a whole bunch of mess this time, ain't you?" he chuckled.

"What makes you think that?"

"You need a gun, don't you."

I laughed as he led me into the small add-on room in the back of his sister's house. He handed me the silver-plated nineteen-forties-vintage weapon and informed me that he shot it once a month to make sure it still worked. I felt obligated to sit and talk about old times for a while, but eventually I thanked him for the gun and promised to return it. I had to meet Isaac soon.

"Briscoe, do you remember Otis Powell?" I don't know why I asked him. I think I was just making conversation and perhaps fishing a bit.

"That boy they kilt back in fifty-eight," he replied.

"Damn." The expletive escaped unconsciously.

"That why you need the gun?" he asked.

I ignored his question and asked him, "How the hell do you know *they* killed him, and who the hell is *they?*"

"You know how hard it is to fall out of a speeding car even when you're drunk? It ain't easy, little brother, or I woulda been dead years ago. I ain't never believed that story."

"Apparently everybody else did. I don't remember that much talk about it when I was growing up."

"Even back then, little brother, there were colored people and important colored people. You remember Reverend Watson, Carter's Funeral Home, Principal Spaulding over in Martin County. Folks didn't talk about it. They were our leaders, so you probably didn't hear all of it."

"Since you know so much, who do you think killed Otis, because it could be that the same person killed Ben Rhodes."

Briscoe suddenly got quiet on me. He took another swig of whiskey, but he didn't act like he really wanted it. He had stopped playing me, and he wasn't having a good time anymore.

"You sure you want to keep diggin' in this, little brother?" He didn't wait for a response. "I don't know nobody who wants to drag up all this mess, even Mary Alice."

"Mary Alice. Mrs. Higgins?" I asked.

He stopped talking again.

"You might ought to go on back to Atlanta and leave this alone," he finally added.

"What about Ben Rhodes? Somebody around here did a job on him."

"Maybe he got what he deserved." The words were spoken with conviction, and he looked at me with a fervor not usually reserved for conversations over a bottle of liquor.

"You're not gonna tell me anything, are you?" I asked the question just to force him to say the words.

"I ain't in this, Albert Lee."

"I am," I replied as I shoved the gun in my belt. "Where can I find Mary Alice Higgins?"

"She's in the Shady Rest Nursing Home down 158."

"You wanna ride with me?" I asked.

A broad grin brightened his face.

"Sure, you want me to git my other gun in case you need some backup?"

Mary Alice Higgins was one of those women who raised a lot of

the other children in the community as well as her own child. I still remembered her, but I had remembered a younger woman. She had aged far beyond the image I carried in my mind. A series of strokes had left her unable to manage even her most basic needs. Her daughter, an only child, lived in Los Angeles and hadn't been back to this town since dropping out of high school.

I didn't know why I was there; nobody was talking. I was soon to find that Mary Alice wasn't talking either. She had what they called an expressive aphasia. Whatever thoughts were generated in her mind rarely made their way to her lips, and when they did, were often garbled and nonsensical. She smiled when I hugged her, acknowledging with a nod that she remembered me. She cried softly when I asked about her daughter. The revelation that Ben Rhodes had been killed was met with agitated grunts and excited but unintelligible gibberish. I was almost persuaded that she was exhibiting something akin to joy, but in my heart I knew I was getting nowhere fast. When I started to leave, the grunts and gibberish became louder, and the nurse squeezed my arm in order to delay me.

"I think she wants you again," she said.

"I'll come back to visit her later," I explained. My comfort level with this unfortunate lady was being severely tested.

Briscoe came in and offered to sit with her a while, and his presence seemed to calm her. I heard that Briscoe used to spend time with her after her husband died, but I wasn't about to ask him about it. A folded sheet of pastel blue paper on her bedside stand caught my eye. She watched intently as I walked back to her bedside and picked it up. I felt awkward looking at something that was potentially personal. She shifted her weight as if she wanted to reach for the letter, but the strokes had made her too slow. The praying hands on the logo created a ripple of anticipation in my belly.

The letter was a prayer—a plea. It was an appeal for forgiveness. It was an apology, an attempt at atonement, and it was signed by Benjamin Rhodes.

"Why did Ben Rhodes need your forgiveness, Mrs. Higgins?"

"Raining!" She replied more clearly than I had expected.

"What?"

"Raining!" She repeated more forcefully. "Raining! Raining! Raining!" The one hand that she still had some use of clawed the air repeatedly in my direction until I handed her the letter, and she clutched it tightly with an unexplained desperation.

"Mary Alice . . ." Briscoe interrupted.

She stopped trying to talk and stared at him. He stared back intently.

I watched both of them, and she didn't say raining any more.

Mary Alice Higgins died in her sleep two days later. It was not unexpected. It meant just another funeral in this small town whenever her daughter arrived. Isaac had gotten busy—too busy to be found since he was investigating an all-important murder. I caught him in his office, however, and trapped him.

" 'Bout time for you to head back to Atlanta, ain't it, Albert?" Isaac asked the question nonchalantly as if it was a casual afterthought.

"You too, Isaac? Everybody wants me to leave. I wonder why?"

"Why you gettin' defensive?" he asked. "I just asked a question."

"You know what I think, Isaac?" I didn't wait for his answer. "I think everybody in this town knows something, and nobody wants to talk about it, even you. Oh, you were gung ho at first, but something changed. Nobody really wants to know who killed Ben Rhodes, or maybe they already do, and they just don't care."

He looked away. His face was sad.

"The truth don't always set you free, Albert," he sighed.

I ignored him and picked up his phone.

"This is Detective Albert Ivey," I explained to the secretary on the other end. "I'm on loan to the Halifax County Sheriff's Department. I have a message for Deputy Chief Aubrey Watson. Let him know that I acquired the letter that Benjamin Rhodes wrote to Mary Alice Higgins before he was killed. I'd like to discuss it with him at his convenience."

"What the hell are you doin'?" Isaac was on his feet and seething.

"Your job, Sheriff Johnson," I replied. "I'm doing your job."

The phone rang and saved me from the onslaught of profanity that Isaac was about to heap on me, and I took the opportunity to sneak out of his office.

"Hey!" He yelled as I tried to ease through the door. "Your goddamned friend wants to talk to you."

Briscoe Falcon was on the line.

"Mary Alice's daughter is at the airport in Rocky Mount," he informed me. "She needs a ride. Why don't you go pick her up?"

"Why the hell are you calling me?" I asked indignantly.

"You *need* to go pick her up, little brother."

The tone of his voice indicated that he was trying to tell me something. I took the suggestion in spite of my puzzlement. I told Isaac where I was going, and he rolled his eyes at me without answering. It seemed a good time to leave, so I did.

Rona Higgins was a tall, attractive woman who appeared to be in her early to mid-sixties. I recognized her by that West Coast aura that seems to surround well-heeled Californians addicted to perpetual youth and glamour. She didn't remember me, and I wasn't surprised. *Rona. Rona. Raining. Raining.* Why did Briscoe want me here?

"They say that you don't get back here very often."

She seemed amused at my attempt at small talk.

"It's my first time since high school," she said with an obligatory smile. There was something melancholy about her—something hiding just below the facade of that smile. It was etched in her face, unrecognizable from a distance, and it was not benign.

"I saw your mother just before she died. She seemed . . . content."

I had to struggle for that word and hoped that it was right. She nodded an acknowledgment of my attempt to be sympathetic.

"Did you hear that somebody killed Ben Rhodes a few days ago?" I asked.

She swiveled in her seat to face me. Her eyes were wide and inquiring.

"Was it painful?" she asked.

I almost stopped the car. It was the singular most unexpected question that I could have anticipated. The words were as cold and impersonal as anything I had ever heard. After a few more miles, I did stop the car. My question had opened the floodgates. She began to talk, and I listened right up until the metallic knock on the car's window startled me.

Distant thunder gently folded itself around us, accentuating the dread.

"Get the hell out of the car, Albert!"

Randall Coleman was in civilian clothes. The weapon he brandished was police issue, however. I stepped out into the late afternoon heat and the premature darkness brought on by evening rain clouds. The soft rumble of distant thunder gently folded itself around us, accentuating the dread that followed.

A shadowy presence that I couldn't recognize stood next to a car several yards behind us. Rona got out of the car and gazed at him. The glamour drained out of her face, but there was no fear, just a deep seething anger. The other man didn't approach. I knew most of the story now, and whoever he was, I knew why.

"I want the letter," Randall said.

"I got no letter, Randall. It was a bluff. Who's that back there?"

"Give me your gun," he demanded, ignoring my question.

"Or what?"

The response flustered him. It clearly was not what he expected.

"Give me the goddamned gun!" he yelled.

"What are you gonna do, Randall? You gonna kill me? You gonna kill Rona? For what? For him? Are you that dumb?"

Randall was still trying to get up enough nerve to do something with his gun when I pulled Briscoe's .45 out of my belt and pointed it at his head.

"The difference between you and me, Randall, is you think you're a badass, but I really am. I don't care whether you drop the gun or not, but I'm gonna blow your head off if you don't."

Randall's chin trembled badly, and the hand with the gun seemed paralyzed.

"I think everybody better drop their guns." The other man had come closer when Randall distracted me. Aubrey Watson, Roanoke Rapids's deputy police chief, drew down on both of us. He was out in the open now and playing a hand with no winning cards. I glanced at him briefly and told him what to kiss before returning my attention to Randall who was standing between us.

Watson started to raise his gun, but flashing blue lights racing toward us seemed to take his spirit away. He backed toward the car looking bewildered.

Randall let his weapon slide from his hand and stepped away.

Watson jumped into the car, but he didn't go anywhere. I retrieved Randall's gun and walked toward the car, when a muffled shot ended it all.

Isaac Johnson stepped out of his car and surveyed the scene before him.

"How'd you know?" I asked.

"Briscoe told me who you went to pick up. Figured you'd come this way."

Isaac didn't say anything else. He walked over to Randall's car, opened the door, and stared silently at Aubrey Watson's body.

"He was a good man," he murmured.

"They were all good men," Rona added. "Every damned one of them, and I hope they all burn in hell."

The venom in her words unnerved Isaac. I knew what he thought. I grew up in the same era, when success was so hard to come by that everyone who escaped the system was viewed as a

hero. He looked toward me for support, and I had none to give. She walked slowly back to my car and waited.

"Five kids riding in a car, and one gets pushed out and dies." Briscoe started talking absently. "Did she tell you the story, little brother?"

"She told me that Otis was the only one who didn't rape her," I answered. "That's probably why they killed him. They were afraid he would tell."

"You can't never tell how childrens gon' turn out," Briscoe continued. "All them boys grew up to be pretty good men."

"Except they killed a boy," I corrected him. "They killed Ben or had him killed when his religion and his conscience finally got the best of him. They would have killed me if their flunky, Randall Coleman, had had the stomach for it, maybe even Rona too."

I returned Briscoe's .45 and started the long drive back to Atlanta. Isaac did his job just as I knew he would. Randall Coleman confessed and was arrested for the murder of Reverend Benjamin Rhodes. Judge Spaulding and attorney Vernon Carter were arrested for conspiracy in the murder of Benjamin Rhodes. Rona Higgins returned to Los Angeles never to set foot in her hometown again. The knowledge that all of them, even her mother, had seen her assault as a lesser evil in light of the accomplishments of her assailants was more than she could bear.

THE CASE OF THE SICKLY MANSION

LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

Lady Philippa du Luth was a pert young woman of sixteen or so. She also was an orphan and very, very rich, which made her an extremely important orphan in the eyes of Donwoddie and Plander, her overly sedate solicitors. The solicitors varied in age from an energetic forty to a sputteringly cautious seventy-five, and with facial hair ranging from an artistically trimmed moustache (on Morton Plander, the forty year old), to a long, white, scraggly beard on the seventy-five year old, whose unlikely name was Jedidiah Donwoddie. Donwoddie confessed before our meeting was half over that he'd had a Jewish grandfather.

Lady Sara floored him by remarking, with sweet matter-of-factness, "So did I," an outright lie, but it demonstrated how much she cared about such matters.

The solicitors were present in Lady Sara Varnley's study against their better judgement. Lady Philippa du Luth, whose name suggested that several million pounds of her considerable fortune derived from a French ancestor, was there because she valued her own better judgement more highly than theirs. The unanimity of Donwoddie and Plander on the subject of Lady Philippa's home, which was the topic under contention, probably was unusual. My brief contact with them indicated that they were rarely in agreement on anything.

Lady Philippa said firmly, "It's a beautiful mansion."

The solicitors brushed this remark aside. The mansion's appearance was not going to figure in any legal brief they intended to file on the subject.

"I spent some of the happiest years of my childhood there," Lady Philippa announced, "and I intend to return there to live. It's mine. Why shouldn't I live in it if I want to?"

The solicitors responded to that with protests. "The mansion is

Tatjana Mai-Wyss

sickly," Morton Plander said. "Dangerously so. For a young lady your age to isolate herself—"

"That's nonsense," Lady Philippa announced. "The only problem with the mansion is that it hasn't been lived in for years except by caretakers, and it's been allowed to become run down. But I have plenty of money to put that right."

"The first problem," Jedidiah Donwoddie announced, with his voice taking on a squeaky quality that made it sound like a last trump that had just sprung a leak, "the first problem is that you would have no servants. At your age—at any age—one can't live in a mansion, even a well-maintained mansion, with no servants. For anyone at all to reside in Frayne Hill would require an enormous number of servants. And that is just the first problem."

"I can afford them," Lady Philippa said confidently.

"No one," Morton Plander said, "could afford to pay servants to look after that house. They wouldn't stay. The house—"

Lady Philippa turned to Lady Sara. "These superannuated legal ledgers keep saying the mansion is sick. I lived there for five years when I was younger, and at that time no one noticed anything wrong with it. I certainly didn't. But they persist in refusing me permission to live in my own house. It still hasn't penetrated to them that I have the right to discharge their dinky firm and engage a new one for myself the moment I decide to do so."

"After you are twenty-one," Jedidiah Donwoddie murmured politely. "Until then, we are jointly responsible for your welfare, and the Chancery Court would deal severely with us if we were to permit—"

Lady Sara Varnley, who was Britain's foremost detective and an expert at listening, had been hearing both sides of the dispute patiently. Thus far she had registered only one reaction, an eyebrow-raised glance of respect when Lady Philippa came up with the word "superannuated." Now she stirred herself and got a word of her own in. "Perhaps if one of you would tell me just what is sickly about the mansion—"

They all began to talk at once.

Lady Philippa shouted the solicitors down. "In an earlier age," she said, "it would have been called haunted, and people would have burned witches on the lawn. I thought those days were past, but apparently not where Donwoddie and Plander are concerned."

"What it comes down to," Lady Sara said, "is that you think nothing is wrong with the mansion, and they think something is drastically wrong with it—to the point where it would be at best

unsuitable for a young lady your age to live there and at worst impossible or even dangerous. What do servants find objectionable about it?"

"Noises at night," Jedidiah Donwoddie said. "Cries in the darkness, footsteps in unused hallways, sounds of occupancy from rooms that have long been unoccupied. Deliveries that don't get made but that tradespeople swear were performed in the usual manner. Things that disappear or that are moved to other locations with no explanation. All of that added to the fact that it is a creaky old building and no servant wants to live there, not even for the best wages in the county."

"*I* want to live there," Lady Philippa said. Her jaw had a stubborn curve to it that evidenced long arguments in the past on this subject and foretold more to come. "Why won't you let me try to find my own servants? You're afraid I might be successful."

"And what is my role to be in this dispute?" Lady Sara wanted to know.

"*They* want someone to agree with them and tell me the house isn't habitable. *I* want someone to agree with me and tell them that it is."

"Neither commission is one I could accept," Lady Sara said. "All I could undertake to do is investigate Frayne Hill. A few days in actual residence there would seem to be in order. If I find anything wrong with the state of the mansion's health, or any indications at all that it is not a suitable place to live, whether for a young lady your age or anyone else, I will say so. If I don't, I will say that. Either way, I will tell you why, of course."

Neither party seemed particularly pleased with this, but in the end, that was the agreement. I was already mentally packing my valise. Frayne Hill was located in the town of Burrough Ford, situated some forty miles from London. An investigation there seemed like a pleasant break from the summer heat of London's pavements, which on that July day was already upon us. Lady Philippa and her escorts took their leave of us, and I went to pack.

Burrough Ford already had a history. It could be deduced from the "Burrough," which came from the Old English word *burth*, which had become Burch by the time of the Domesday Book with several variant spellings. It referred to a fortified place on a ford. The ford was found at the centre of town, where an old stone bridge now carried the town's High Street over it. The fortified place was a crumbly looking hill that an earlier Stone Age population evidently derived some feeling of safety from. The "hill"

from "Frayne Hill," Lady Philippa's mansion, was located on the other side of town.

Burrough Ford was a pleasant, quiet place—little more than a village. The railway had missed it, which perhaps was why there were few London commuters among its population. On the "business" side of the river, there was a blacksmith shop, a carpenter shop, and a row of hopeful little concerns of the type that ornamented the high streets of most small towns of that size: a bakery, a grocer's, a fish monger's, a doctor's surgery with, at night, its never failing red lamp, and a rickety, old-fashioned inn that still flourished sufficiently to rival the two much more modern pubs the town managed to support. In addition, there was a weathered, red brick Church of England with an equally weathered, red brick vicarage beside it. Across the High Street was a much newer and smaller red brick First Baptist Church. Where the High Street widened into a market square, there was a shop that promised to offer all the latest women's styles, another shop that sold clothing and draper's goods for the entire family, a confectionery, and a penny shop that no doubt was popular with children.

Beyond the central businesses, the High Street narrowed into a normal town street lined with dwellings in various stages of decay. At the edge of town, the street narrowed again and took a sharp turn upward. This was Frayne Hill, and—at the top—stood a monstrous old monstrosity of a mansion, all wings and gables and arched and bay windows, and fake turrets, and dormers, and, in the spacious grounds, a sprinkling of gazebos.

Directly at the rear of the mansion, a gazebo near the kitchen door served as a pump house, protecting a well and an old-fashioned pump that were the dwelling's water supply. There were other wells scattered about the grounds—one near the barn that had been used for the horses when Frayne Hill had had a well-equipped stable and other livestock. Two more were strategically placed so that the vegetable garden and fruit bushes could be kept flourishing during a dry summer.

All in all, the old mansion seemed practically ideal for haunting, and if it hadn't already been haunted, I would have been tempted to haunt it myself. I easily could understand why Lady Philippa had fallen in love with the place as a child.

It was more difficult to understand why the two solicitors were so intent on keeping the home unoccupied.

We made a preliminary survey of the property in order to determine what we would need in order to occupy it comfortably.

Rick and Charles, Lady Sara's footmen—who were splendid detectives in their own right—were dispatched to test the town's resources and purchase essentials. Our staff of servants, which had arrived ahead of us, was already engaged in cleaning. I inspected the dining room—its long table would seat at least twenty dinner guests comfortably—perched myself in the sturdy armchair the master of the house had occupied when entertaining, and tried to envisage myself as the proprietor of what must have been a considerable affluence with a crew of servants carrying a huge roast in from the kitchen while the cook watched anxiously from the kitchen door and another crew—expertly supervised by a sedate butler—brought in an assortment of vintage wines. I reflected that life at Frayne Hill must have been very pleasant indeed.

Lady Sara, on an inspection tour of her own, smothered a laugh when she saw me.

"What will happen to the house if the solicitors have their way?" I asked.

"Lady Philippa is a very bright, articulate young lady," Lady Sara said. "The solicitors will need a far better case than the one they presented to us if they are to convince a Chancery judge. Thus far, their only valid argument concerns the servants, but you have noticed that I had no difficulty in engaging a full staff. True, I have 'connections,' but anyone as wealthy as Lady Philippa also has connections if she decides to exploit them."

"In short, the solicitors have no case," I suggested.

"That is how I see it."

"Then why—"

"That is one of the intriguing things about this case. The solicitors surely realize they have no case. So why are they fighting what must be an invaluable client? We may have to solve that riddle before we consider why the mansion is sickly."

She took the chair beside me. "Sickly or not, it certainly is mysterious," she said. "It isn't just the solicitors. I can understand why the caretaker and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Franklin, are opposed to Lady Philippa's living here. The answer to that may be as simple as their worrying about their jobs. As soon as Lady Philippa brings in her own staff of servants, she won't be needing caretakers. Very likely she will discharge them. Also, there is the farmer who operates the accompanying farmland for her. He may have similar worries. Either she will meddle in the farm's organisation, or she will bring in someone else to do it."

"Is that the villainous old coot with the long, drooping moustache?"

"That's him. Ebenezer Wilson. He's been the farmer for three

decades, at least, and everything about the farm is either run down or out of date. Even *I* can see that. He has good reason to worry about being replaced."

"He looks like the type who would sweat his farmhands every chance he had," I remarked.

"You may be right. Much more complicated is the case of the four neighbouring farmers. What possible profit could there be to them if the property remains unoccupied? Perhaps they are profiting in some way from Wilson's inept management. Perhaps, perhaps, but it complicates our mystery. In addition to the two solicitors, that makes six local people who are vehemently opposed to Lady Philippa's living here."

"The solicitors make no sense to me. Obviously they are risking losing a fabulously wealthy client in four or five years, if not now. And just what is their objection apart from the ghost stories?"

"I haven't fathomed that myself," Lady Sara said. "However you cut it, Lady Philippa is surrounded by villainous opposition. That is why I insisted on our accompanying her here."

Lady Sara's impromptu staff of servants served us a highly creditable dinner. There was no enormous roast to be brought in from the kitchen for our small party of six—Lady Sara, Lady Philippa, myself, the two solicitors, Morton Plander and Jedidiah Donwoddie, and Anna, an elderly, profusely wrinkled nanny Lady Philippa had insisted on bringing out of an impoverished retirement and establishing in the comfort of Frayne Hill—she had been treated shamefully by the firm of Donwoddie and Plander, which in no way surprised me, and Lady Philippa, to her considerable credit, put a stop to that as soon as she learned about it. A heaping platter of chops served admirably for the six of us, and the meal was neatly topped with fruit-flavoured ices. It was commendably served by Charles Tupper and Rick Allward, Lady Sara's footmen-detectives, transferred from London's Connaught Mews while the case lasted.

As Rick served my ices, I muttered to him, "Tell Charles we're due for a pub crawl after dinner. We need to find out what the villagers think of this place."

He nodded.

I wasn't disappointed to miss Lady Sara's and Lady Philippa's bedtime palaver about how wonderful the mansion was. Lady Sara knew what I was up to and gave me an approving nod. Rick and Charles met me at the kitchen entrance. They had changed from their footmen's uniforms to sedate togs of the type Burrough Ford villagers would wear on a night out, and we sprinted down

the steep hill to the village, not without a reflection or two as to how steep the climb back to the mansion would be if we took on a consignment of beer or ale.

We started at the rickety, sedate old inn, the White Lion. It had an old-fashioned dart board in one corner and two draughts tables nearby, all with full quotas of enthusiastic performers.

We settled at the bar, took a sip of the landlord's homemade beer, murmured our compliments—it fully deserved them—and, in answer to his question, allowed that we were working in "the big house" and hoped that the situations would become permanent.

Mr. Jones was the landlord, a Welshman marooned in an area of Anglo-Saxon stagnation, and he hoped so, too. "They say the young lady is rich," he said. "The town could use that kind of patronage."

We allowed that the young lady gave every indication of being rich. "Fond of the house, too," I said. "If she has her way—and rich young ladies are accustomed to having their way—she plans to live there permanently. She lived there as a child and loved the place."

The room had suddenly become quiet when we began to talk. This didn't suit our purpose—we wanted to listen, not talk. "What about these rumours about Frayne Hill being haunted?" I asked. "I'm not sure I want to live in a haunted mansion."

"Posh and nonsense," the landlord said. "Who believes in haunted mansions these days?"

"Now that I think about it, they didn't exactly use the word *haunted*. Sickly is what they are calling it."

The landlord guffawed. "Who ever heard of a sickly mansion? It is a mite rundown, of course. No reason why it wouldn't be, it standing unoccupied by anyone except a caretaker for so long. But it's a splendid old building, and if the young lady is as rich as they say, she'll soon have that put right."

Obviously the villagers were much in favor of having the mansion occupied, which certainly was not unexpected, and didn't care for talk about it being haunted. We finished our beer, congratulated the landlord again, and moved on to the Pig and Whistle, a sparkling, modern establishment that was much better patronised than the White Lion had been. This proprietor hadn't made his own beer, which convinced me the town folk didn't know a good thing when they had it. I could see the direction that was going—the White Lion would gradually lose out to the flashy, more modern pubs, and the folk of Burrough Ford would lose

their really commendable homemade beer. But perhaps Lady Philippa's patronage could reverse that trend.

We settled at the Pig and Whistle's bar and had just got ourselves nicely wrapped around bottles of beer, as the saying goes, when Mary Damary, Lady Sara's maid, burst into the room. She came directly to me and whispered in my ear, "Lady Philippa has disappeared. Lady Sara says come at once."

I spun half a crown on the bar and left without waiting for change. Lady Sara's "at once" meant a speed somewhat quicker than immediately. Without knowing what the message was, Rick and Charles followed closely on my heels. We made our way back up Frayne Hill at a speed I wouldn't have believed on our way down, dashed panting across the old mansion's sprawling veranda, and burst in on a funereal meeting that was being held in the drawing room.

Lady Philippa was indeed missing. So was Lady Sara, for the moment, but she had gone to look for Lady Philippa. In the rear of the house, the spacious grounds were populated with moving dots of light—lanterns of various types being waved about by those who were searching for Lady Philippa. The ceremony in the drawing room was being presided over by the Messrs Donwoddie and Plander. Donwoddie was lamenting the fact that his warnings had been ignored. Plander was seconding him whenever he could get a word in.

I interrupted the two of them. "Who saw her last?" I demanded.

No one had thought to ask that. Rick and Charles took care of it, questioning a servant whenever they could corner one. I went looking for Lady Sara, figuring that wherever she was would be where the action would be. She was talking with Anna, the elderly ex-nanny.

"She loved wandering about at night," Anna said. Her face was wet with tears. "Such a generous young lady she was." To her credit, she was worried about the young lady rather than what was likely to happen to her personally if she were once more thrown back on the not-so-tender mercies of Donwoddie and Plander.

"Where did she wander?" Lady Sara wanted to know.

"She played a game—something she made up herself. She had no other children to play with and her guardians wouldn't let her play with the village children. She went from gazebo to gazebo, counting them in some strange way no one but she understood."

"Yes, yes," Lady Sara said impatiently, "but where did she start and what direction did she follow?"

We returned to the mansion and began the strangest trek I've

ever been involved in. From one of the mansion's rear entrances we next went to a gazebo with a slanted roof to another gazebo with slanted walls and from there to the pony shed. She always paid a visit to the pony, Anna said. Of course there was no pony there now. From the pony shed, Lady Philippa would double back to the mansion and slide down the cellar doors, a game some American children had taught her one summer, and then—

"Listen!" Lady Sara commanded.

It was a faint, pipping voice, but the word was unmistakable. It came from an old well near the house, and it said, "Help!"

Once I had got a rope secured, Rick went down it quickly and held Lady Philippa's head above water until ladders could be obtained in the village. By then Lady Philippa was almost too weak to climb out, but Rick was right behind her, helping her one step at a time. Lady Sara was waiting at the top with warm, dry blankets. As soon as the village doctor had checked her over, Lady Philippa was packed off to bed. Donwoddie and Plander, for once unanimous, insisted on taking her back to London immediately, and as far as Lady Sara was concerned, they could go right on insisting. On that particular evening, one doctor outranked any number of solicitors.

When Lady Sara next poked her head out of Lady Philippa's door, both solicitors were waiting outside. "Are you ready to agree with us now, Lady Sara?" Jedidiah Donwoddie demanded in his squeaky voice. "It's a sickly mansion."

"I don't agree with you at all," Lady Sara said sweetly. She was always at her most dangerous when she used that tone of voice. "Mansions aren't sickly, but there certainly are some sickly people about. Lady Philippa is not to be disturbed." She turned to me. "What's the story?"

She knew I would have investigated the scene thoroughly.

"An old well had been covered with slabs of slate," I said. "Probably in former times, before a washhouse was built, it was used for a supply of water that could be carried down the outside stairway into the basement for laundry. When it went out of use, it was covered. Someone had removed the slate recently—perhaps as recently as this evening."

"Someone who knew Lady Philippa intended to take her childhood walk in the dark," Lady Sara said. "Who—"

"Rick and Charles are interviewing the servants now," I said.

She nodded. "Give them a hand. Everything is under control here."

"How is Lady Philippa?" I asked.

"She had a fright, but she'll be all right. Evidently that well has been covered since long before her time. She didn't know it was there. When you've finished with the servants, go over the study carefully. I noticed some old plans of the estate there."

I nodded, politely excused myself to the solicitors, who gave every indication of camping there until they got someone to admit that the mansion was sickly, and I headed downstairs.

None of the servants could tell us anything about Lady Philippa's nighttime ramble. Childlike, she had adroitly slipped out without being seen. With the help of the old nanny, we had already traced her route, however. A lantern showed us exactly what had happened. She had slid down the old, slanting outside door, took one step when she reached the bottom, and walked right into the freshly uncovered well. It was as good a murder trap as could be devised. Unless one was close to the well, her cries couldn't be heard, and there was enough water in the bottom to drown her when she tired.

It was too late to look for evidence around the well. Everyone in the house had already left footprints there in the soft ground, including the doctor, the solicitors, the village constable—he had belatedly made an appearance—all of the servants, even Rick, Charles, Lady Sara, and me. I went to report to Lady Sara.

Lady Philippa was propped up on pillows and thoroughly disgusted that a mystery investigation was taking place—right under her nose, so to speak—and she was left out of it.

"Never mind," Lady Sara said. "You've had adventuring enough for one evening. Just concentrate on remembering the answers to the questions I asked you. Especially concentrate on remembering who knew you were going out."

"Uncle Jed knew," she said. That was the way she addressed Donwoddie. Actually, she called him Donwobble, but not in his hearing. "Uncle Jed thought I should be allowed to go—get the mansion out of my system, was the way he put it. Uncle Charlie—" That was the way she addressed Plander. "—Uncle Charlie ordered me to stay in the house. So did Anna; she was worried about me. None of the servants would have told on me even if they'd noticed my going."

I thought it odd that they would have developed loyalty in such a short time.

She laughed and shook her head. "They're all in awe of me because I'm rich, you know. They'd do anything I wanted them to do because they'd figure there might be something in it for them."

Which left me to reflect that a rich country child could grow up

developing the same order of cynicism that I'd developed growing up as a poor child in the streets of London.

We left her, finally, with Anna perched beside her bed and Rick and Charles standing guard outside her door. Lady Sara and I went to inspect the room that had been Lady Philippa's grandfather's study. Lady Sara was right, as usual. There were old plans of the estate there, and they clearly showed the well just outside the cellar entrance—providing a source of water for the laundry, I supposed, before a separate building was constructed for it.

I said to Lady Sara, "If Lady Philippa were to die, who would inherit?"

"An excellent question," she said. "As matters stand now, the trusteeship of Donwoddie and Plander of a considerable fortune is due to end when she is twenty-one. I don't know what happens if she dies. We need to find out. We also need to find out who would profit if Lady Philippa were merely to decide to *not* live here, to dispose of Frayne Hill. That is a much more complicated question."

I said thoughtfully, "Yes. I see. Frightening her away might serve a conspirator's purpose just as effectively as murdering her. It's all a matter of intent."

"Exactly. We are handicapped somewhat in having no notion of what the intent is. I fancy that a trip to Somerset House is in order. Give John my apologies. If you leave at once, you can be there when it opens tomorrow."

John was her coachman; mention of his name meant a long nighttime ride for me. Somerset House, of course, was the large eighteenth-century building on the Thames that housed the government's General Register Office, where it was possible to examine records of marriages, deaths, and wills.

I awakened John with our apologies; it meant a forty-mile drive for him but a sleepless night for me and perhaps a hard day's work on the morrow. That was what I thrived on.

At Somerset House the next morning, I paid a shilling each for search tickets that would entitle me to look up indexes to the wills of Lady Philippa's father and grandfather. Having discovered the entries, I filled in the forms explaining what I reqired. Then I sat back and amused myself by watching the quests being conducted on all sides of me. Exclamations of delight came from one direction as a long-lost niece learned that she was heir to several hundred pounds, a small fortune to her. And groans of despair came from another when a long-lost brother worth ten thousand pounds turned out to have left it to a home for dogs.

Eventually a messenger conducted me into the adjoining room, and I quickly determined that Donwoddie and Plander's trusteeship ended when Lady Philippa attained the age of twenty-one, or on her death if that came first. If she died, that enormous estate was tied up in a complication of bequests, but none of them benefited Donwoddie and Plander. Donwoddie and Plander's conduct in opposing Lady Philippa's desire to live at Frayne Hill was therefore totally inexplicable.

I returned to Connaught Mews, where Old John, the coachman, was obtaining some much-needed rest. I needed some rest myself, so we both slept into the afternoon and then began the forty-mile drive back to Burrough Ford. It was a long trip because no coachman, and especially not Old John, cared to put an unnecessary strain on his horses by hurrying them for so many miles.

It was dark when we finally arrived. Lady Philippa was still in bed, recuperating from her ordeal in the well. Lady Sara heard my report with a nod. "Sorry you had such a long trip for nothing," she said, "but it had to be checked. Obviously the mansion remains a mystery. For some reason, it is more valuable to someone when it is empty than it is occupied, and we must find out why and to whom."

"Ah! Then there is considerable chicanery in attempting to manoeuvre Lady Philippa out of her Frayne Hill ownership."

"Perhaps. On the other hand, there may be other aspects of this case that do indeed make this a sickly mansion. Lady Philippa's adventure with the well was no accident. It was staged deliberately—in my presence—and I resent that."

I went to pay my respects to Lady Philippa, who was snuggled comfortably in her bed with Anna in attendance and Rick and Charles standing guard outside the door. I told Rick and Charles, "That's right—sit around and relax all day while I do the work."

"We've had some very tense moments of guarding to see to here," Rick said with a grin. "This character Donwoddie is going to have his beard trimmed for him if he doesn't grasp the fact that Lady Sara's instructions apply to him."

"Was he trying to break in?"

"With an armful of legal papers. We had to restrain him and convince him that this wasn't Lady Philippa's day for reading and signing anything."

Lady Philippa snickered. "I'm not signing anything unless Lady Sara approves it."

"That's an excellent position to take," I assured her.

I'd had a long day, and so, with Lady Sara's permission, I went to bed.

I was awakened suddenly by a loud scream. I reached Lady Philippa's bed a poor second behind Charles and Rick. Lady Philippa was a pathetically struggling figure intertwined in bed and bedding while a frantic Anna struggled to extricate her. The bed had collapsed. Charles and Rick, both being married men with families, were familiar with such such petty domestic crises and more than capable of dealing with them. They shooed me back to bed. Jedidiah Donwoddie and Morton Plander put in a belated appearance and were prepared to convert the collapsed bed into a legal problem, but Lady Sara convinced them that legal interpretations were temporarily out of court.

The house settled down to a restless night.

In the morning, Lady Philippa announced that she had been in bed long enough. Lady Sara suggested a picnic; the two solicitors thought that a splendid idea—for someone else. They announced their intention of spending the morning at the post office sending and receiving telegrams. Their other business had been neglected long enough. They left immediately after breakfast, having promised to dispatch riding horses and a trap from the village for our picnic.

The horses and the trap arrived—three riding horses, bay mares that looked reliable, and a brown cob pulling the trap that did not. Lady Sara looked it over thoughtfully and questioned the boys delivering the horses. With a village livery stable, one took what one could get, but one didn't have to be pleased with it. The bay mares should be more dependable. We thanked the boys and tipped them—not lavishly; it wouldn't do to corrupt the villagers so early—and when the cook had handed in a lavishly packed luncheon hamper, we made a leisurely departure with Lady Sara driving the trap and the cob with Lady Philippa a reluctant passenger, turning south and heading into the country rather than north toward the village.

It quickly developed that the mare riding horses were plodders, whereas the brown cob had viciousness bred into it. "I should have harnessed one of the mares to the trap and ridden this horse myself," Lady Sara said. "However—no matter, I can handle it."

All went well for a time, but the cob became increasingly restless; finally it reared and decided it wanted to go sideways and without the trap. Lady Sara hauled on the reins masterfully, but suddenly the trap proved unequal to the strain. A front wheel locked and the flimsy vehicle skidded sideways. Lady Philippa clung to the seat, her face white. Lady Sara, by hauling first on one

rein and then on another, kept the trap skewed half forward, hauled viciously when the mare attempted again to go sideways, and finally brought it to a quivering halt.

Rick and Charles were there to grasp the reins and steady the horse.

"Wow!" Rick said. "That was one prize-winning exercise!"

Lady Sara stood up and looked about her. "That little grove looks like a splendid place for a picnic," she said. "It'll give us a chance to repair the trap and let the horses quiet down."

I took the picnic hamper and picked out a pleasant sward that looked suitable for a picnic. Rick and Charles tied the other horses and set about quieting the mare.

I said to Lady Sara, "Do you suppose it was done deliberately?"

"Does an unruly horse do anything deliberately?" she asked. "Perhaps someone took a chance and had it almost pay off."

"You really can handle a horse," Lady Philippa said admiringly. "When it started trying to go sideways, I would have thought no one could handle it. Let's see what Cook has provided for our lunch."

Cook came through nobly. There were five different kinds of sandwiches and all of the trimmings a respectable picnic requires. We stuffed ourselves, and then Rick and Charles, by dint of strenuous effort, freed the front wheel and harnessed one of the mares to the trap for the return trip. Charles undertook to ride the cob, but after a brief effort he decided it were better led. He and Charles shared a mount.

As we approached Burrough Ford, we met Morton Plander, who had anxiously come to meet us. "I don't trust that liveryman, and I was worried about you," he said. "Did the horses give you any problems?"

"A few," Lady Sara said. "But problems exist to be overcome. At least, those problems did."

She gave Rick and Charles a nod; they were to return the trap and horses and find out who selected them for us. They also would send a telegram to a reliable liveryman in Reading and have horses we could depend on delivered on the morrow.

Rick, Charles, and I launched another pub crawl that evening. This time we weren't interrupted. We started again with the White Lion and moved on to the Pig and Whistle without anything eventful happening. At the third pub, its name, The Mafeking Hero, evidenced its youth. It commemorated a local lad who had distinguished himself at the battle of Mafeking in the Boer War a scant few years before. We settled down in the

Mafeking Hero, found its beer to our liking—though not the equal of the White Lion's homemade beer—and turned our ears to the local gossip.

Three men who were obviously strangers, outfitted in leather togs with cases of equipment that they parked at the door, were the object of the villagers' curiosity—so much so that for a time no one paid the slightest attention to us.

"Have a look," I whispered to Rick.

He and Charles moved to a table near the door and, without seeming to do so, studied the cases of equipment. After a time, they returned to my table.

"Surveyors," Rick said. "They're very close-mouthed, too. No one knows what they may be surveying, or why."

"There isn't much that would be worth surveying in a place like this," I mused. "Still, I suppose property lines have to be resurveyed occasionally. Lady Sara will be interested."

Lady Sara decided that a frontal assault was in order. She said to Donwoddie, "Know anything about the surveyors that are hanging around the town?"

"They aren't exactly 'hanging around,'" he said. "I engaged them myself to reestablish the Frayne Hill property lines. In the event that Lady Philippa decides to dispose of the property, it would be well to be certain just what she owns."

"And—if she doesn't decide to dispose of the property?"

"It still would be well to know precisely what she owns. After all, the settlement of her estate is only five years away. As long as we are here and can supervise, it is well to have the survey done now."

"Is he within his rights as a trustee?" I asked Lady Sara.

"Entirely within his rights," she said. "Were you able to find out how long the surveyors have been working in the vicinity?"

"Just since we arrived."

"Frayne Hill becomes more and more mysterious. We must be missing something. Here we have a decrepit old mansion whose chief value is sentimental, a mediocre farm, and a plot of land near a decaying little town that only survives with everyone taking in everyone else's laundry, as the saying goes. There is no prosperous enterprise within thirty miles of here. Is it possible that Donwoddie and Plander know something that is strictly in Lady Philippa's interest and that they are keeping it to themselves? That would represent considerable self-sacrifice on their part. By seeming to oppose Lady Philippa's interests now, they may be sacrificing a highly profitable connection in a few years' time. It is dif-

ficult to say what their motives could be. And then we have all these mysterious things going on around Lady Philippa—beds collapsing, horses running away, a cover removed from a well just before Lady Philippa chanced to walk that way. These things are not only mysterious, they are dangerous. Until we work out the solicitors' motives—why they should be manipulating things against their own obvious interest—" She paused. "As I said, no prosperous enterprise within thirty miles of here. Burrough Ford is not even on the railway—" She paused again. "Now, I wonder about that. Send a telegram in the morning—but no. I'll have to take care of this myself, very quietly. John is due for another long drive to London, and this will require some influence that only I can exert. Hopefully, I can take care of it in one day."

It took her two days. She left careful instructions for the protection of Lady Philippa—Anna was not to let her out of her sight, and Rick and Charles were never to be beyond hailing distance. I had a complicated investigation of my own to carry out. Unfortunately, my investigation came to nothing, but when she returned in the evening, two days later, I was able to report the other objectives were accomplished. "And you?" I asked.

"A more oblique pair of villainies it has never been my pleasure to unravel," she announced. "The problem is how to bring the chickens home to roost. That, unfortunately, will not be easy. Has there been any action at all here?"

"None, except that Donwoddie and Plander are getting restless. I told them you were embarked on an investigation of your own that should settle Frayne Hill and divert Lady Philippa's attentions elsewhere. That seemed to please them."

"It would," Lady Sara said. "The problem is this: Everything is perfectly clear, but there is no proof. Without proof, there is no case. Without a case, it will never be possible to prove anything, and two unqualified villains will escape unscathed. Wipe the frown off your face and let's get to work."

Both Rick and Charles grew up on farms and were experts with horses and with horsemanship. That ruled me out for the kind of deception Lady Sara had in mind. Anyone watching me with a horse for two minutes would know immediately that the horse and I had no common ground for communication.

When Donwoddie and Plander appeared, they immediately wanted to know what progress Lady Sara had made. "What I've decided," Lady Sara said, "was that you were on the right track all along. If Lady Philippa insists on being a farmer, she should be required to *be* a farmer. In other words, a few days of genuine farm

work will quickly cure her of that abnormal craving. What I propose to do is give her the farm and insist that she run it. A day or two of driving a heavy farm waggon across the fields, and hauling heavy loads, should be cure enough."

She described in detail what she had in mind, and as the plan took shape, Donwoddie's jaw dropped and Plander shook his head and allowed that it was the most brilliant thing he had ever heard of. "You are absolutely correct," Plander said. "Provided, of course, that no injury can come to the young lady. I take it that you will ensure that Lady Philippa cannot come to harm through hard work?"

"How could she?" Lady Sara wanted to know. "A few strained muscles have no lasting effect. A state of exhaustion at night results in nothing that a good night's sleep can't correct. She might, of course, develop an abnormal appetite and gain a little weight—an excellent condition among farm girls."

Lady Sara sent for Lady Philippa and described her plan. Lady Philippa, who had already been rehearsed in private, reacted with a rare enthusiasm. "Just what I always wanted to do," she said. "Run the farm myself. That old wheezer Wilson doesn't know the first thing about farming, as anyone can see with one glance. I can't understand why you left the farm in his hands for so long. When do I take over?"

"As soon as you feel ready," Lady Sara said. "Mr. Donwoddie and Mr. Plander should perhaps give Mr. Wilson some instructions, but there shouldn't be anything complicated about that. All they need to do is make clear to him that he will be under her instructions for the next few days. When Lady Philippa has had her fill of farming, she can return the management to Mr. Wilson. Would that be satisfactory, Lady Philippa?"

"It'll be a warm day in January when that happens," Lady Philippa said happily. "How do I start?"

"I think," Lady Sara said with a wink at Donwoddie, "I chanced to notice a large pile of cow dung down by the barn. It needs to be loaded onto a waggon and then hauled over to a cornfield for the fall fertilizing. Doesn't that strike you as a good way to begin?"

"An excellent way to begin," Donwoddie said. This was unusual because he had not previously agreed with her on anything. "Not exactly a fragrant operation, but as far as farming is concerned, an essential and critically important one. Perhaps those energetic young men who have been acting as Lady Philippa's escorts could instruct her. They seem to be knowledgeable farmers."

"They are highly knowledgeable," Lady Sara agreed. She sent for

Rick and Charles, and Lady Philippa's farming education began. It was not, as Donwoddie had suggested, a fragrant education, and Lady Sara insisted that Lady Philippa do the work herself with no more than a small amount of rudimentary instruction from Rick and Charles. Lady Philippa proved to be a willing student albeit a rather clumsy one, and the Messrs Donwoddie and Plander, perched on a fence to watch, had a good laugh at her expense. Knowing who the last laugh was going to be on, she took it all good-naturedly.

The hauling of bales of hay placed the work on a rather more strenuous level. Lady Sara had been a bit anxious about this herself, but, as with so many chores, once the technique was mastered, all proved far simpler than had first appeared. Even flimsy girl-muscles proved equal to surprising loads when Lady Philippa was shown how to do it. She was surprised and pleased herself, but in bed that night, Anna had to apply rigorous massages, and the second day was far worse. Lady Sara had, in the meantime, supposedly returned to London and left everything in the hands of Rick and Charles, with occasional meddlesome interference from Donwoddie and Plander.

As far as they were concerned, Lady Philippa put her foot down. "If I'm running the farm, I intend to run it my way," she told them. "I don't mind your criticism, but don't expect me to pay any attention to it. You don't know any more about farming than I do—rather, a great deal less, I would say." It was a telling blow, and they had to retire to their place on the fence.

I noticed they were having more and more palaver with Young Ebenezer Wilson, the farmer's son. The regular farm hands had little to do with him. Young Eb, who threw his weight around to little purpose, was no more popular than his father.

Out of sight of the perching position Donwoddie and Plander—and Young Eb—had chosen, a great deal of farm work went on, but this was done by Rick, who crawled out of his hiding place in a bale of hay as soon as it was safe to do so, and by the regular farm hands, who understood what was going on and who delighted in putting something over on the solicitors and their cohorts. If Lady Philippa had done only one third of the work the solicitors thought she was doing, she would have been a well-worked young lady indeed, but they were too lazy to move out of sight of the mansion to see what was going on. Of all of the schemes Lady Sara had thought up, this was, without a doubt, the slickest. The one thing that bothered me was that while we were putting something over on the solicitors, they thought they were putting some-

thing over on us, and we had no idea what that was. Lady Sara, on surreptitious visits to the farm, had been going over the whole scheme carefully with Lady Philippa, however, and the young heiress agreed that nothing could be accomplished without taking some risk. Getting the firm of Donwoddie and Plander out of her hair would be worth it.

And so the farce continued: Lady Philippa sweat genuine sweat when it couldn't be helped, performed genuine hard work when it couldn't be avoided, and developed her muscles in ways I wouldn't have believed. Having watched the illusion produced by her pitching a bale of hay off the waggon, I went back and told Donwoddie I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself.

"She'll soon get tired of it," he predicted smugly. At least her moans in the morning, from aching muscles, were genuine, and she made them more convincing every morning. And, of course, he held the trump card, whatever that was, and he was convinced that we knew nothing about it. As far as I was concerned, he was right. I didn't.

He wanted to know when Lady Sara would be returning. I gave her one more day, which meant that on the afternoon of the second day, everyone's trump cards, both the solicitors' and ours, would be played in one convulsive grand slam. Someone was going to be surprised. I hoped it wouldn't be us.

Of course, Donwoddie and Plander knew nothing about the driving lessons Rick was giving Lady Philippa with each outward trip of the waggon. She was getting more skilled than I would have believed.

The timing worked perfectly. Lady Sara's carriage, with Old John in the box, swung grandly up to the Frayne Hill veranda, and from somewhere beyond the barn came screams that were nothing if not realistic. They proclaimed a runaway waggon, and one came into view a moment later, with Lady Philippa hauling frantically at the reins. The horses were furiously neighing and rearing, the waggon almost went over each time it veered, but Lady Philippa clung to it magnificently. Its careers threatened to bounce her out if they did not fling her sideways. Rick crept precariously from his hiding place and secured a grip on the reins. but the solicitors' agents had, if anything, overdone things. No mere force exerted on those slender lines of leather was going to re-establish control.

From the direction of Burrough Ford swept a totally unexpected ingredient, one that was, to Donwoddie and Plander, the last thing they were expecting. I was only half expecting it myself: a

mounted constabulary, led by the Chief Constable himself, splendidly horsed—no doubt this was the first time in his career that he'd had the opportunity for such a display. At that stage of police history, runaway horses were still something the police were both mentally and physically equipped to deal with, and they set about it right smartly.

They gave quite as much attention to the two solicitors as they did to the horses, however, much to the indignation of those gentlemen.

The Chief Constable brought his horse to a halt beside Donwoddie. "You, Sir!" he thundered. "A gentleman, attempting to manipulate that young woman's life for sheer, sordid financial gain!" He could scarcely contain his outrage. "The Chancery Court will give full attention to Lady Philippa's petition to have new trustees appointed for her, and I will endorse it myself!"

Charles, having quieted the horses, removed a harness and revealed the telling blow—a small mat of clotted blood. A cushion of nettles had been skillfully embedded below the harness so that every pressure applied with the reins would lacerate the flesh further. The second horse had experienced the same thing.

Donwoddie said nothing. There was, really, nothing he could say, and Plander was equally mute. Then he decided to plead ignorance, but the farmer's family was fairly caught and had already confessed.

I cornered Lady Sara. "The motive! What were they up to?"

"A fortune in commuter land. They were heavy stockholders in the Grand Southwestern Railway. Not only in railway rights-of-way but in access rights to business properties and new residential developments. Without the railway, the land is of limited value. The man with holdings in both literally held all the aces."

"The scoundrel!" I muttered.

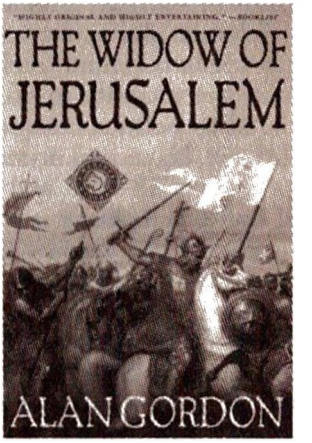
"He was that," Lady Sara said. "He was willing to risk Lady Philippa's life on the chance of frightening her into selling her holdings. But all that is straightened out, now. The mansion is no longer sickly. I'm afraid nothing can be done about the sickly people, but at least Lady Philippa won't have to associate with them any longer."

Booked & Printed

ROBERT C. HAHN

The explosion of historical mysteries has reached into almost every age and resulted in some historical figures developing hidden talents as investigators while other figures become foils for the forerunners of our modern private eyes. The Middle East, which remains a hotbed of intrigue and war today, was no less so in past millennia. Several authors are delving into that storied past to create entertaining mysteries.

Alan Gordon's highly original series features Theophilos, a member of the Fool's Guild and as such a much-traveled storyteller who roams all of Europe and the Middle East during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In his fourth adventure, **The Widow of Jerusalem** (St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95), Theophilos recounts his role in trying to end or mitigate the destruction of the Third Crusade.



The Fool's Guild is a sort of behind-the-scenes secret brotherhood determined to manipulate world leaders and affairs in order to promote order—realpolitik with a world view rather than a nationalistic one. Guild members undergo rigorous training in the arts of the fool and learn to sacrifice individual goals for the goals of the guild. It is a bold concept and it powerfully augments the usual concept of the fool as jester or clown. Gordon's fools are skilled entertainers, as well as confidantes, assassins, lovers, and warriors. Naturally, the Fool's Guild was bound to conflict with the powerful Christian church as well as with secular powers of various kinds.

Two other fools have worked unsuccessfully to induce Richard the Lionhearted to accept a truce with Saracen leader Saladin. Theophilos has contrived to convince King Philip of France to abandon the crusade and return home. But Richard's slaughter of almost 3,000 hostages has ended any possibility of a truce and the Crusade seems destined to continue with its attendant battlefield slaughter as well as continued unrest in Europe. Now, Theophilos and the fool, Scarlet, undertake a different tack to end the war.

Their base of operations is Tyre, where Scarlet serves as the fool of

Isabelle, Queen of Jerusalem. Isabelle is actually queen of nothing since Jerusalem is still in Saracen hands and the young "queen's" second husband, Conrad, rules in Tyre while Richard favors another's claim to the throne of Jerusalem. With a kingdom at stake, Scarlet and Theophilos are not the only ones scheming, and murder is a price some are willing to pay.

Weaving together historical facts, leading historical figures, and the imagined machinations of Theophilos and Scarlet, Gordon creates a tale of intrigue and bravery laced with good humor. His concept of the Fool's Guild gives him a freedom to explore and exploit a wonderful variety of locations from London to Venice to Byzantium to Tyre and their cultures, high and low.

Prolific writer Paul Doherty (a k a Michael Clyne, Paul Harding), best known for his medieval mysteries featuring Hugh Corbett and his Amerotke series set in ancient Egypt, has developed a series dealing with Alexander the Great and featuring as detective, Alexander's physician-advisor, Telamon.

Telamon shares one important characteristic of Gordon's fools: he can speak his mind freely and bluntly to Alexander, something few have the temerity to do. Alexander is mercurial, vain, brilliant, and brutal as befits a conqueror. In **The Godless Man** (Carroll & Graf, $25.00), his second mystery set during Alexander's brief but meteoric career, it is 334 B.C. and Alexander has just taken the important city of Ephesus. Ephesus is wracked by divisions: the Oligarchs, who had supported the Persians defeated by Alexander, and the Democrats, who had resisted Persian rule, are at one another's throats.

When a group of leading Oligarchs take sanctuary in a temple, Alexander guarantees their safety and posts guards both inside and out. Despite those precautions, all inside the temple are slain, brutally and quietly, without those standing guard ever hearing a single scream. The murders are puzzling and frightening and presage more bloodshed and a threat not only to Alexander's control of the city but to his reputation and possibly his life. A clever assassin nicknamed the Centaur is loose in the city seeking to fatally undermine Alexander if he's unable to kill him.

While Telamon serves as Doherty's detective seeking to uncover the who, how, and why of the temple slaughter as well as other murders and plots, Alexander dominates by force of personality. Doherty portrays an Alexander at once grand and petty, valiant and vainglorious, bold yet calculating, as he establishes himself in the conquered city and plots his next shrewd stroke against the Persians. It is a convincing portrait fleshed out by quotes from classic sources about Alexander's conquests.

Smyrna, near Ephesus, and rebuilt by Alexander is the setting for Albert A. Bell, Jr.'s **All Roads Lead to Murder** (High Country, $21.95).

Set some 400 years later, Rome is now ascendant in the region and Smyrna, located on an important caravan route, is a melting pot of languages, cultures, and religions, including in the year A.D. 83, nascent Christianity. Bell's detective is Pliny the Younger and Bell turns the keen observer of his time into a young, eager observer of the sights and people that surround him on his journey from Antioch to Rome. The murder of one of Pliny's fellow travelers, an obnoxious fellow, brings the caravan to a halt in Smyrna until the killer can be identified and justice carried out, and Pliny assumes the role of lead investigator. Like many writers of the past, Bell uses the caravan's makeup to explore a wide diversity of customs and beliefs: Marcus Carolus, a German merchant who has Latinized his name; Lucius Cornutus, a government functionary given to lavish spending; a "witch" and her group of female fellow believers; Marcellus, a rogue-in-training; a physician named Luke. Bell's prose is somewhat stilted and the romance he introduces contrived, but his depictions of daily life and routines, the state of medical knowledge, and the inspired way that Christian beliefs and history are woven into the story make this an entertaining historical mystery.

Consisting of three short noir novels previously published in Great Britain, **The White Trilogy** (Justin, Charles, $14.95) by Ken Bruen tracks two Southeast London detectives, Brant and Roberts, and a revolving cast of cops as they hunt down a brutal assortment of criminals: a madman bent on assassinating the English cricket team, a gang that lynches its enemies from streetlights, a serial rapist, a pair of cop-killing panhandlers. The novels are not directly linked, though each one revolves around a central, appalling crime. Bruen's cops engage in what might be called police work by attrition: the cases are closed, but it's not clear who gets the worst of the struggle. Meanwhile, the consequences of violence spare no one. The bleak mood is emphasized by Bruen's staccato prose and his frequent name-dropping of gloomy literary figures, while his cops seem to wield their crude, wise-cracking slang to keep despair at bay.

Even more damaged and desperate than the London cops of *The White Trilogy* is Jack Taylor, the protagonist and narrator of Bruen's **The Guards** (St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95). A former member of the police force in Galway, Ireland, and now a P.I., Taylor doesn't let his investigation of a young girl's death interfere with his true calling, drinking himself to death. Here, Bruen's harsh writing style is at its peak; sentences are fractured, as if Taylor's thoughts are too painful to finish. Despite the anguish of Bruen's characters, both *The White Trilogy* and *The Guards* are first-rate novels, difficult to put down and impossible to forget.

—Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

OPEN AND SHUT

JOHN L. FRENCH

One o'clock, thirteen hundred by the twenty-four-hour clock, almost the end of the shift. It had been a slow day as far as those of us who worked in the Crime Lab was concerned. By slow I mean that we weren't called to any crime scenes other than what you'd expect on an October morning in Baltimore.

We began our tour at six A.M. with no calls pending. That didn't last long. By seven the B&E calls started coming in as business and shop owners got to work and discovered that burglars had struck overnight. At eight the requests came in from the School Police. Vandals had hit three different schools. By nine the impound lot called with a list of recovered stolen cars that had to be dusted for prints. Ten o'clock brought the first of two bank robberies that went down that day.

We handled them all, finishing one call then responding to another until the backlog was cleared. By noon only Max Hammond was still out—on the second bank hold-up. As I said, it was a quiet day by Baltimore standards—no rapes, no shootings, no serious assaults, and no dead bodies. That is, until Karen Johnson got a D.O.A. call up in College Town.

Baltimore City has more than its share of colleges and universities. The University of Maryland Medical School System is located near the Inner Harbor and the Camden Yards stadiums. The Peabody Conservatory is closer in to downtown, off Charles Street. Go north on Charles and you'll pass Johns Hopkins University, Loyola, and the Notre Dame College for Women. Turn northeast from there and you'll find Morgan State University. Head south and west and there's Coppin State.

If you follow sports at all, especially basketball or lacrosse, you've heard of some of these schools. Most find their way into some playoff or another. And all are even stronger in academic achievement than they are in sports.

There are smaller colleges too, ones you've never read about in the sports pages. Most are specialty schools, such as the Culinary

Arts Institute. Others are devoted to incorporating a philosophy or system of beliefs into the academic life, such as St. William's Academy in Guilford, a very conservative Christian college tucked in among the homes of some of Baltimore's wealthier citizens.

With all these schools and all the students who attend them there comes a major problem—housing. Not everyone lives on campus. Not even the bigger schools have room for all the students who attend. And some of those who could find dorm space prefer the less restricted life off the college grounds.

Some of the smaller schools have no housing—St. William's especially. It is an older school, having been well established before most of its neighbors moved in around it. As the school grew, what dormitories it had gave way to classrooms.

What we call College Town is where most of the off-campus students wind up. It's the Charles–St. Paul–Calvert Street corridor from Twenty-eighth Street north up into the exclusive homes of Barclay and Guilford. Being centrally located, students from most of the schools mentioned above can be found there. They live in homes that were once three story family dwellings, now cut up into rooms and apartments. Some of the houses are devoted to students from just one school, and are in fact owned and rented by that school. Others are privately owned and are open to whoever can come up with the first and last months' rent.

D.O.A.s in College Town are not that unusual. Every school year produces its share of suicides, drug and alcohol overdoses, and death by stupidity. Last year a sophomore bet that he could chug-a-lug a quart of malt liquor while hanging out a third floor window. He lost. The year before that a junior built a homemade howitzer from compressed air and PVC piping. It was designed to shoot potatoes and similar vegetables across great distances. When it didn't fire right away he looked down the barrel to see what the problem was. Only then did it go off. The M.E.'s report, "Death by Potato Gun," was reprinted in several forensic journals.

At first Karen's case looked to be one of these cases. The 911 caller reported hearing a shot come from behind his housemate's closed door, a door locked from the inside. The caller said that they had forced the door in and found the deceased lying on the floor.

All this we got from the dispatcher who had given out the call. "Looks like another overachieving high school student who couldn't handle the shock of getting B's in college," Karen said

before leaving. To the supervisor she said, "Ed, I'll call if I need help." No one expected her to call, not on a suicide.

After she left we sat around and waited for the clock to tick down to quitting time. At twenty minutes to the hour we went down to the garage to unpack our personal equipment from the trucks. Just as I got back in the office, the phone rang.

"It's for you," my supervisor said, looking right at me. I didn't like the grin on his face.

"Technician Grace, how are you this fine afternoon?" It was Detective Sergeant Joshua Parker of the Homicide Unit. Parker and I don't get along very well, so I knew this wasn't a social call. There were no pending court cases that involved both of us. And the fact that he was making an effort to be polite meant only one thing—I wasn't going to go home on time that day.

"Just fine, Sergeant. How are you and how can I help you?"

"I'm on the Calvert Street scene. We have need of your knowledge."

Now I was confused. Calvert Street was the location to which Karen had been dispatched. If the scene was that complicated or involved, or if it had proven to be homicide and not suicide, she would have called Ed directly, and not gone through Parker. Besides, she knew the rules—this close to quitting time, you waited until the next shift came in to call for help.

"Sergeant, Karen's on the scene, she's every bit as good . . ."

"As you, Technician Grace? Actually, she's somewhat better. And it's not your crime scene skills I need. I'm also calling Detective Arnold, you can ride up with him."

"What did he want?" Ed asked after I had hung up the phone.

"He wants me at the D.O.A. scene, Rich Arnold too."

"I guess you better go then," Ed said, putting on his coat. "See you tomorrow."

Rich Arnold was a homicide detective under Parker's supervision. Like me, he had been getting ready to go off duty when Parker called.

"Do you have any idea what this is all about?" Arnold asked me as he stopped to pick me up at the garage entrance.

I threw my equipment bag into the back seat. "None whatsoever. I haven't done anything to tick him off lately. You?"

"There's more red than black on my side of the board."

The names of all the homicide victims go up on a big board—names in black are closed cases, those in red are unsolved. It's an ever present reminder of how well you're doing, or how badly.

Rich Arnold had been in Homicide for a little over two years.

During that time he had been partnered with Alexander Klein, in the hope that some of Klein's genius for solving cases would rub off on him. With Klein's help Arnold had managed to maintain a decent closure rate. Klein, however, had been detailed to a combined DEA/FBI/BPD task force for the past three months, and the column under Arnold's name had started to look like someone had slit its throat.

Normally I wouldn't let a comment like Arnold had just made go without some kind of smart-mouthed reply. At the least I should have said, "So what else is new?" That would have given him the opportunity to rag me about some less-than-stellar moves I may have made lately—not that I make that many, mind you, but no one's perfect. I let it go this time. I was busy puzzling over why Parker might need me, but not my crime scene skills. I decided that there was probably a lot of evidence to be carried from the scene and Parker had selected his two least favorite people to do the donkeywork.

As Arnold pulled onto Calvert Street from Twenty-ninth, I started counting the police cars that were parked in front of the scene. That's a way of judging how serious a scene is before you get to it. You get a call for a shooting. You pull up and there's only one patrol car there, then probably someone shot himself in the foot. However, if you pull up and there's more than a half dozen, all with their flashers and blue lights on, well, cancel any plans you had made for that evening.

There were only three marked cars parked on Calvert Street, about right for a suicide. They would belong to the primary officer, his sergeant, and the officer called in to guard the entrance and take the names of all those who enter and exit. There was one unmarked car, and it belonged to Parker and the detective who had caught the call. Finally, Karen's Crime Lab van was double-parked in front of the scene itself.

"Who's got the call?" I asked Arnold as he pulled in front of Karen's van.

"Wingate." Janet Wingate was newly appointed to Homicide. This would be one of her first solo cases.

"She's good," I offered, then waited for Arnold's opinion.

"Better than me," was the surprising reply. "Give her a few years, she'll be better than most of us."

We got out of the car, walked up to the house, and introduced ourselves to the officer at the door. He took our names and unit numbers, then directed us to the second floor. "Top of the stairs," he told us as we walked past him.

I'd been in this neighborhood before, on burglaries mostly, but also on some more serious calls. I was familiar with this type of house. A long hall led back from the front door. Midway down the hall was an open doorway to a big living room. At the end of the hall were stairs and a shorter corridor taking you to a sizable dining room and from there into an equally large kitchen. There was another open doorway between the living and dining rooms.

On the second floor there would be three bedrooms—one in the front and two smaller ones in the rear—a bathroom, and yet another flight of steps that went to the third floor. Up there would be either two more bedrooms or attic storage.

Being careful not to touch anything, Arnold and I climbed the stairs. At the top we found Parker, Wingate, Karen, and another uniformed officer. All four were gathered in the front bedroom.

Parker greeted us with a nod and a "Gentlemen." I nodded back as Arnold asked, "How can we help, Sergeant?" Neither of the women said anything. I didn't know about Wingate but from the looks I was getting from Karen they were no happier about our being there then we were. The officer looked like a child who had just witnessed a major argument between his parents. He was staring out the window and trying very hard to pretend that he wasn't in the room.

There was no body in the room. With Karen's camera bag and equipment case on the bed and two police-style clipboards on the dresser this didn't look like a crime scene.

"Where's the body?" I asked Karen.

In reply I got an icy stare. Finally she pointed to Parker and said, "Ask him. We're not expert enough for this case."

Parker answered my question just as I was about to ask him what he had said to get the normally placid Karen so mad at him. "The deceased is in the left rear bedroom."

"My left or your left?" I interrupted. He almost answered me but then he noticed we were both facing the same way.

Ignoring me, Parker continued, "His name is Brian Rice. He was a student at St. William's Academy, as are the three young men waiting in the living room. All four live here. The three men downstairs were sitting at the dining room table this morning when they heard noises from upstairs."

"Noises?" Arnold asked, emphasizing the plural.

"Yes, two of them, the first louder than the second. One of them," Parker looked at his notebook, "Jason Prisca, came up to investigate. Rice's door was locked. He knocked and got no

answer. He called up the other two, Donald Meyers and Jared Wallace. When they failed to get an answer the three of them decided to break the door in."

"Did they?"

"Go back and see for yourself, Technician Grace. You too, Detective Arnold. Then tell me what you think."

The room was what I expected. Despite being one of the two smaller bedrooms, it was still larger than most college dorms, more so when you consider that Rice hadn't had to share it. Giving the lie to most movies about college, the room was reasonably neat. A made-up bed was against a wall in one corner of the room, a computer station in the opposite corner. There were no clothes strewn about the floor, and the flat surfaces of the bureau, dresser, and computer table were mostly free of books and papers. These were presumably in the bookcase and small file cabinet that made up the rest of the room's furnishings. Everything was as it should be, except for the forced-open door and the body on the floor.

While Arnold went to look over the now late Mr. Rice, I checked out the door. It was covered with black powder from Karen's fingerprint brush, so it was safe for me to play with if I had to.

I didn't. It was a standard inner door with one passage lock and one bolt lock. Both were more for privacy than preventing theft. The passage lock in the doorknob was hardly damaged by the forced opening. No surprise there. In the Crime Lab we don't even consider a door locked if it's secured with only one of them. The bolt lock was a little better. I knew that type of lock, used them in my house. It had a half-inch barrel that would withstand a quarter ton of force. Put it on a good door with a good frame and you'll need an axe to get past it. In this case, the cheap wooden frame split before the lock gave.

Arnold looked up at me. "Death by natural causes," he said.

It was an old joke, one I'd heard the first week I'd been a technician. "Sure," I replied. "Shoot yourself in the head, it's only natural that you die. One shot or two?"

"Just the one. The first shot they heard must have been a hesitation shot. The second did the trick."

I looked around. No bullet holes in the wall or furniture. Then I started to get an idea of why Parker asked for us specifically. I looked around for something else I suddenly knew would be missing. I didn't find it.

I stuck my head out the door. Parker was waiting in the hall. "You rolled him?"

No one is supposed to touch a dead body before the medical examiners arrive. That rule didn't stop most detectives, and particularly Sergeant Parker. Once the crime scene photos are taken, he's got his gloves on and the corpse at an angle so he can see what's beneath it. He then very carefully lowers it back to its original position.

Knowing what Parker's answer would be, I waited for the nod of his head then asked the big one. "There's nothing underneath him, is there?" This time he gave a half smile and shook his head no.

"Should I tell him or wait until he gets it himself?" jerking my head back toward the room and Arnold.

"Better tell him, otherwise we'll be here all day."

"No bullet hole," Arnold said as I came back into the room. "Must have been an echo."

I don't know if he was talking to me or to himself, but I interrupted and asked, "Rich, where's the gun?"

He looked around, checking under the bed and every other piece of furniture in the room. "Under the . . ." he started, but stopped as I shook my head.

"Parker says no."

"Then someone's lying to us."

"If you go by their story, all three are lying."

"That's what I thought, too," came Parker's voice from the doorway. Standing against the shattered frame, he went on, "But then I thought that these are college students, and all three couldn't be so stupid as to fake a suicide and forget the gun. So it's possible that only one of them did it."

"And there's the matter of the second shot," I added. "Why would they make that up?"

"Exactly, Grace. So before we take all three downtown and start working on them, I thought it would be a good idea to explore all possibilities."

Parker looked at the two of us. "So now you know why I called you two in particular. In addition to being fairly competent at your respective jobs, the two of you are overly fond of mystery stories. That gives you a unique perspective over those of us with better ways of spending our time. It also gives you your big chance. Here it is, gentlemen—a locked room with an unexplained gunshot. You are not to leave this house without some idea of what went down in this room. Once I have that, I can surprise whichever one of those kids who thinks he's smarter than we are." He turned and left us to our puzzle.

Arnold gave me a "Now what do we do?" look and started

searching the room. For what I don't know. Maybe he hoped he'd find the gun someplace where no one bothered to look. Either that or a note Rice left detailing exactly how he'd done it. Me, I decided to examine the door.

"Locked room" puzzles are nothing new to me, or to any crime scene investigator who's been on his share of burglaries. How the burglar entered is always the first question you ask yourself. Where did he come in, and how did he get through? Most of the time that's an easy question to answer—the window's smashed, the door's kicked in, there's a big hole in the wall. Sometimes it's not so easy and there's no apparent point of entry. Think of it as a locked house problem.

The first thing you do is check the windows. Are they all shut and locked? If not, how easily do they open? The door locks are next. Can they be unlocked from the outside without a key? Most deadbolt locks can't be. Passage locks, the kind in most doorknobs, are way too easy. One of my favorite crime scene tricks is to ask the victim to lock me out of the house. Then, using only the small blade of my pocketknife, I show them how easy it is to get back inside. In most cases, I can usually open the door faster with my knife then they can with their key.

If the doors and windows don't pan out, you look for other means. I've had cases where the burglar was able to reach through the mail slot to unlock the door. Thieves have been known to enter maintenance rooms and break into adjoining apartments through closet walls. Once inside, they pile shoeboxes and clothing over the hole to cover it up.

None of this helped me in this case. This was a room, not a house. A brief glance out one of the windows showed me that they were too high to climb up to, and there was nothing in the alley below to use as a climbing aid.

No answers came from the door either. The deadbolt lock could only be locked from inside. The door was hinged from the inside, and so couldn't easily be removed and replaced.

Discounting trapdoors and secret panels, I mentally reviewed all the cases I'd been on and the stories I'd read. I recalled one shooting scene I'd processed where a bullet accidentally fired in one room had passed through the ceiling and killed a woman in an upstairs bedroom. I looked at the hole in the deceased's head. A close contact wound on the right side of the head. The bullet had gone straight in. Rice would have had to be lying with his head on the carpet with the shooter pressing the gun against the ceiling and that still didn't allow for the powder burns. Just the same, I

went downstairs and checked the ceiling for bullet holes. I didn't find any.

"I got it, Grace," Arnold almost shouted as I came back into the room. Without my asking he pointed to a thick book sitting on the computer table, which had apparently also served Rice as a desk. It was the Doubleday edition of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes.*

I watched as Arnold walked over to the body. He stood where Rice would have been before the shot. Making a gun from his right thumb and forefinger, he held it to his temple.

"BANG!" Arnold shouted. Then he turned to the window and said, "Bang!" again, but in a softer voice. "It has to be," he muttered, taking the two steps to the window and opening it up. "Yes!" he yelled, pumping the air with his right fist.

Arnold ran out of the room to get Parker. As he passed me he said, "Thor Bridge, Grace, Thor Bridge."

No, it couldn't be. I looked over at the Holmes book. Then I thought of the two "gunshots," one louder than the other. The second could have been the window slamming shut.

I raised the sash, looked out the window, and saw what I had missed in my previous cursory glance. I waited and watched from above as Arnold had Karen photograph and recover his discovery. Then I went downstairs to witness Arnold's triumph. Damn, I hate it when he's right.

They were in the dining room. Parker was shouting at the uniformed officers, "Well look again. Make sure it isn't stashed someplace."

I started to ask what he was looking for, but he wasn't yelling at me and I didn't want him to start. Instead, I looked at what was displayed on the dining room table.

There was a long piece of twine. Around one end was tied a brick; the other end was frayed, as if something had been pulled or cut off. Tied in the middle of the twine was a wooden dowel, long and thick enough to have held the window open. Next to this assembly was a broken piece of plastic, the kind used to make pistol grips.

Karen started taking pictures of the display as Arnold played Great Detective. " 'Thor Bridge' is a Sherlock Holmes story in which a woman commits suicide but makes it look like murder. She makes something like this—" He gestured toward the arrangement on the table. "—and shoots herself on a bridge. When she releases the gun, the weight of the rock, which was hung over the side of the bridge, pulls it and the gun into the water.

"In this case," he continued, "the brick was tied to the dowel and hung outside the window. Rice kept it from falling by holding

onto the other end of the string, which was tied to the gun. After he shot himself, his hand relaxed and he let go of the gun. The brick fell, pulling the gun out the window and the window shut."

"And why," asked the uniform who had greeted us at the door when we arrived, "would he go through all that trouble just to kill himself?"

Karen spoke up. "In some religions suicide is a sin. You can't be buried from the church or in holy ground."

"Or maybe," Wingate added, "he wanted to get his roommates in trouble. Or he just thought of it as one last joke on the system."

Someone had to ask, so I did. "Where's the gun?"

Arnold pointed to the broken plastic. "That's all that's left of it. This is Baltimore, Grace. The life expectancy of a gun on the sidewalk or in an alley can be measured in minutes. Sometime between Rice shooting himself and the uniforms' canvass, someone came along and snatched it up. This piece must have broken off when the gun hit the alley."

"It will turn up, probably after a murder or two. Good job, Detective Arnold," Parker said. "Detective Wingate, time to call the M.E. Ms. Johnson, you'll want to photograph and recover the book."

"Yes, sir, right after I secure this stuff."

To feel at least partly useful, I offered to help. "Karen, if you give me the camera I'll take care of the book."

"Sure thing, Matthew," she said with a smile, handing me her Nikon. Now that I had failed to solve the crime, we were friends again.

Something started bothering me as I walked back up the stairs. I put it down to Arnold having solved the problem before me. I told myself that another five minutes in that room and I would have spotted the Holmes book and made the necessary connections. Even if that were true, it didn't help the feeling.

Back in the room I took an overall photo of the room, making sure to include the computer table and the book in the picture. A close-up photo of the book followed. That was all that was really needed, but I was feeling particularly useless just then and decided to do a little extra. Wearing gloves, I opened the book to the table of contents and photographed the entry for "The Problem of Thor Bridge." Then I turned to the proper page and took a picture of the beginning of the story, making sure to get the dog-eared flap that Rice had used to mark his place. With any luck the prints of his thumb and forefinger would be found on either side of the flap, icing Arnold's cake.

For good measure I decided to take a picture of Rice's bookcase just to show from where he had gotten the book. I looked at the bookcase—it was full, no gap to show where a book the size of the Holmes should have been. He could have borrowed it from one of his housemates, I thought. Then I started looking at what kind of books he did have.

Half the shelves were devoted to his textbooks and what had to be assigned reading material. The rest were filled with popular novels, a few westerns, some horror, and what seemed to be every Star Trek book ever written. No mysteries, unless you counted a western by William DeAndrea. I pulled a few books off the shelves and leafed through them.

That's when I realized what was really bothering me. I walked over to Rice and repeated Arnold's actions—shooting myself in the head with my finger, imagining the gun falling from my hand, the now released brick falling to the ground outside, the window slamming shut.

"Sergeant Parker, get up here," I shouted. I used my radio to call the afternoon shift supervisor. I needed a few things.

An hour later, those of us who could fit were crammed into Rice's room. The M.E. had come and gone, taking the deceased away. That gave us a little more room. Karen, Parker, Wingate, Arnold, and the primary uniformed officer were all watching me set up my demonstration. At my suggestion, Prisca, Meyers, and Wallace had been sent to wait in their rooms.

"Are you sure about this, Technician Grace?"

"Frankly, Sergeant, no. But look at it like this—if it works you got a closed case. If not, I'm going to look like a fool. Either way you can't lose."

"I'm betting on number two." Arnold wasn't happy about my suggestion and the need to recreate the crime. If I was wrong he'd never let me forget it.

The video camera I had asked the supervisor to send was set up on its tripod, ready to record my success or failure. I picked up the other things I had sent for—a brick similar to the one used, a wooden dowel, twine and a red gun.

The red gun was a disabled .38, used by the Police Academy for training in loading and unloading weapons. The firing pin had been removed for safety purposes. The barrels and grips of weapons of this type are always painted red so that everyone knows that it's a "safe" firearm. I asked for a red gun to be sent because no one cared how beat up they got.

I talked as I set things up. "When I came up here to photograph

the Sherlock Holmes book, I noticed that there was no place for it on Rice's shelf."

"So what, Grace," Arnold interrupted. "Maybe he borrowed it."

"Be quiet, Detective. Let him make his speech."

"Thank you, Sergeant. As I said, there was no shelf space for the Holmes. Not only that, there are no mystery books on his shelf."

Karen was closest to the bookcase. She looked it over. "He's right."

"Also," I continued, "the first page of the 'Thor Bridge' story is bent down to mark the spot. I looked through some of Rice's books. None of them are dog-eared."

"So what?" asked the uniform. He probably wasn't an avid reader.

Arnold was. Suddenly interested, he knew what I was getting at.

I was ready. I tied things together the way they were supposed to be—brick to dowel, dowel to gun. I put the dowel in the window, holding up the sash. The brick I left on the windowsill. I handed the gun to Arnold.

"Walk over to where Price was found," I told him. "Keep the tension on the string."

Arnold did so, being careful not to step in any blood. When he was in place, I eased the brick out of the window, slowly letting it down by the string.

"Are we all agreed that this is how things had to have been set up?"

Everyone nodded. "You don't just start turning down corners right before you're going to kill yourself," I said. "And why would someone who's not a mystery fan use an elaborate locked room scheme to take the short way home?"

I hit RECORD on the video camera. Then I yelled, "BANG!"

Arnold let go of the gun. It dropped to the floor and lay there. The dowel, held firmly in place by the weight of the sash, stayed where it was, the brick dangling from the window.

A click and a flash told me that Karen had been photographing the whole thing. She took a close-up of the gun lying on the floor. No one else spoke or moved. If I was expecting applause I didn't get any.

"Once I realized that it wasn't Rice's book and that he probably hadn't turned the page down," I continued, "it suddenly occurred to me that this was a set piece, that we were supposed to make the Thor Bridge connection. Then I realized that the dowel would probably support the brick whether the gun was released or not. And that means Rice didn't kill himself, not like this, anyway."

"Good thinking, Matthew," Karen said.

"Yeah, good job," Arnold added. A more gracious loser than I am, he sounded like he meant it, too.

"Couldn't have done it without you, Rich. You thought of 'Thor Bridge.' I probably wouldn't have."

Parker spoke. "Detective Wingate, let's you and I let the college boys know they're not as smart as they think. Grace, nice idea having them go back in their rooms."

"What did he mean by that?" Karen asked after the two had left.

Arnold answered her. "They have a right to privacy in their bedrooms. With them waiting in the living room, we couldn't go into their rooms without a warrant. But now we can go in and get them out. And at the same time look around to see who's got a large collection of mystery books, and no Sherlock Holmes."

It all came out in questioning. Prisca was the mystery fan. The Thor Bridge scheme was his idea. He came up with it after Wallace had accidentally shot Rice with what he thought was an unloaded gun. Meyers had bought the gun from "a guy he knew" following some burglaries in the area. Wallace found the gun in Meyers's room. After being assured by Meyers that it was unloaded, he took it, saying, "I'm going to have some fun with Brian." When Meyers heard a pop, he remembered that he had meant to unload the gun, but hadn't yet done so.

Prisca had the room on the third floor. By the time he had run down to Rice's room, the other two had already decided to make it look like a suicide. That's when he got his idea. He set the Thor Bridge scheme up, tying the gun and brick to the dowel and throwing them all out the window. He then locked himself in Rice's room. The other two broke down the door.

"But why?" I asked Wingate over my steak. Parker was making her buy Arnold and me dinner for solving her case for her. No matter that he had called us in. (By the end of the meal she "let" us talk her into separate checks.) "A locked door, a dead guy, a gun nearby—instant suicide."

"Because he's a stupid college kid. He's read so many mysteries he thought they were real life. He assumed that we'd somehow see through a 'locked room' death and start looking at them. It wasn't Rice's gun, and he had no reason to kill himself. So Prisca came up with an idea. He'd make it look like a murder that looked like a suicide. When they were accused, he'd find the book, then 'solve' the

case. And if we found the book and figured it out, so much the better. He didn't count on us having our own mystery fans."

"He also didn't count on someone taking the gun away," Arnold added. "With the piece of plastic from the broken grip and the bullet from Rice, it will be easy to match once it's found. If it's used in a crime Parker plans to charge Prisca and maybe the other two as accessories for making the gun available."

"Will that stick?"

Wingate answered me. "Long enough to mess up their lives for a while. Some justice for Rice at least."

"You know," Arnold said, "it's a shame that Prisca didn't take at least one physics course; he might have fooled us."

I couldn't let that go, not with having the Great Detective looking over our shoulder this whole case. "But, Rich, Prisca did take physics back in his old school. Failed the class, of course, but he did take it."

He bit. "What school was this, Matthew?"

"Elementary, my dear Arnold. Elementary."

Solution to the June "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Marple
B. Alabama
C. Rawhide
D. North Star
E. Oklahoma
F. Liters
G. Deja vu
H. Hessians
I. Anderson
J. Rippling
K. Drills
L. By the way
M. Ownership
N. Ice cream
O. Linchpin
P. Ellipse
Q. Darning
R. Alligator
S. Newsworthy
T. Dress code
U. Home fries
V. Occasional
W. Towhead

QUOTATION

Author—M(artin) ARNOLD
Work—HARD-BOILED AND (Still) HOT
(The New York Times, June 27, 2002)

"Chandler's appeal is across the brow: low, middle and high. His major creation, Marlowe, was the traditional American hero. . . . Chandler's novels—like *The Big Sleep* . . . were morality plays, and his prose was crisp, original and funny."

Ziggy Comes Through

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

To tell you the truth, I thought Ziggy Boone was dead.

He was old enough to be dead the night I picked up on my answering machine after hearing a voice that was either Ziggy or a bullfrog trying to croak out words past a chronic case of laryngitis, asking:

"Augie, do you remember Julian Marlowe?"

It was more than the rasp hanging precariously between too much caffeine and too much nicotine. It was Ziggy's old habit of never identifying himself before launching into a conversation, as if everyone in the world would know it was Sigmund Boone calling. I don't remember if he picked up the trick from me or me from him, not that it mattered after all this time.

"Ziggy, I haven't heard from you in a hundred years," I said. "I thought you were dead."

"Yeah? Wishful thinking, maybe? . . . I asked you, what about Julian? I asked you, do you remember him? Julian? Julian Marlowe?"

"Who could ever forget Julian Marlowe!"

"For openers, the world. Nowadays people got problems remembering as far back as their butt. How Julian died?"

"The great leap forward. I suffer an occasional senior moment, Ziggy, but some things you never forget."

"From the first O in the Hollywood sign, yeah. Not the H. You also remember why, of course. Because Julian, he knew the H belonged to Peg Entwistle."

"The first one to jump and go bump in the night."

"Yeah, how she came to own the H lock, stock, and leap, Augie. Then, the first L, came some schlub publicity seeker who couldn't ever approach poor Peggy's talent or Julian's star power. Only broke an ankle instead of her neck the way she wanted. She was

Ron Bucalo


HOLLYWOOD

a first-class floppola even up there on the Hollywood sign.

"Both ankles and wrists and a hip. She was laid up at County General for a month. Wound up with a shot on 'To Tell the Truth,' Joey Bishop's talk show, and a walk-on in one of the last Sam Katzman rock-and-roll epics at Columbia."

"A Joni Taps epic. She also did a bit in a beach movie for Nicholson and Arkoff over at American-International."

"Joni, yeah. Harry Cohn's top gun," he added. "You got some memory on you."

"Like an elephant," he said.

"That's how you used to drink. You still drinking like Dumbo's daddy?"

"A bender sometimes, but mostly I take it slow around the curves. Age catching up on me. Same as for you and for everybody, Ziggy."

The grandly lit sign lords over the city: HOLLYWOOD.

Ziggy grunted at the idea. "Not necessarily," he said. "You know you can always do something about it, the same way Peggy and Julian did. The permanent twelve step program. The last step a real lulu, only you have to plan it better than that schlub did. You remember the girlie's name?"

"If you give me a minute."

"This ain't no quiz show. I don't either, which makes my point. Peggy we remember because she was the first to go. Julian because he was the biggest."

"And because nobody ever knew why. To this day."

"Yesterday, Augie."

"Meaning?"

"A different story today because today I know. And you remember something else?"

"What's that, Ziggy?"

All I heard in the next few moments was Ziggy grabbing for air, like the sky would soon be empty if he didn't hurry up, then, "I promised you right after it happened that, if I ever got down to the bottom of it, I'd bring you down there with me, isn't that so?"

"So."

"So, I got to the bottom and here I am, coming through, making good on my word."

"Ziggy, let me get this straight. You're telling me how now, forty-something years after the fact, you've found out why Julian

Marlowe, at the pinnacle of his fame, took a swan dive from the Hollywood sign."

"That and more."

"*More* like what more?"

"Come on over and I'll tell you."

"Ziggy, it's almost midnight. I was halfway to bed when I heard the phone."

"I know exactly what you mean, kid. No more nightlife for me, either. You also got trouble falling asleep?"

"Tomorrow. First thing. How's that?"

"I could be dead tomorrow first thing."

"Give me a better reason."

Ziggy recognized the gag under my irritation and, with his version of a smile in his voice, said, "Julian was being blackmailed over a definite career killer, starting with the affair he had with Peg Entwistle and going from there to the murder he got away with. How do you like them bananas for a better reason?"

"Julian Marlowe and Peg Entwistle? Blackmail? Murder?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"You always did have a great imagination, Ziggy. What's a good time tomorrow?"

"Take down the address, I'll be waiting up for you," he said, no trace of humor this time. "Tonight or never. That's the way the wind blows."

The route from my place near Griffith Park in Los Feliz to the Fairfax area took me west through Hollywood on Sunset Boulevard. At Gower, I impulsively slid into an open parking spot in front of CBS and charged over to the intersection to take a look at the grandly lit electric sign lording it over the city from the top of Mount Lee.

The nine letters had begun as thirteen—HOLLYWOODLAND—in 1923 as a real estate developer's stunt for transforming a maze of fruit and vegetable farms and acres of lots overrun with oak trees, holly bushes, greasewood, and poppies into a five-hundred-acre residential paradise.

The developer spent an outlandish twenty-one thousand dollars to build the sign and watched proudly as each of the letters, thirty feet wide and forty-five feet tall, was cautiously lowered into place to fit the erratic configuration of Beachwood Canyon's landscape. Then, as four thousand light bulbs were carefully screwed into place.

That the promotional sign would come to symbolize "The

Entertainment Capital of the World" wasn't even a thought, although it had been ten years since the legendary director Cecil B. DeMille had come west scouting filming refuge from the expensive uncertainties of East Coast weather, converted a horse barn at Selma and Vine he bought from Jacob and Sara Stern into a studio, and began filming *The Squaw Man*.

By then almost all the coyotes, cottontails, possums, raccoons, squirrels, and deer had disappeared, and it would not be much longer before the remaining foxes, lizards, and tarantulas assumed human form as movie studio executives.

I know because I heard plenty about those times from the Ziggy Boones and the Julian Marlowes of the business a lot of years later—first while I was trying to break into movies as an actor, then after I switched gears and became the town's top crime beat reporter with the hottest byline ever to habitually crack page one of the Los Angeles *Daily*.

Correct. Modesty was never my long suit. In a city of egos, you can only beat 'em at their own game by playing it better and bigger. The fact that I moved into a position to seal the lid on ugly truths that could prove embarrassing to certain of L.A.'s movers and shakers made it easier.

It ultimately led to the dung pile of markers that I've been feeding off of ever since, like the one that had just come along from Ziggy Boone.

There have been times when I've winced at my image in the mirror, but what the hell—I'm still here. I'm a first-class survivor on a playing field covered with the battered remains of people who never learned that "integrity" is a word that works better in the dictionary than in life.

Me, a cynic? Thumbs up on that score.

By 1932, the development had become a kitschy hodgepodge of European castles and vine-covered cottages better suited for Hansel and Gretel and other fairy tale characters, as if the prime architects had been the Brothers Grimm. On a Sunday in September of that year, Peg Entwistle made up her mind to bring to this Mecca of make-believe a blunt dose of reality.

Peg was one of those lissome, cute and perky, blue-eyed, dime-a-dozen blondes struggling for attention and stardom on the silver screen after experiencing eight consecutive flops on Broadway.

Hollywood treated her hardly any kinder after she moved in with her Uncle Harold in Beachwood Canyon, within walking distance of the decaying sign that originally had been meant to last only eighteen months.

A stage role opposite Ziegfeld's widow Billie Burke and my one-time drinking buddy Humphrey Bogart in *The Mad Hopes* had brought her a contract with RKO Radio Pictures, but it ended after Peg's first film, *The 13 Women*, with her mostly on the cutting room floor.

She scavenged for auditions after that, became part of the wild party scene before and after a two-year marriage to Robert Keith, the actor whose actor son, Brian, was a movie and TV star before he blew his head away, and was never able to get enough money saved to manage a trip back to Broadway.

Tired of rejection, or so the story went, Peg sauntered off from Uncle Harold's place that Sunday in September after telling him she was walking up to the Beachwood Village drugstore and would be hanging out with friends.

Instead, she headed for the HOLLYWOODLAND sign.

She climbed up the service ladder behind the letter H and leaped to her death.

Or, did it really happen that way?

Rumors galore had to this day circled around the event that brought Peg the everlasting fame that otherwise eluded her. They talked about—

Wonk. Wonk.

Wonk. Wonk.

Wonk. Wonk.

An angry horn splintered the calm of a tranquil night on a street empty of traffic until this moment—reality interrupting recall.

The driver of the towering S.U.V. pounding and pounding to emphasize his demand that I clear the lane and let him pass, gunning the engine to suggest he had worse thoughts in mind.

The address Ziggy Boone had given me was one of those nursing homes where all the patients are older than ancient history, either bedridden or wheelchair-bound, and playing bingo is the most exciting part of their day.

It was located on Fairfax, south of where San Vicente and Olympic intersect, and you had to know where to look to find it sandwiched among a stretch of old-fashioned mom-and-pop storefronts that had never outgrown the thirties.

An old gentleman in a tattered robe was angled asleep on a faded sofa losing its chicken feather stuffing faster than I'd been losing my hair. Safety-pinned to the pocket of the robe was a tag

on which had been printed in large block letters with a Sharpie: SECURITY.

At once feeling safe, I tiptoed around him and took the elevator up the one flight to the resident floor, where the astringent smell of disinfectant barely masked the unmistakable odor of bowel movements along the rows of rooms on the two corridors book-ending the nurses' station.

The duty nurse, a woman with tired black eyes and bags to match, looked up from her copy of *People En Español* when I knocked on the counter for attention and asked directions to Ziggy's room.

"Too late," she said, after thinking about her English.

"He's expecting me."

She shook her head and repeated, "Too late." This time she added something in Spanish and, recognizing the puzzle on my face, said in uncertain English, "He's gone, the Señor Boone."

"Dead?" I turned my disbelieving face from her to the attendant in the green smock who'd quietly materialized at my side. "I talked to Mr. Boone, it was only—it was less than half an hour ago, forty minutes max."

"How long you think it takes to die?" he said, like he was delivering the double-or-nothing question on "Hollywood Squares." He said, "You're breathing one second and the next second you're not." He ran a finger across his throat. "Only that's not what Guadalupe here was meaning, mister. That so, Guadalupe?"

She nodded agreement and said, "Gone es el señor."

The nurse's aide slid a hand across his bumpy, cocoa-brown shaved head and down his neck. "Went to his room to turn him and he wasn't there, his bed is empty. I've been searching the plant for him ever since. He's definitely gone." He snapped his fingers. "Like that, as fast as dying. His two roomies, they both slept through him taking off again."

"He's taken off before?"

"Smooth as an airplane." The aide turned his arms into wings. "Don't know how or where to, only that Mr. Ziggy, he always comes back for a safe landing. Same goes for his co-pilot."

"His co-pilot?"

"Mr. Dale Flanagan," the aide said, throwing a thumb over his shoulder. "Two doors down from Mr. Ziggy. Them's a team usually, but not tonight, you go and look, you'll see for yourself. I'll show you. C'mon."

I followed him down the corridor and into the room past the first two of three occupied beds running military style.

Both of the first patients were sleeping, but not Dale Flanagan. His bed was tilted upright and he was watching a movie on a small TV set settled on his food tray. His eyes, small circles of ruby-red irritation, were fixated on the screen and he remained unaware of our presence until the aide tapped on the earphones feeding him sound.

"Go away, Charles, it's just getting to the good part," he said, without adjusting his stare. He was half in, half out of the thin covers. His exposed leg was bloated; its pasty white color marred by a roadmap of bulging blue veins.

The aide lifted one of the earpieces and bent over so that his mouth was almost touching Flanagan's ear. "Someone to see you, Mr. Dale. He come inquiring about Mr. Ziggy."

I fielded his glance and, taking Charles's cue, stepped closer and said, "I understand you might be able to tell me where he goes when he leaves here."

"Straight to hell for all I care, and you with him, you don't let me see the end of my movie." His voice was pungent with irritation, reed thin, and loud enough to wake the ward, but none of his roommates stirred.

"Mr. Dale, he thinks we're all deaf like him," Charles said, then into Flanagan's ear: "Mr. Dale, Mr. Ziggy happen to say where he was off to tonight, without you this time?"

Flanagan ignored the question and, trying to raise the strength to point at the screen, said, "The best part coming up now, Charles. Remember how the girl steps aside and the gag he does then with the note?"

Integrity is a word that works better in the dictionary than in life.

Charles gave me a hopeless look and turned his palms to the ceiling. "He watches that movie a hundred times a day," he said. "Don't want to know from the world when he got the tape going. In between it's reading and writing some in his diary or staring at the pictures in his scrapbook, over and over, like that's all there is to life, that and running off with Mr. Ziggy."

He replaced the earpiece and angled around the bed heading for the door, me on his tail, Dale Flanagan calling after us, "The minute my movie's over, I need you to change my diaper, Charles. I just pooped again, and I'll be needing my protein drink. You hear me, Charles? Charles?!"

Before leaving, I scribbled my private number on the back of a

nursing home business card and handed it over to Charles with a sawbuck.

He double-checked my name before slipping both into his wallet, promising, "Don't you worry none, Mr. Augie. He gets on back here, Mr. Ziggy, you'll be the second to know. Right after me."

Somehow, when the phone rang at about the same time the next night, I knew it was Ziggy calling again. I snatched it up and said, "What kind of game are you playing here, Ziggy?"

The question drowned in a few seconds of silence before he said, " 'Truth or Consequences.' How do you like that for an answer? The old radio program with Ralph Edwards and then on television with—"

"Are you back at the nursing home? What in hell happened to you last night?"

"Better on the radio than TV. The Mrs. Hush contest? It was Clara Bow, I remember. You remember her? The 'It Girl,' they called her. Sex appeal, that was 'It,' and Clara had it in spades. Diamonds, clubs, hearts—the whole deck . . . No. Why would I be back there? I didn't have to be in there in the first place, except to find out something. Do I sound like a basket case to you?"

"A mental case. Where are you?"

"You could at least try to make it sound like you care, Augie. You ready to meet again?"

"The first time, you mean."

"We used to meet all the time, so don't give me that," he said, then dropped into a teasing sing-song: "All about Julian and his jump . . . The story I promised to share with you if I ever could . . . The secret that's not a secret anymore to me . . ."

The old fool knew what my answer would be.

Like Ziggy, I'd been out of the newspaper business for years, but there wasn't a reporter alive who could ever pass up the chance to unravel a mystery that had stuck around for more than four decades.

He said, "You know that all-night coffee shop down off Franklin and Beachwood? Phil and Bobby's? See you there in an hour."

"And this time you'll be there? Not like last night at the nursing home?"

"You remember their doughnuts, Augie? Best sinkers in town, especially the chocolate-covered ones and the glazed."

Ziggy sent a two-fingered whistle across the room and did a finger-twirling thing with his other hand, as if it might be a problem

finding him in the empty diner. He had taken an out-of-the-way back table by the door to the johns, under a giant sepia-toned photo blowup of the HOLLYWOODLAND sign.

"Help yourself before they're all gone, my treat," he said, pointing to the platter of doughnuts in the middle of the table as I settled onto the chair across from him. "I'm four ahead of you and my belly's already feeling it. Why I'm by the toilet—that and my prostate. How's yours? Still aces at getting it up, Augie?"

I poured a cup of coffee from the gunmetal-gray service pot, surrendered to temptation, and bit off a hunk of glazed doughnut. It still had an oven-fresh edge and measured up to Ziggy's memory, and mine.

"You're looking good, Augie. Healthy and fit."

"You too, Ziggy."

He had no right looking ten or fifteen years younger than me—he was at least that much older—but he did. He'd hardly changed since my last sight of him at the party the press room gang tossed after the *Daily* conned Ziggy into an early retirement. He was still string-bean thin, a byproduct of his bad eating–better drinking habits, with a full mop of disheveled hair the color of wheat and dancing green eyes as bright as traffic lights.

"My reward for breaking all of life's rules," he said, charging after another doughnut. He dabbed at the edges of his mouth, like he was working out the wrinkles, and wondered, "You remember how the cops came to find Peggy Entwistle?"

"A mystery woman, according to the files."

"Yeah. With a cap M, cap W. The dame calls cop central downtown and says—" He changed into a harsh soprano. "—*I was hiking near the Hollywoodland sign today and near the bottom I found a woman's shoe and jacket. Farther on I noticed a purse. In it was a suicide note. I looked down the mountain and saw a body. I don't want any publicity, so I wrapped up the jacket, shoes, and purse in a bundle and laid them on the steps of the Hollywood police station.*

"Sure as shooting, there's the goods, a neat bundle on the steps of the Wilcox substation, and there's the corpus, as advertised. Nobody knows who, not until after the *Daily* prints her suicide note saying, *I am afraid I am a coward. I am sorry for everything. If I had done this a long time ago, it would have saved a lot of pain. P.E.*

"It's the initials that led Peg's Uncle Harold to come forward and say something, then go make a positive ID down at the Strothers Mortuary on Hollywood Boulevard. A parking lot now, you know? Across from the Pantages Theater."

"Ziggy, tell me what I don't know."

"Life is too short, my friend." He sent a wink across the table. "When the *Daily* dealt me the fast shuffle out, I took some unfinished business with me, not the least being Julian Marlowe's jump. You saw how I was never happy with the idea he had turned into another Hollywood crazy, so I kept on digging on my own dime. When you dig deep enough, sometimes you hit pay dirt before you get to China.

"First thing I find, the coincidence that Julian, when he was a kid just making his name in the movies, had hit the hot spots with Peg. Not exactly stop-the-presses stuff, but it got mentioned a few times by Louella and Hedda, both of those gossip queens saying his next one, *Guilty of Love*, is the one that's going to put him over big time. That gets me on the scent.

"The next thing I find, turns out Julian got Peg in a family way. She likes the idea, but not him. He has a career to consider and marriage doesn't fit the image. He meets her to talk it over here in this coffee shop, but all Julian is buying is a java and a few sinkers, not domestic bliss."

I cut Ziggy off there, fearing the old war horse was so lonely nowadays, he was reduced to rewriting RKO B movies as an excuse for company.

"Let me guess the rest," I said, figuring to cover the last reel at mach speed and get myself home and to bed that much sooner. "He feigns happiness and suggests they take a stroll to talk about their future. He maneuvers her to the sign. He forces her up the ladder at gunpoint. He shoves her off, and—"

"And what, Augie? First he makes her write the suicide note or he quickly forges it himself, et cetera, et cetera? No. Julian's smarter than that. He recognizes how vulnerable Peg is. When she says either they get married or she's going to commit suicide, he says either way it would mark the end of his career, so he's going to commit suicide, too. The two of them go to the Hollywood sign. She writes her note and he writes his own, saying, *I'm responsible for P.E.'s death and can't live with the shame of my action. I'm taking the only honorable way out.* He signs his full name with a flourish. They climb the ladder to the top of the H. They embrace and share a last kiss. Then, Julian pushes her off and goes home to what eventually will be a long and meaningful career. The star we came to know, who gave the likes of Colman, Coop, and Gable a stiff run for the roses. Fill in the blanks any way you want, Augie, but that's how it went down back in '32 with Peg Entwistle and Julian Marlowe."

"You're telling me Marlowe got away with murder."

"Not so far away, my friend. Down the ladder and maybe another twenty or thirty yards, but that was it." His eyes drifted around the room, pausing to examine photo murals of neighborhood landmarks from past decades that nowadays were only as real as the pictures on the wall. "It all got seen by a Griffith Park ranger on patrol. Peg's nose dive. Julian taking a gander from up top of the H before heading on down. The ranger's there in a flash. Gun drawn. Julian's panicked face is doing a jitterbug in the beam of the flashlight and he's jabbering like a crazy man to draw attention away from a piece of paper he'd just turned into a matzo ball and let drop. The ranger makes him retrieve it. Smooth it out. Hand it over."

"Julian's suicide note."

Ziggy touched his index finger to his nose.

"Exhibit A," he said, "after poor Peg's broken body at the base of the . sign. Only the ranger suddenly has a better use for it."

"Blackmail."

"Forever after that night. Not a lot of money at first, but the sum grew larger and larger in proportion to Julian's fame and fortune over the years. Anytime he balked, it only took a simple reminder about Exhibit A to get Julian back in line."

"And I suppose you're telling me the park ranger was the mystery woman who made the phone call that turned the cops onto Peg's suicide?"

"Yes, of course. After she struck her devil's bargain with Julian. She wasn't about to let that poor girl rot to the bone or, even worse, become fresh meat for the coyotes roaming Mount Lee. There is some good in even the worst of us, Augie. I never teach you that?"

Ziggy was telling me this with a fanatic's zeal, his green eyes blazing with the thrill of sharing an elusive discovery. I flashed on an image of the archeologist who cracked the lid on King Tut's tomb, the first miner to pan gold at Sutter's Mill, but the reporter married to my skin was also seeing an empty sarcophagus, fool's gold.

I said so, in language he'd understand.

"Makes for great copy, Ziggy, but where's your source? Your substantiation? Your proof for what I've been hearing?"

"My word, it isn't good enough?"

"That and two bits gets my car an hour at the meter."

Ziggy leared back in his seat and his fingers began a tap dance on the table as he fried me with a mocking look.

I said, "Isn't that one of the first things you taught me on the beat, Zig? Proof? Shouldn't the rule also apply to the teacher?"

"I also learned you to pay attention to everything, how every

detail, however minor, is a stitch in the seam holding the story together."

"I did. I have."

"Then you'd know I already showed you proof, wise guy."

He shut down then and his silence quickly turned into a suffocating smugness.

Finally, I raised my hands in surrender and steered my face left and right. I stretched out empty palms to emphasize I didn't know what in hell he was talking about.

Taking my response for a victory in some secret game he was playing, Ziggy rose from the table and arrowed a finger at his crotch. "Duty calls again, loud and clear," he said, and he disappeared through the door to the johns.

I used the next few minutes replaying everything I had seen and heard since his first call two nights ago. Nothing held up as the *proof* he said he'd already given me.

Another couple of minutes went by, and now it was verging on too much time for even a piss out of Paul Bunyan.

I trooped over to the men's room and pushed through the door calling his name.

Nobody home at the urinal.

No shoes showing on the other side of the throne wall.

I tried the ladies' room. Ziggy wasn't in there either.

At the end of the short corridor was an exit door that led to a small parking lot and service alley behind the coffee shop. For whatever his reasons, the wily old son of a bitch had used it to split on me.

I twisted and turned through the night, unable to sleep while my mind grappled with the puzzle Ziggy had laid on me. Sometime before sunup, rousing to the first sounds of waking birds and the growing rumble of the distant freeway traffic, I bolted upright and leaped from bed with the answer, almost tripping over my own feet dancing a little victory jig from one side of the room to another.

True to his own-horn-tooting boast, Ziggy had shown me proof linking Peg Entwistle to Julian Marlowe. Proof about the murder. Proof about the blackmail.

He'd made it mine to find, made me see it, although I recognized now that what I saw is what I didn't see and what I didn't see is what I saw.

Nursing home staff members in their color-coded smocks were

maneuvering through the routines and rituals of morning when I got there and went looking for Ziggy.

Ziggy's bed had not been slept in.

I stepped out looking for someone with an answer to his whereabouts and immediately bumped into Charles, the nurse's aide.

He stole a nearsighted look at his watch and shook his radiant brown pate apprehensively. "Mr. Ziggy and Mr. Dale, they're never gone this long, but maybe one time," he said, his voice unable to suppress the concern that also sat like a pancake on his face.

I padded down the corridor to Dale Flanagan's room with Charles on my tail. I told him I'd wait here for awhile and fed him a sawbuck as a down payment on some privacy. He took the bill and the hint, and in less than five minutes he had spirited Flanagan's roommates into their wheelchairs and out for what he said would be special therapy sessions.

Neither of the old gentlemen seemed interested or even alert enough to care. One left behind a cloud of breakfast gas that lingered foully long after Charles had closed the corridor door and I had settled on a chair by the window to view the videocassette that Flanagan never tired of seeing.

The movie was called *A Push Before Dying.*

It was the kind of title they still put on low-budget films to generate interest, and the opening credits revealed what Dale Flanagan's fascination was built on.

Flanagan had written, directed, and edited the movie. He was a triple-threat guy who in the opening sequences proved himself a worthy successor to Ed Wood.

I don't know how I missed *A Push Before Dying* the first time around.

Just lucky, I guess.

Flanagan's film told the sad and sordid tale of a young girl who comes to Hollywood chasing after stardom. She falls for a rising young star who does her wrong and then does her in to sustain his budding career by pushing her off the H on the Hollywood sign.

Ultimately, many years later, out of remorse and a need to satisfy the MPAA Production Code guardians of our morals, he leaps to his own death from the sign.

If anybody had asked me, I'd have suggested they title the movie *A Star is Boring.*

So here was Ziggy's proof: A lousy cheapjack movie.

I had a picture of Ziggy watching it over and over with his friend Dale, the fictional "Rick" and "Baby" standing in for Peg Entwistle

and Julian Marlowe and ultimately becoming one and the same tragedy-bound couple in Ziggy's mind.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Halfway to the door, I realized there was more to what I'd seen and hadn't seen—the diary and scrapbook that Charles had mentioned the last time I was here.

I found them on top of the lowboy cabinet between the bed and the exterior wall with its window in desperate need of a wash and a view of Fairfax Avenue through gauze curtains, next to a ceramic drinking cup crammed full of pencils and pens and a stack of dog-eared paperback romance novels. Both the diary and the scrapbook presented revelations.

So here was Ziggy's proof: a lousy cheapjack movie.

The diary's owner, someone named Gail Prentice, had inscribed her name on the first page in a flowery but firm script. The pages were brown with age and filled with entries dating back to the teens and early twenties of the last century.

Evidently, Gail Prentice was the ranger who saw Julian Marlowe give Peg Entwistle a helping hand to eternity and promptly blackmailed herself into his life.

Some years later she'd married a studio grip named Bud Flanagan, who had no problem joining Gail in the blackmail scheme. Times were always tough for Bud, particularly after the Crash of '29, when survival became a luxury completely underwritten by Julian. Later, the monthly payments grew to cover the education of Bud and Gail's only child, Dale. Dale inherited the diary after both parents tumbled over a safety railing atop the Eiffel Tower.

A fast study in life as well as at Stanford, he upped the ante on Julian. Julian was obliged to get Dale work at the studios and to contribute to the low budget *eau de* crap Dale went on to produce independently, titles that included *A Push Before Dying*.

The scrapbook covers were held together by a shoestring tied with a butterfly knot. Paste and glue had dried beyond purpose and most of the book's contents were loose and jammed between the pages.

I had the impression it had begun as a labor of love, a proud mother chronicling her child's climb up the Hollywood ladder with neatly trimmed clippings from *Daily Variety* and the

Hollywood Reporter, the dailies, and magazines that had ceased to exist even before Dale Flanagan's career.

Also, lousy reviews heavy with scorn and dreadfully written news releases by some hack press agent, maybe Dale himself, dozens of them citing *A Push Before Dying* as his "magnum opus," use of a term that one critic insisted put the entire Latin language in jeopardy.

Stills from his movies, too, one or two familiar faces that had seen more lines and better scripts in better days, but mostly invented names and delicious profiles that meant nothing then or since.

Except for one: Julian Marlowe. A set-side candid, posing with Dale Flanagan. Dale all smiles behind the director's chair emblazoned with his name, hugging Julian like a life preserver, Julian showing his discomfort better than he could ever act it.

And something else equally significant in proving that the entries in Gail Prentice's diary added up to more than a star-struck girl's fantasies, but had an absolute basis in truth.

Lost among the stills was a severely creased handwritten note signed by Julian in CinemaScope: *I'm responsible for P.E.'s death and can't live with the shame of my action. I'm taking the only honorable way out.*

Also lost among the stills, a handwritten note from Julian to Dale, Julian's anger leaping from every letter and word, telling Dale: *With your wretched movie and its flimsy excuse for a script transparently about P.E. and me, you have finally gone too far, Dale Flanagan. I could live with the shame, but never with the blame that's sure to come. I'm out of your life forever—as well as my own. Marlowe.*

As close to a real suicide note as there ever was and, I suppose, evidence there is something for somebody in even the worst of motion pictures, like *A Push Before Dying.*

I pushed deeper into the scrapbook and came across an interview Flanagan had given the *National Enquirer* shortly after Julian's jump, telling the world, "Julian was like a father to me. We couldn't have been closer. The last time we spoke on the phone, he'd called saying he was terribly upset over losing again for the Academy Award. That's probably why he chose the letter O on the sign. O for Oscar."

I closed the scrapbook and returned it and the diary to as close to their exact locations as I remembered, then went scouting after Ziggy again. His bed was still empty. Charles was nowhere around, so I put the question to the duty nurse at the control desk.

She looked older than most of her charges, orange hair as thin

as a spider's threads, eyes big as boulders behind lenses on loan from the Griffith Park Observatory. They got even bigger and then her molting eyebrows came together when she heard Ziggy's name.

"Gone," she said, eyeing me curiously.

"I know, but maybe you have some idea when Mr. Boone'll be back."

"Never. Gone, as in passed on." She sized me up for a straightjacket. "And that was fifteen years ago, with me at his bedside, holding his hand and watching him pass through his final expirations."

"Ziggy Boone?"

"How many Ziggys you think there are in the world?"

"Will you page Charles for me, please?"

"Charles? We have no Charles here."

I explained who I meant.

"Sir, we haven't had that fine nurse's aide here for as long as Mr. Boone's been gone."

"Guadalupe? The duty nurse who was on duty when—"

"Not anyone by that name forever as long as I've been here."

Her hand inched over to what I suspected was a sort of emergency button, for those times when the patients rose up threateningly, demanding extra rounds of bingo.

"Dale Flanagan," I said, as I anxiously exhausted my roster.

She pushed out a bunch of air and made a modest gesture that seemed to mean *that's better.*

"Checked out two nights ago," she said. "Gone to visit a relative, Mr. Dale said. Would you like to leave Mr. Dale a message for when he returns?"

I had a different idea. "Did Mr. Dale happen to say who the relative was?"

She thought about it. "A Mr. Marlowe? That sound right to you?"

It sounded frighteningly right, and I believed I knew why. And where I had to go.

Heading up Beachwood Canyon to Mount Lee, it struck me how the Hollywood sign by day has an overpowering physical presence even though it lacks the dramatic intensity of the letters at night, when they're lit by floods to challenge a backdrop of animated clouds and stars that sometimes appears less real than the work of a studio art department.

It wasn't always so.

Maintenance had been discontinued in 1939 and the sign over

the years had turned as teeter-totter old and decaying as Hollywood Boulevard itself became beyond the stars on the Walk of Fame. The light bulbs had either burned out or had been stolen. A weed jungle had taken control of the hillside.

In 1978, the Chamber of Commerce, responding to cries that the eyesore be dismantled and disposed of once and for all, mounted a successful restoration campaign. Celebrities paid twenty-eight thousand apiece for the privilege of "owning" one letter of the sign.

Peg Entwistle's H fell quickly to Hugh Hefner. The first O went to an Italian movie producer, who some said had built his fortune distributing Julian Marlowe films throughout Europe.

It was no longer possible to get any closer to the sign than a hundred feet. There's a heavy-duty fence, a padlocked gate, light and motion detectors to help keep the sign safe from tourists, vandals, anyone contemplating suicide.

I parked and headed for the back gate. There's always a back gate. I was pretty sure where to find it. Around back.

The gate was unlocked. I hurried through, and within minutes I'd found what else I expected to find at the base of the first O—Dale Flanagan's body.

Crushed and crumpled beyond repair, the way you would expect to find a body that had fallen forty-five feet and had only six feet more to go. His eyes were open and to me bore the twinkle of happy expectation. His right hand was clutching a modest sheet of yellow notepaper.

I fought his rigid fingers open one by one, until I could safely lift out the note without tearing it.

It contained a single handwritten sentence under his signature, inscribed like John Hancock: *The sins of the father are visited upon the son.*

Somewhere behind me I thought I heard Ziggy Boone's hoarse laughter and him boasting, "Come through for you the way I said and better, Augie."

I was mistaken.

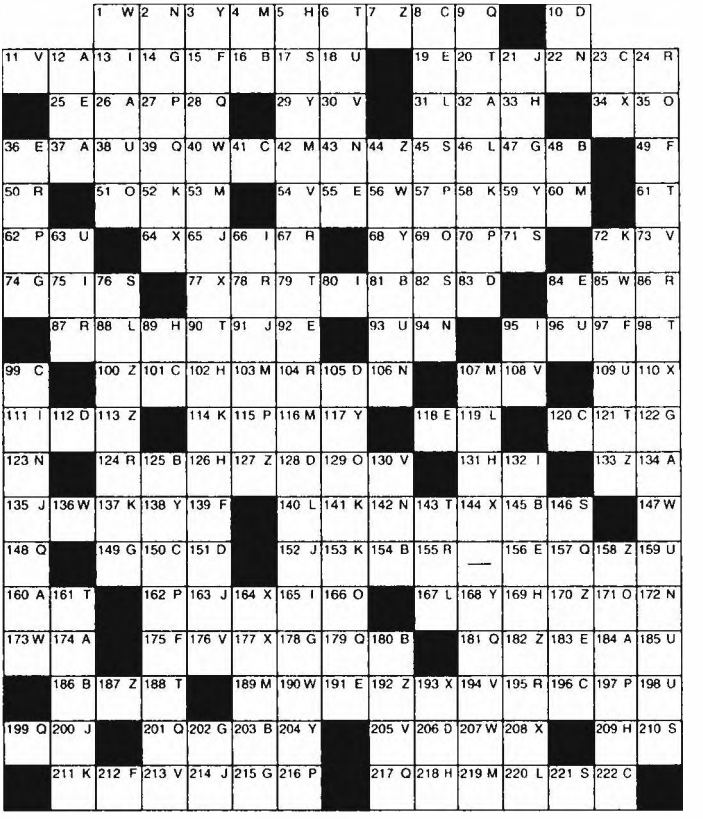
It was a park ranger, bearing down on me, thick-soled boots grinding hard and heavy on the gravel path, shouting, "Hey, you, trespasser, can't you read? What's it you think you're doing in here?"

I pointed at the lifeless heap that was Dale Flanagan, slipped his suicide note into my pocket, and started giving the ranger the kind of answer I figured he'd believe.

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC PUZZLE BY ARLENE FISHER

Directions for solving are on page 225. The solution will appear in the September issue. The solution to the June puzzle is on page 143.



DEFINITIONS

A. Form of carbon

174 37 26 12 32 134 184 160

B. Broadway seats

145 125 81 180 16 48 203 154 186

C. Broadway employee

101 222 150 23 99 8 120 196 41

D. Moves indolently

83 206 105 112 151 10 128

E. Mission bigwig

183 25 156 36 191 19 84 92 118 55

F. Take turns

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
139 49 175 212 15 97

G. Lop

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
149 14 74 178 47 202 215 122

H. Casual communications network

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
89 102 209 5 126 169 131 218 33

I. Far from in the chips: 2 wds.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
66 165 80 132 75 13 111 95

J. Ezra successor

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
214 91 65 200 135 163 21 152

K. 17th century construction: 2 wds.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
72 141 211 114 58 52 153 137

L. Cape Canaveral occurrence

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
220 46 119 31 88 140 167

M. Like a ruminating chess player

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
60 116 219 42 107 4 103 53 189

N. Give help (to)

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
123 43 94 172 142 106 2 22

O. First name in aquatics

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
69 166 51 35 129 171

P. Norfolk work area: 2 wds.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
27 115 57 62 216 197 70 162

Q. Mob rule

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
157 39 201 199 148 179 9 217 181 28

R. Dated one: hyph. wd.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
50 104 124 155 78 87 195 24 86 67

S. Go on the offense

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
210 76 17 71 82 45 221 146

T. Arbitrary: hyph wd.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
143 98 90 20 121 6 79 161 61 188

U. Found

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
63 18 109 38 198 159 93 185 96

V. Cosmetic tool: 2 wds.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
194 73 205 130 11 176 54 213 30 108

W. Onetime "German" star: 3 wds.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
207 56 1 40 136 173 147 190 85

X. Obsessive one, perhaps

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
177 34 77 193 208 64 110 144 164

Y. Groucho or Harpo, in "Monkey Business"

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
204 59 29 3 168 68 138 117

Z. Aegis

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
127 7 170 187 44 182 192

___ ___ ___ ___
133 113 158 100

GREENSPACE

ELAINE MENGE

The sun broke on a broad field of green, one of the few open spaces left undeveloped in a city hungry for land, bounded as it was on two sides by water. The field saw little recreational action outside of the occasional jogger or dutiful soul walking his dog. It simply provided a buffer between an upper-middle-class neighborhood and a large, brackish lake. The greenspace also proved a rich feeding ground for flocks of birds skimming low for insects that sometimes popped out of the grass. On this particular morning, the sun's blooming rays glanced off the coppery armor of a beetle, revealing him to a sharp-eyed grackle. The bird gave two hops and a peck, and the beetle vanished.

Hours later, in the approximate spot where the grackle had spied his breakfast, a human hand descended and thumbed a golfing tee into the ground. Herman straightened, gripped his driver, and shook it out as if it, not he, needed a warm-up. He chewed a cigar and squinted at his target, a scrub pine 175 yards away. His first drive arched beautifully. The ball fell short, but his aim was straight. He slid the cigar from between his lips and smiled in appreciation.

A block away, a woman was running toward the greenspace. Serena was aware only of her own breathing and her silver-striped running shoes padding the pavement. The shoes were new, superlight, each footfall sounding so far behind her, she felt like winged Mercury.

The laurel tree on the Winfields' lawn marked the end of her first mile. One of its branches was oddly bent, a skinny arm tapering into a long, crooked index finger. Serena always glanced up at that branch. It was a good landmark that pointed her toward the greenspace and the lake beyond.

Past the corner house and its curving hedge of Ligustrum and across one last residential street, the greenspace spread out before her. The first sight of it was always best: broad and flat, many football fields wide and long. The slope of a levee rose a quarter mile farther, straight ahead. A sign on a bent metal post read DRIVING

OF GOLF BALLS PROHIBITED. Serena liked that. It made this little spot seem like the entranceway to the greenspace.

The sign didn't keep anyone from driving golf balls, though. A man was out there now, in fact, knocking ball after ball into the blue yonder. He looked well past sixty. A beige knit shirt hugged his potbelly, and plaid shorts dangled above his knees. His golfing cap, tipped to one side, appeared too small for his head. Serena frowned as she ran by. She wondered why someone like him would come here where it clearly wasn't allowed instead of going to a driving range. It seemed tacky, and possibly dangerous. She'd heard of people being killed by golf balls. That was rare, of course. Rarer than being struck by lightning.

In her running she often came across lost golf balls. Usually they were slashed up by the mowing machines that kept the greenspace clear. Someone once told her that if you sliced into a golf ball, it would explode. She remembered seeing one like that when she was little—explosive-looking, all right, its core tightly wrapped with something like twine. But the ones she found sliced up on the greenspace appeared harmless, with sea-green plastic centers.

Upon reaching the levee, she charged to the top. The breeze felt stronger against her face, chasing in the shrimpy smell of the lake. She checked her pocket to make sure she'd brought her mace keychain. Her husband didn't want her running to the levee without it. Through the trees she could see greenish-brown water, lines of whitecaps. She'd learned to swim in the lake when she was little. No one swam there now. Biologists had found dead areas caused by pollution, and clumps of fish sometimes bobbed against the seawall, belly up.

Serena didn't like the thought of those dead spots. She turned her back on the lake and sat facing the greenspace. There was something wide open and honest about it, dotted with scrub pine and stunted, thin-trunked oaks and covered with weed grasses. Some of the grass hugged the ground, purple-green tendrils reaching out like thirsty spiders. Elsewhere, in patches the mowers neglected, golden-green stalks waved in the breeze like wheat. Closer in, hemming the levee below her, pollen-tipped pink puffs rose on spires above colonies of sensitivity plants. The man with the golf club stood at mid-field where tufts of silky grass glistened, washed clear emerald by the sun.

More than ever before she was aware that the greenspace wasn't just green. It was full of color. She took it all in, savoring the last minutes of her quiet time. But something wasn't right. That poky man driving golf balls was a blot on the landscape. She doubted he saw the other colors. To him this field was plain old green, the

standard shade you'd find in an eight-stick box of crayons. And that color probably meant only one thing. Golf.

During the run back, she ignored the man. She kept her eyes on the ground and noticed how the colors changed as one type of grass took over territory from another. Just as she neared the sign at the front of the greenspace, a golf ball bulleted past, grazing her hair. Like a confident meteorite, it punched into the ground a few yards ahead of her.

Dazed, Serena stared at it as if she had never seen a golf ball before. She turned around. There was that man, calmly driving another ball. He hadn't even yelled "fore."

She picked up the ball and began walking toward him. Obviously, he wasn't aware that he'd nearly hit her. She would tell him. He would apologize. Then she would suggest that he respect the rule and not drive golf balls on the greenspace in the future.

She held the ball out before her as she approached. The man was digging more balls out of a sack. The fat stump of a cigar stuck out from the center of his mouth. He looked up and said, "Thanks for bringing me that back. Just toss it over there."

"I don't think you get it," she said. "I was running and almost got hit."

The man swung his club in a small arc above the grass. "Yeah, well, I must've sliced it. I've got to correct that slice." He stooped and set a ball on the tee.

Serena's grip tightened on the ball. "Is that all you have to say?"

He looked up, frowning. "What?"

"You almost hit me with this ball. You could have killed me!"

He chuckled. The crinkles around his eyes signaled the tolerant exasperation of a superior. "Lady, you shouldn't be running so close by here. Next time, pay attention."

Serena could feel something surging inside, making her shaky. "You almost knocked me in the head! It's against the law for you to be out here in the first place." She pointed at the sign. "Can't you read?"

The man held his club at arm's length as if it were a staff and balled his other fist against his hip. "I can come out here if I want," he said. "It's a free country."

"But it's the rule." She could feel herself getting red in the face.

"Get outta my light, will ya?" He planted both feet, swung, and sent another ball sailing.

"You'd better get lost, you old coot. The second I get home I'm calling the police." She was surprised that she'd called him an old coot.

The man laughed, his face glistening with sweat. "Go ahead. Got

a friend on the force, owes me a favor. Besides, it's a free country."

The cigar butt centered in his mouth was wet, mashed down. It looked like it just grew there naturally. She shook her head fast, as if to shake away the sight of him. "You're going to be sorry." Her words bit the air with conviction as she turned and jogged toward the street.

"Hey, gimme back my ball!" the man called after her.

"Not on your life, you moron," she yelled back.

He sent another ball hurtling in her direction. That gave her an idea. Further out, where most of his balls had landed, she stopped to gather as many as she could, stuffing them in her pockets. She looked back at the man. He waved his club in the air and hopped from one foot to the other as if he were doing a rain dance. He was yelling, probably cursing, but she was too far away to hear.

She made good time on the run home, even though carrying the extra weight. Her husband was hosing the garden, his wet flip-flops making squishy noises as he strolled from bush to bush. Serena took the hose from him and splashed water on her face. She felt giddy, on the verge of fainting. When she caught her breath, she told him what happened.

"The police aren't going to fool with that," he said.

"But it's the law."

"Chinch bug," he muttered, bending down to examine a yellow spot on the lawn.

"It *is* the law," said Serena.

He patted the yellow spot with his hand and said, "That guy won't come back. He'll figure it's too much hassle."

"He won't if he knows what's good for him."

Her husband glanced up, squinted as she disgorged the golf balls from her shorts pockets onto the lawn. Serena enjoyed the surprised look on his face.

Herman drove home and ranted to his wife about the sassy female jogger. His wife kept one eye trained on the TV screen the whole time. "That crazy woman stole my balls," he said. His wife's only comment was, "My, I never heard such a thing."

He told her how the gal called him old coot and moron, but his wife just turned to him and asked, "Will you be playing with Sidney this weekend?" She always asked that, and he always answered, "Maybe, if it don't rain," even though he hadn't played golf with Sidney in years.

Herman didn't like the game, really. Didn't like sand traps, putting and scoring, or talking to Sidney. What he liked was driving the hard, white ball. Since he'd retired he liked nothing better than

to go out to some green field and drive one after another. Watching the ball soar gave him a good, peaceful feeling. He'd count out the seconds of hang time when, like a little pockmarked moon, the ball appeared to forget gravity. But that silly woman had to go and show up, ruin his day. If she knew what was good for her, she'd better not come sashaying back.

The next two days, Serena skipped her afternoon run. The idea of jogging to the greenspace and finding the man there made her feel lightheaded. What would she do? Ignore him? What if he knocked another ball in her direction? Could she ignore that?

The third afternoon she lolled on the sofa with a crossword puzzle. She'd filled in only three words and suspected those were wrong. She stretched her shoulders and glanced through the picture window. The lawn was neatly trimmed, an unvariegated green. She thought of the greenspace, how its colors were always changing. The crossword puzzle fluttered to the floor.

Her daughter appeared in the doorway peeling a banana and said, "What's wrong, Mom? Afraid of old Baggy Pants?" She flashed a teasing smile and disappeared down the hall. Serena laughed. Her daughter was right. That man didn't own the greenspace. If she stayed away on his account, then he would have won. She quickly put on her running shoes.

When she approached the Winfields' laurel tree, she felt weak again and considered jogging home, but the crooked branch pointed her onward to the greenspace.

The man wasn't there.

Serena felt relieved, but disappointed too, as if an odd hunger were gnawing inside her. She ran every day the rest of that week without seeing him. The next Monday she sat on the levee watching the clouds billow and change shape. She looked out over the field like a benevolent appraiser. Its glowing hues were intensifying in the hour before sunset. The greenspace was hers again, no longer threatened.

But just as she was preparing for the run back, a white station wagon rounded the corner in the distance. It stopped near the metal sign. Her heart fluttered as she saw the man get out, pull down the tailgate, and shoulder his club. She couldn't be sure from this far away, but she imagined the disgusting cigar was still rooted in the middle of his face.

Adrenaline—that was the stuff pumping through her veins, making her feel shaky but strong. An automatic chemical response. Cavemen had found it handy, whether fleeing or on the attack.

She got up and began running toward the man, a gliding run. She

had no idea what she would do or say when she reached him. She only felt the adrenaline—liquid fear—pumping through her body.

The man held his driver in front of him and jiggled it up and down like a sword. "Look, you," he said, "better keep your distance if you know what's good for you."

"You're violating an ordinance out here," said Serena.

"And you're a thief. You stole my balls."

"I'm calling the police."

"Go right ahead. I'll tell how you stole my balls."

Serena was nonplussed. The man was right. He'd broken the law first, but she had broken it too, and now that the law had been broken on both sides, this was just between the man and her. Now they would make their own law.

"Get outta my light, why don't ya?" he said.

Serena swayed in front of him. She could just turn away, run home. Be safe. If she never returned to the greenspace, she would never have to see this jerk again. But he would be here, the victor. She would know it. The greenspace would belong to him.

"Look, lady. You're making me lose patience," he said.

They traded sour looks. Serena glanced toward the aluminum sign at the entrance of the greenspace. The sign looked flimsy, and at this distance the words were invisible.

She eyed the man's driver. She felt wild, as if many birds were closed up in her chest, wings beating, frantic to get out. "Let's make a bet," she said. "I bet I can drive a ball farther than you. If I lose, I don't come back here again. You lose, *you* promise not to come back."

He snorted. "Little lady, you don't have a chance. I can knock this ball over two hundred yards."

"Go on," she said. "Give it your best shot."

The moment the club and ball connected, Herman knew that this was a great drive. Frozen in position for the follow-through, he watched as the ball arched majestically over his imaginary fairway and rolled to a stop only a few feet from his station wagon. Never in his life had he hit a ball that far. He stared at the white speck, more amazed than proud, his cigar dangling precariously from his lower lip.

"Now it's my turn," Serena said.

Startled, Herman turned around. He'd forgotten she was there. Her eyes looked blank, like a shark's. He could tell that the beauty of the feat she'd just witnessed was lost on her. "Top that," he said, handing her the club.

The moment Serena curled her fingers around the club's neck, she took off with it.

"Hey!" The cigar fell out of Herman's mouth. He ran after her, but soon had to stop. His cigars hadn't helped his asthma any.

When Serena reached the aluminum sign, she beat the club against the ground until she heard the wood crack. This thing must be ancient, she thought. She'd never seen a solid wood driver before.

"Hey! That's not fair," the man yelled.

"Why not? It's a free country!" Serena dropped the club and ran, cutting through a service alley a block away.

When she got home she didn't tell her husband. He wouldn't understand. This was between the man and her.

That night, sick with fear and excitement, she couldn't sleep. She wondered what would happen next. Would the man up the ante? Before, she had only taken a few balls to get even. Now she'd destroyed his property. No, he wouldn't put up with that. He would be back, she knew.

Herman sat on a stool in his garage. His driver, in two pieces, lay on the workbench before him like a severed corpse awaiting burial. His father had given it to him when he graduated from high school. They didn't make them like this anymore.

He sure wasn't going to let that woman get away with breaking his favorite club. But what could he do? The police wouldn't care since the area was posted against golfers anyway. Still, it was a free country. He never got to vote on the rule against golfers on the greenspace. It was legislation without representation.

In the morning he would go to a sporting goods store and buy a new driver. He'd get the best one they had, something with heft to it.

In the line at the grocery's deli counter the next day, Serena's daughter said to her, "They had another food fight at lunch. Two boys got suspended."

Serena nudged the grocery cart with her foot. She was thinking about the man, seeing the stubby cigar in his mouth.

"It got really crazy this time. When they ran out of french fries, they started throwing knives and forks."

The knives and forks caught Serena's attention. "Was anyone hurt?"

"No, but the principal's calling a special meeting to discuss violence in the school."

"I want to be at that meeting." Serena moved her cart up. "Your father and I will be there."

Later, Serena felt for the mace keychain as she jogged past the Winfields' laurel tree. The man was out there, hitting golf balls

again. She thought of her daughter, considered running home. But that course seemed so chicken. She jogged in place, decided to run her usual route to the levee and back, but she'd take care to keep more to the left of him. And no matter what he yelled at her, she would ignore him. She would not be provoked.

But to her surprise, as soon as she was within range, the man wheeled around and began knocking a barrage of balls in her direction. He had set up a lot of tees, and he stepped from one to the other, firing them off like volleys from a fort.

Ignore the fool, ignore him, Serena chanted. She kept on running toward the levee, heading away, until a ball struck her on the thigh. It made her so angry she hardly felt the sting. She turned and sprinted towards him. Balls whizzed past her body, but as if shielded by her own fury, she held her straight course.

The man was stepping up to his last tee. Serena whipped the mace keychain out of her pocket and unsnapped its leather top. The man swung at the ball, missed, and she was upon him, holding the small canister at arm's length. She pushed the button hard, caught him full in the face. He sank to his knees coughing.

Serena ran. When she reached his station wagon, she squatted and began letting air out of a front tire. This was insurance, just in case he was able to make it back to his car before she had time to run home. Thumb pressed against the valve, she smiled at the hissing sound. But then, spying another car rounding the corner, she ran off, sorry she couldn't do more damage. Still, the tire was noticeably spongy. It would give him trouble.

The next afternoon it rained, but the day after that Herman went to the greenspace as usual. As he drove, he sipped a Big Boy root beer through the straw of a plastic-lidded cup. His eyes had cleared up, but his throat was still raw from the stuff she'd sprayed on him. Instead of parking and going out to drive balls, he cruised the neighborhood, sipping root beer and making frequent passes in front of the greenspace. A gun lay on the seat beside him. He'd been careful to empty it, since he knew he'd just as soon shoot her as look at her.

On his fourth pass by the greenspace, he spotted the woman. She was already halfway to the levee. He parked in his usual spot and waited. Now and then a car passed by, but none of the drivers paid him any attention.

Serena saw the station wagon when she reached the levee. She sat, catching her breath, and wondered why he didn't get out. Then it dawned on her that he was waiting. He was going to follow her home, maybe try to run her down.

She fingered the mace keychain in her pocket, considered strategy. She would run straight to his car, then quickly veer around back. To follow, he would have to pull into a driveway and turn his car around. By then, she could probably make it to the service alley, another half block away. After that, he'd never find her.

The plan didn't work. He turned around quicker than she anticipated and was beside her, rolling along slowly, well before she could make the alley. She glanced over at him and saw that he was driving with his left hand, holding a gun in his right. He extended that arm toward her across the passenger seat and let the revolver's long barrel rest on the edge of the rolled-down window glass.

Panicky, Serena clenched her fists, digging her nails into her palms. She pushed herself harder. He sped up. She ran faster than she'd ever run in her life, but she no longer felt like winged Mercury. Her breaths came faster than her lungs could pump; blood surged in her ears. She imagined the bullet—smooth, gunmetal gray—slicing the air. When she finally turned down the alley she felt that her back was naked, exposed. Any moment now, the bullet would penetrate.

That must have scared her for good, thought Herman. He sat on a stool in his garage, the old driver spread out on the workbench. He liked remembering the expression on her face when she saw the gun. She'd gone all white in a second, scooted down that alley like a scared jackrabbit.

He studied his driver and thought maybe he'd glue the pieces back together, hang it over his bench for old times' sake. He opened a can of wood glue and dumped some of the powder into a cup, but he paused before adding water. The idea occurred to him that the woman might bring a gun of her own next time, and maybe hers would be loaded. That woman was sincerely nuts. No telling what she might do. Maybe he should stay away. He'd made his point. There was another field he knew of, closer to home even. He could go there to practice instead.

In the large meeting room at her daughter's high school, Serena and her husband sat in the first row. The principal stood behind an old wooden lectern and gripped its front corners with his hands. He looked too young to be a principal, Serena thought. His eyes watered as if he were having trouble wearing contact lenses. "I understand your concern," he said, smiling and blinking rapidly.

"But can you assure us this violence will end?" asked a parent in the back of the room.

"The ringleaders have been disciplined," the principal said. "You needn't fear any further escalation of these noontime activities."

No, there must be no further escalation. Serena bowed her head as if making a vow to God. Eyes closed, she could see the barrel of a gun pointed at her. That man was a lunatic. He could have killed her. But she had been spared. She would never go back. After all, she had made her point.

She stayed away for a week, but then a thought started eating at her. Maybe the man had only used the gun to scare her. It was a big joke, and ever since, he'd been coming to the greenspace—was out there now—driving golf balls, gloating over her absence, thinking he had won.

There must be no further escalation, her inner voice chanted. But as days passed, the voice grew fainter. The picture of the man out there ballooned in her mind—him with his chest all puffed up, thinking he owned everything. She could see him plugging tees into the ground, swinging the club. It was intolerable. She put on her running shoes.

"Are you playing golf with Sidney this weekend?" asked Herman's wife. "Maybe, if it don't rain," he said. He pulled himself out of his armchair. "I'm going to practice my drive awhile." His wife nodded, one eye on the TV.

Herman first steered in the direction of his new spot, but then turned the wagon around and drove to the greenspace. He didn't like that new spot. Too many trees, and hordes of robins stupidly hopping all over the place. At the greenspace he could watch a ball soar without worrying it might hit something. The only birds were sea gulls circling high above him, smartly using the air currents instead of their wings. He missed the peace and quiet. At least, it had been peaceful before that bitch had come along. It wasn't fair. He wasn't going to let himself be pushed around.

Serena ran toward the greenspace irresistibly. Nearing the Winfields', she saw the man's station wagon parked near the metal sign. She jogged in place under the laurel tree. She didn't have a plan; she had even forgotten to bring her mace keychain for protection. "Go home, Serena," said a voice in her head. Still jogging in place, she made a half turn as if to retreat. But another voice intruded: DRIVING OF GOLF BALLS PROHIBITED.

She narrowed her eyes, let out an angry breath. Of course, that

gun hadn't been loaded. If he'd meant to shoot her, he would have. Now it occurred to her that since he'd pointed a gun at her, even an unloaded one, she was in a position of greater power, legally. In fact, even before that, hitting those balls at her had been intentional. Assault. She'd written down his license number, too. If he did anything else, he'd be in big trouble.

Serena glanced up at the laurel tree's crooked skeleton arm. The part that looked like a tapering index finger pointed at the greenspace and seemed to zero in on the man. No, she wasn't going to turn back. The greenspace was waiting, calling her.

On an impulse, she pulled a white tissue out of her shorts pocket and waved it in the air as she jogged towards him. She wanted him to think she was signaling a truce.

Herman stopped driving balls and leaned on his club as she approached. Good, she's surrendering, he thought when he saw her waving what looked like a white flag.

She came up even with him. They faced each other, neither speaking.

"Now you get out of my way," Herman said at last. He could tell by her look that she wasn't giving in after all.

"I'm staying right here." She stood in a resolute straddle, hands on hips.

"You're in my light, lady." He prepared to swing, but she moved so that she was standing right in front of the tee.

"Lady, you're gonna get yourself hurt bad if you don't get out the way."

"Go ahead," Serena said. "But if you drive that ball, you're going to have to hit me to do it." Of course. Why hadn't she thought of this sooner? Simply stand too close, so close he *couldn't* hit the ball. But even as she praised her latest tactic she was thinking, What am I doing out here, what on earth am I doing?

Herman circled the ball, prepared to knock it in the opposite direction, but Serena shifted with him. "Now cut that out," he said. "Somebody'll get hurt if you don't."

He revolved again. Serena moved with him like a satellite fixed in his orbit. She was smiling, incredulous at herself, thinking, You're like a dog with a bone—just can't let this bone go, can you, Serena?

Finally, Herman lowered the club and looked straight into her eyes. He imagined he saw a tiny reflection of himself in her pupils—a tiny self trapped in there. Her eyes didn't seem human. She looked more like a rabid dog, cornered, poised to jump at his throat. For a moment he wondered if his eyes looked the same to her. But then she said, "Go ahead. Hit the ball. Hit it, you old bastard."

Old bastard. The words made something break inside of him. Without even thinking, he swung the club straight up over his head and brought it down onto her shoulder. The woman staggered but did not collapse, though her right arm dangled unnaturally. Something had broken for sure, and it wasn't his club. That was only bent some.

Serena swayed from foot to foot. The pain stunned her, then quickly numbed. He'd done it, finally done it. In the moment before he struck, her daughter and husband flashed through her mind. How strange. They didn't know about this, didn't know this side of her. She'd had no thought of getting out of the man's way, no thought of anything except the inevitability of his movements. Raising the club, bringing it down. And she was still standing, as if she'd walked through a brick wall and come out on the other side.

Herman backed up and looked around wildly. He had never struck a woman in his life—never struck anyone, not even a dog. He didn't want to look at the woman. All he wanted to do was leave. But the woman made him look at her.

"I've got you where I want you now," she said.

"Look lady . . ." Herman began.

"I've got you just where I want you. I've won."

"Shut up," he said. "Stop saying that."

"I'm going to sue you for everything you've got. I have your license number at home. I can find out who you are. I'll call the police."

She looked like a demon, swaying there, arm dangling.

"You're going to lose everything. Everything."

Herman swung around and raised the club, threatening.

"Go ahead," she taunted. "Either way, you lose."

The club came down harder on her other shoulder. Serena sank to her knees under the blow. Crazy, she thought. Crazy, crazy that she'd pushed it to this. She was going to die out here, die over the greenspace. The pain was crazy, too. It seemed far away, like the muted beats of her silver-striped running shoes. She looked at his face. It was full of fear, as hers had been. But her fear and anger were gone now. How far away everyone and everything seemed. So far away. Before the last blow fell, a picture of the greenspace, calm and peaceful, filled her mind.

Dumbstruck, Herman turned his back on the woman. She was the one on the ground, but he felt as if he were the one who'd been hit, as if a train had run right through him and left him standing. He picked up his club and bag of balls, kept his eyes on the station wagon as he approached it. The closer he got, the farther

away the wagon seemed. His knees felt shaky, about to buckle. The bag of balls grew heavier with each step. He hadn't wanted to be enemies with anyone, he kept telling himself. He was a live-and-let-live kind of guy. She'd goaded him past all mercy.

He kept walking, propelled by the queasy awareness that he was leaving something ugly behind. A mess he'd made. Once, in an A&P, he'd pulled a bottle of cooking oil from a pyramid display and the entire structure collapsed. Sheets of oil went sliding down the aisle. No one was around to give him one of those shaming looks. Still, he'd hurried away, feeling exposed, as if his clothes had been raked from his backside, right down to the pink flesh.

He felt that raw, naked feeling now. But it wasn't smashed bottles of oil he was leaving. He couldn't let himself think about what was lying on the grass behind him. As in the grocery, he sensed no one had seen. The windows in the houses across the street looked like eyes, but blind eyes—no one was peering out; no one was going to say anything. He could maybe handle it better if someone did see, if someone ran out of one of those houses and yelled an ugly name at him. But no one did. No one had seen.

When he reached the sign at the edge of the greenspace, he cocked his head and stared at it. He couldn't make sense of the words; the letters seemed to be from another alphabet. He shut his eyes. An inverted image of the sign appeared, the letters white against a black field. He backed away.

Next thing he knew, he was gliding past the greenspace in his station wagon. No other cars were in sight. Still, he drove slowly, taking care to stay on his side. He never signaled turns, but nearing the corner, he clicked on the blinkers. The steady beat filled his head. It was the end of another practice session and he was going home to his wife. This weekend, maybe, if the weather was good, he would play golf with Sidney.

But as the station wagon completed the turn, a view of the greenspace bobbed up in the rearview mirror. He saw it and gently applied the brakes. She'd said that she had won. But what he was seeing in the mirror now . . . *that* was what they had both lost. Something about the intense green pulled him back, beckoned him to turn around. He couldn't. Not just now. He let the brake out, rolled on.

Soon, the shadows of the scrub pines lengthened and the grass turned a deeper, bluer shade of green. Birds settled into their nests for the evening. For many hours, but for the click and thrum of many thousands of insects, the greenspace lay in the dark, undisturbed.

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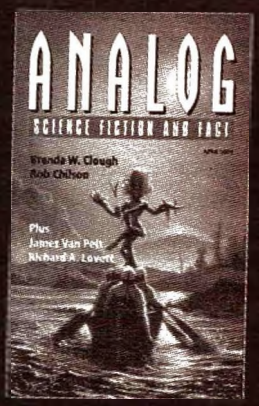

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THE TEN-DOLLAR ROOSTERS

DOUGLAS GRANT JOHNSON

While I was gathering the eggs, somebody shot my ten-dollar rooster.

I heard the glass shatter in one of the chicken coop windows and saw the bird flop off the watering fountain onto the floor. The sound of the gun came almost at the same time and a split second later his entire harem, all forty of them plus another hundred in adjacent pens, were suddenly caught up in a state of advanced hysteria. Chickens aren't thought of as a flying-type bird, and they don't, usually. But when they are startled—and they startle easily—they can get off the ground and fly almost as high and far as Orville Wright did that first time. In a small chicken coop, that many chickens flying around like clawed rockets, accompanied by the squawking sound only a terrified chicken can make, can be a wondrously terrifying experience. I ducked as one of them collided with my wrist, leaving a wide gash. Another aimed herself at my head and left another mark. I scrunched down just in time to hear another crash of glass and another hen exploded in a burst of feathers and blood right over my head.

I dropped to the floor, unmindful of the normal hazards down there and tried to avoid being slashed to ribbons.

Another bullet whanged through the window and whunked into the back wall. Three more shots quickly followed. I was aware these last ones were not crashing through my windows, but I tried to scrunch even lower anyway. Eventually, I crawled through the panicked mess and found the door.

I reached up to open it just as a car in a nearby street shifted from second into high. That normally wouldn't have been a problem except this one was just beginning to show a need for a new muffler and, I judged, was also in need of a good timing adjustment. That combination set off a couple of loud backfires at the

shift. The noise set off the hens again and a half dozen of them blew out the door along with me. When the door was securely closed, I sank to the ground and took inventory. Inside, the rest of the hens were showing signs of settling down. I was so covered with dust I had to hold my nose for a few seconds to keep from sneezing. If I had, it might've set them off again.

I was still alive and pretty much whole, but my face and arms were covered by scratches from the flying talons. Blood and other stuff from the hen that was shot, including an egg she hadn't laid yet, was splattered all over me. Diving for the floor hadn't done my shirt and pants any good either. They were covered with smears and spatters of . . . well, what do you expect you'd find on the floor in there?

Through some paralysis of mind or muscles, I had managed to hang onto the egg bucket, although by the time I got outside, most of the eggs were broken and oozing together in a fine mix of feathers, straw, and broken shells.

And the chickens that had gotten loose? They had suddenly discovered peace and quiet in my wife's garden and were already quietly sampling the lettuce just starting to come up. Chickens forget quickly when they see delicacies like that. I should have gone after them, but I was too scared and miserable to do anything but hunch over and run for the house.

"You could have been killed," Lillie, my wife, gasped when I fled into the kitchen and told her what had happened. Billy, our three year old, watched from the safety of the doorway, not at all sure whether this apparition was his father. The first thing she did was herd me back outside and turn the garden hose on me. I was pretty grotty-looking and I suppose she considered me to be as much a danger to her clean house as the possibility of flying bullets was to my well-being. Actually, the shooting seemed to be over, but still we went to the opposite side of the house. That and the fact that the chicken coop was made of sturdy old railroad ties seemed to make a safe barrier. The hose got rid of the worst of the mess and I was glad to see it go.

"So then, we're almost out of the eggs-for-the-hatchery business?" my wife asked after she calmed herself down and found I was otherwise unhurt. Well, not quite unhurt. I was oozing from more than a few cuts and scratches and the iodine she was painting on promised to be more painful than my wounds.

"We've still got one good rooster in the third pen," I said, "but the hatchery won't want to buy eggs from us out of the other two unless we can get the roosters replaced."

"Do you think this would be a good time to sell the whole flock?" she said.

"Market is still down for that. Selling eggs is doing pretty good for us, isn't it?" I asked. Lillie was never a great fan of our poultry flock, mostly because of the extra work it gave to both of us. But she tolerated it because it provided a worthwhile part of our cash income.

What we were doing with that flock of chickens was selling eggs to a chick hatchery in the next town. When a farmer wanted a new flock of chickens, he bought newly hatched chicks and raised them. The eggs these chicks hatched from had to come from flocks that had roosters in them, like mine and a few other flocks that sold eggs to the hatchery when their own output wasn't enough to meet the demand. We were paid a premium for the eggs and the whole endeavor gave us a little extra money to supplement our income from the auto repair shop I ran down on Main Street. That was my main occupation. I was the owner and sole employee of the Cliff Mills Garage.

I had been occupied in this way for the past few years. When everything went south in '29, the Cadillac dealer up in the capital cut back and I found myself without a job and with prospects that ranged from none to not many. Very quickly, me, my wife, and our year-old son were in a pretty desperate condition and faced with eviction. My wife's family offered us this place, her grandfather's old place, because it was empty. We could have it rent free if we could somehow keep the taxes paid.

It was in a small town, and when we looked it over I found there was no mechanic there. So, we took it and I decided to create my own job. About three blocks away, on Main Street, an old blacksmith's building was vacant. I could walk there every day and save gas money. I rented it on pretty much the same basis as the house. We now had a roof, food on the table, and the lights were on. I think we were generally satisfied with how things were going.

"I'm sure the hatchery can supply us with a couple of replacements," I said. "Ought to do it soon, too." The reason two of our three pens were without a rooster was that a couple of days ago a hunting dog belonging to a guy who lived on the other side of the block had gotten into one of my chicken runs and killed the rooster and about six hens. The second rooster we'd lost was the one that was shot off the watering fountain about thirty minutes before. I really hated to lose those roosters because they were pedigreed ones and the hatchery liked eggs from the flocks they

serviced. We'd paid ten dollars for one of them and seven for the other, and I didn't like replacing them often at either price.

By the time Lillie was through with her doctoring, I had worked up a good mad—people shouldn't be shooting like that in the city limits. I decided to go looking for Dave Henley, the town marshal. I had gotten to know him pretty well as a customer at the garage, and I wanted to find him and bring a complaint.

Dave had a desk down at the city offices, but he was never there. He was usually out at his farm. The office of marshal was part-time and largely ceremonial. So was the jail. It was just a room in the town hall basement that could be locked. It had never been used in anyone's memory, and it had been almost as long since the marshal had much of anything to do of a law enforcement nature. What little he had to do was usually done by the force of his personality and by the fact that everyone liked him.

I went first to his farm, where he wasn't, and finally found him where he was, at Floyd Harmer's place, just through the block from where I had been shot at. Even though we were neighbors, so to speak, I didn't know a lot about Floyd. He didn't mix much with most folks in town. About all I knew was he worked as a foreman at a cannery near here, drove a new car every year, and never seemed to scrimp for lack of money.

I walked past Dave's Model A pickup and a late model Chevy sedan with the Sheriff's Department insignia on the front doors. Dave, along with a detective named Baxter from the county sheriff's office, were standing in Floyd's yard.

Someone had shot and killed Floyd and his dog, the same dog that had gotten into my chickens a few days ago. Apparently both man and beast had been killed at about the same time I was getting shot at in my chicken coop. An old patchwork quilt had been thrown over Floyd where he lay in the yard. The dog lay a few feet away, not covered by anything.

We stood a little distance away from that scene and I told them what had happened to me. They listened, but it didn't take long before the sheriff's man stepped closer and started asking questions that began to sound a lot like he thought I might have been the one who did the shooting.

"Dave's been telling me you and Floyd here had quite a feud going."

"I don't think feud is the right . . ."

"He tells me you and Floyd had a big fight down at the post office where you told him you were going to shoot that dog of his."

Dave hadn't been there, so what kind of secondhand gossip had he recounted to the sheriff's detective? I looked at Dave but he remained silent and kind of apologetic-looking.

"It was no big fight," I said. "His dog killed some of my chickens and I told him I thought he ought to pay for them. He had a big laugh over that and said I ought to have a higher fence around the run. Then he turned his back and walked away."

"So what did you do then?"

"That's when I told him, if his dog got into my chicken runs and killed any more of my chickens, I'd shoot it."

"And then?"

"Nothing. He just laughed and got in his car and drove away."

"And you say you were over in your hen house when all of this shootin' was goin' on?" the detective asked.

I looked at Dave and wanted to ask if this guy had been listening a few moments ago when I told where I was and what had happened. I said, "I counted six shots. One killed an expensive rooster about three feet from me and another killed a hen who was flying about a foot over my head. A third just kept things stirred—"

"That your hen house I can see through the block on the other side of them trees there?"

"Yes."

He turned to look at my chicken coops again. "Looks to be a pretty straight line 'tween here and there. Could have been accidental. Maybe you was shootin' at the dog and Floyd here came out to see what was going on and got in the way."

"The bullets were going in the other direction," I said.

"We'll see about that. You own a gun?"

"No, I don't."

"Then why'd you tell him you'd shoot his dog?"

"I thought it sounded a little stronger than 'I'll throw rocks at it.'"

"Are you bein' smart with me?"

"No."

"And you say you got those scratches from your flying hens." He didn't say it like it was a question.

"Yeah. They were pretty spooked."

"Maybe that dog got into your chickens again and you got those scratches when you tried to run him off, and then you went and got your gun and . . ."

"I told you, I don't have a gun."

"Or borrowed one. As I said, we'll be checking that out."

I looked at Dave again. He had been like a spectator during the whole conversation. Now he was looking down the block at the hearse that had come to pick up Floyd. He turned back to us. "We'll come by in a while," Dave said, looking at me, "have a look at your hen house." I thought he looked a little sheepish that he hadn't had more to say in the conversation.

About a half hour later, Dave and the sheriff's detective came by and I led the way to the chicken coop. It wasn't till we were going inside that I noticed Baxter hadn't followed. I looked back and saw that Lillie had just opened the door of the house for him. I was a little angry and almost went back to get him. But in the end I decided to go ahead and show Dave around.

The chickens were quiet now and we moved slowly so as not to startle them. I pointed out the broken window panes and the remains of the rooster and the hen that had been shot. There wasn't much because by the time I'd gone back inside to pick them up, the other chickens hadn't left much. You never think of chickens as meat eaters, but if one is hurt or the least bit bloody, they'll turn carnivorous in an instant.

Dave slowly looked around as I described where I had been. He bent down for a close look at one of the rear roof supports and the nearby wall. The roof support was an old log about six inches in diameter and along one side of it a fresh gash showed where one of the bullets had hit. You could see where the other bullets had embedded themselves deep in one of the ties in the rear wall. He took out a pocketknife and began opening up the chipped part of the support post. In no time he had retrieved a pretty big slug. "Kinda deformed, but it looks like it could be a thirty-thirty or a thirty-aught-six," he said. "You know how many of these we got in this town, Cliff?"

"No idea."

"Surprise me a lot if there wasn't one in every other house."

Then he crouched down a little lower and put his eye close to the place where the bullet had gouged the support and sighted through the first window that was broken. " 'Less I'm mistaken, this lines up pretty close to where Floyd was standing." He stood, still looking out the window. "And with old Mrs. Constantine's front porch."

"Mrs. Constantine?" I gave a little laugh.

"I've heard Floyd's dog killed her cat last week. She was awfully fond of that cat."

"She's so frail I don't think she could lift a gun that big."

"Person gets determined, no telling what they might find the

strength to do," Baxter said. The sheriff's detective had just entered in time to hear the last of our conversation.

"You find any guns there in Will's house?" asked Dave.

"Couple of Red Ryder cap pistols that his boy was sure I was goin' to take away from him. Nothin' else unless he's got it hidden somewhere. What did you find in here?"

"Cliff was right," Dave said, showing the detective the slug he had removed from the post and explaining the sight lines through the window. "I'd say it's pretty clear the bullets were all comin' from the other direction."

"Mrs. Constantine's porch, I believe you said. Maybe she ought to be the next stop, then."

They both turned to leave, but as they were getting into their car, the detective turned to me and said, "If you've got any of your neighbors holdin' onto any kind of gun for you, I'll find out." His comment unsettled me a bit, despite the fact that I didn't own any kind of gun and hadn't asked anyone to hide one for me.

I didn't see the marshal or the detective for a few days and life continued the same as always in our little town. I knew they were out and around though, because a couple of my neighbors mentioned that Baxter had inquired about me needing either to borrow or hide a rifle.

There was a funeral for Floyd over in the county seat where he was from originally. I didn't hear of anybody from here who went over for it, though.

Every customer that came in to my shop had a bit of gossip to add to what everyone was dying to know about the murder, and I gathered the circle of suspects was getting wider. The major problem was that Floyd never kept his dog tied up, even after Dave had warned him about it a couple of times. I heard stories about several who'd had run-ins with the dog, including a man on the other side of town whose cow had been so frightened by the critter one night she had crashed through a corral fence and later gave premature birth to the calf she was carrying. The calf was born dead, of course. Floyd's response had been, "Prove it was my dog."

I also heard the detective had come on so strong to Mrs. Constantine that she almost fainted and had taken herself to bed for two days.

At home, Lillie told me Billy kept asking whether the man was going to come back and take away his cap pistols. I suggested she not let him in again unless he was accompanied either by me or a search warrant.

Folks tried to put a humorous spin on the stories for a while, but

as the days went by, they sounded a bit more serious and in the telling there began to appear a shade of suspicion. People were beginning to ask themselves which one of their neighbors had done the deed.

Lillie heard the speculations every time she went to the market for something. "They were talking about Mrs. Constantine and her cat again today," she said. "You don't think anyone really believes she could have done it, do you?"

"It's just talk," I said. "Of course not."

"Well, I hope they can find out soon so that . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"What?"

"Well . . ."

"Well . . . what?"

"Well, a couple of people have mentioned . . . about our chickens being shot at. Nobody's come right out and said it, but I think some might be starting to wonder which direction the bullets were really traveling."

I had to think about that for a moment. It's one thing to know the evidence is on your side, but gossip and innuendo have never been known to depend on fact to do their dirty work. The thought struck me that people sometimes behave just like those chickens of mine who will turn on their own kind if one of them gets injured.

"Yeah," I finally said. "I hope they can find who did it. I'm sure they will." What else could I say? Or do?

One day Dave told me Baxter had gone up to the state capital to interview Floyd's wife who had finally left him after a couple of disastrous years. I didn't know her because the split apparently happened before we came to live here; in fact, I hadn't known Floyd had been married at all until I heard about Baxter's visit to her. She was living with her parents and working as a clerk in one of the state offices. Baxter learned she had found someone she would like to marry if she could finally get a divorce from Floyd. Evidently Floyd had been making that prospect as difficult as possible and Dave said the detective was beginning to look on the whole matter as if it might be a convenient way for her to settle the matter out of court. So far, that line had come to nothing because she and her parents and her friend could prove where they'd been at the time of the shooting. But it put a new light on things. Maybe it wasn't just the dog someone was after.

My egg business was back in operation. The hatchery helped me find a couple of new roosters that were acceptable to them, but

together they cost me twenty dollars that I could hardly spare at that moment. At least my investment was no longer in danger from Floyd's hunting dog.

While I kept pretty busy at my auto repair business, I wasn't getting rich. Or even well off. I wasn't a trained mechanic if you mean factory trained. But I'd always had a knack for mechanical things and I had always learned fast by doing. And I knew how to tackle a problem logically. When you have some problem on a car, what you do first is find all the things that aren't wrong with it, then whatever is left is what you fix. That approach was as much responsible for what success I'd achieved here as anything. People just didn't have the money to pay a mechanic to keep replacing parts until the problem went away.

It had been only a couple of years since the crash, and the country as a whole, and especially the town where I lived, was still in the midst of the Depression. My bill for a car repair was often partly paid with a side of bacon or a sack of potatoes. Once, even, credit at the local market. People sometimes didn't have a lot of cash to spread around. That was one of the attractions of selling eggs to the chick hatchery. They always paid in cash, and at a premium over just selling them to the farmers' co-op.

One day Mrs. Constantine brought in her 1926 Jordan complaining of a leaky radiator. I hadn't spent a lot of time under the hood of a Jordan but I found the problem right away. Nothing more than a hose clamp that needed tightening. It was the first thing you should check. Took about sixty seconds to find and fix and when she asked how much, I hadn't the heart to charge her for doing so little. She protested, then thanked me profusely, but I knew she'd be bringing over a loaf of bread or a pan of biscuits. Or a rhubarb pie.

As she turned to get into her car, she hesitated, then said, "Mr. Mills, I'm sorry Floyd was killed, but somebody's done this town a service, shootin' that dog. Half the kids in town were terrorized by it."

"It's too bad Floyd got in the way."

"Oh, sure. Still, the neighborhood will be a little quieter. You should have heard the row over there just the day before the shootin'. Some girl was by to see him and there was a lot of shoutin' and screamin'."

"Didn't hear about that."

"I guess it wasn't all that loud. You would'a been down here to your garage, anyway."

"More'n likely."

"Since his wife went back to her folks a few years ago, he's had a few parties over there. Pretty loud they were, too." She turned to get into her car, then stopped again. "I hope they find who did it. Folks are startin' to look at each other a little strangely." She didn't say it, but it didn't take much imagination to know she'd noticed someone looking at her more than once and asking themselves if she was the one who'd done it.

After Mrs. Constantine left I sat for a while thinking and wondering about the same thing: which one of the people in this town —maybe which one of my customers—had decided to get rid of Floyd's dog. Too bad they didn't have better aim. Or had shot the dog from a different vantage point. Maybe Floyd and my rooster would still be alive, and people wouldn't be thinking about which one of their neighbors was a killer. Or better still, why hadn't that someone killed the dog a few days earlier? Then I wouldn't have had to buy two of those ten-dollar roosters. About then my thoughts were getting into the ridiculous and I decided it was time to get back to work.

Over the next couple of days, several other things floated by. Detective Baxter, with a little help from our marshal, had uncovered some new suspects. It began to look as if half the town might actually have some kind of motive for putting a bullet in Floyd's dog. Like the father of a couple of first graders who always had to go several blocks out of their way to walk to school because Floyd's dog had terrified them several times.

I also heard they'd come back and searched Mrs. Constantine's house again. This time they'd discovered an old thirty-thirty rifle in her attic. It had been owned by her husband who had died twelve years ago. She had originally claimed not to own a gun. But at eighty-seven years of age, I suppose she simply forgot her husband ever had it. Baxter was ready to arrest her then and there. It was only when Dave took a close look inside the barrel and discovered rust that the detective had backed off.

I saw Dave one afternoon after he had received a telephone call from Detective Baxter. Seems he had secured an expert second opinion about the rust in the barrel of the rifle from Mrs. Constantine's attic. His expert second opinion thought it could have formed after an incomplete or inexperienced cleaning. Maybe she had even used a damp cloth knowing that rust would form quickly. Baxter, Dave thought, was about two inches away from arresting her. "I just can't believe it, Cliff," he said to me, "beside the fact that she's one of the sweetest old ladies in this town."

As he told me this, he seemed a bit sad and I thought it was because of the old woman. But he looked off down the street and said so softly I could hardly hear it, "If I'd done something about that dog, maybe none o' this would'a happened." Before I could think up anything to say to that, he walked back to his car and drove away.

The next day he dropped by to give me the latest on the second opinion story. Seems Baxter's expert had offered to test fire the rifle and it had blown up. That it had been secured in a vise and fired by pulling the trigger with a string from around a corner was the only thing that had prevented serious injury. Still, Baxter said he might come back over again and have another look through the old woman's house. But this time, when Dave drove away he was smiling and shaking his head.

About the middle of the week I needed some parts for a couple of cars I had in the shop. As there wasn't much I could do without them, I took a spin over to the Chevy dealer in the county seat to pick them up. I was a regular at their parts window, and on friendly terms with most of the mechanics who worked there. It took only a few minutes to get what I needed. It made up two heavy boxes and Sonny, one of the mechanics, came with me to help carry the stuff. When we stopped at the cashier to settle the bill there was a new face behind the window. A middle-aged woman scowled through the screen. I knew the regular cashier only as Rosie, and not at all as well as I did the boys in back. I remarked on it to the new face. "Rosie on vacation?"

"She something to you?"

"No, just that she's always been here when I've been in."

"That be all, sir?" All business.

I said it was and picked up my box of parts and headed out to my car. On the way, Sonny said, "Rosie liked it here. It was a good place to meet boys."

"Guys in the shop?"

"Nah. Wouldn't give any of us a tumble."

"She liked boys with money, then?"

Sonny laughed in agreement with that. "Quit," he said. "Didn't give no notice, either. Couple weeks ago. Word is, she had to go help out a sick relative for a while. Up north of here somewhere. Speculation is, she probably won't be back."

"Why do you say that?"

"Bigger city, more boys."

We were just putting the boxes in the back seat of my car when another car came whizzing by on the street. It needed a muffler

and a timing job pretty badly and the engine let loose with a couple of backfires when the driver shifted at the corner.

It didn't hit me until I had settled behind the wheel that I had heard that same car before. But I couldn't make out where it was or why I should be curious. Most cars were noisy machines, even the Cads and Lincolns, and I had a pretty good ear for their sounds. To me, each make had a sound as distinctive as the radiator grilles they put on the front. I called to Sonny, who had just turned to go back inside.

"Hey, that car that just went by. You know whose it is?"

Sonny glanced at it as it sped off. "That was Wynn Baxter. His old man works at the sheriff's. Why?"

I was still thinking about why the sound of that car should be familiar, but said only, "Sounds like he ought to be gettin' that car in your shop."

"Belongs to his folks, an' his old man's as tight as a lug nut with a dollar. He'll bring it in when it doesn't run anymore."

"Well, I guess the bill will be bigger then." I waved and pushed the starter. Sonny laughed and went inside and I suddenly knew where I had heard that car before. Or one like it. I didn't know how many Franklins there were in the towns around here. A few, maybe. But how many of those would have the same problems at the same time? Thinking about things on the way home, I began to sort out the problem and try to toss out things that weren't wrong. And then I began to get a glimmer of an idea. Just a glimmer, but there were still a few things that didn't make sense yet.

By the time I arrived back in my garage I had gotten nowhere. I gave up and went back to the water pump I was supposed to have finished by quitting time.

Dave stopped by the next morning and sat on the fender of the car I was working under. We chatted about the weather for a moment, then he asked if I needed any grain. Seems his brother-in-law needed some car repairs and he thought he'd spare some grain to help him out if I was agreeable. I laughed and said, "Sure thing. Looks like I'll be in the poultry business for good."

Dave is the reason I am as far into the poultry business as I am. Last summer I did some major repair work on his tractor and he asked if he could pay me in grain. I'd said okay and he delivered it. Almost two tons of it. The market was down and I guess he had a lot he couldn't sell. Then I couldn't find anyone who wanted to buy it, either. Since we already kept a dozen chickens in a coop Lillie's grandfather had built for six hundred, I decided to raise a batch of chicks, feed them the grain, and sell them as fryers. I did

manage to sell off about half—the roosters—but I waited too long for the rest and shortly they became hens that started laying eggs. Then I heard the chick hatchery over in Monroe was buying hatching eggs from other farmers as long as they used pedigreed roosters and they'd pay a premium for the eggs. So, presto, the ace auto mechanic is also in the eggs-for-the-hatchery business and . . . well gosh, you don't really need to know all this, do you?

I'd known Dave as long as we'd lived here and I'd always thought he was a pretty down-to-earth guy. But he was over his head on this murder thing, and it was my impression he knew it. From all I could observe, so was Baxter.

And if they were, where did that leave me? And who was I, with my vague suspicions, to tell either of them what to do? Still, the whole thing was eating at the town. If something wasn't done, suspicions might escalate into something permanently damaging to the community.

For several days since I had returned with my parts, I had been thinking about the whole situation. While there turned out to be a lot of suspects, it was hard to picture anyone, myself included, who would actually have resorted to shooting the dog. It was a small town and in the time we'd lived here, I thought I'd gotten to know many of the townspeople pretty well. Even having promised Floyd, I'd never have done it. I couldn't picture anyone else I knew doing it either.

And if no one would really go after the dog, it made less sense that anyone would go after Floyd.

So if you eliminate everyone in the town, and leave out Floyd's wife, who had been looking for a divorce, who was there left? Someone else, obviously. But who? And there had to be another reason. But what?

That was the trouble. I didn't know. Oh, I'd had a couple of theories, but that's all they were. I didn't think I should trouble anyone with them without more facts than I had seen. It wasn't as easy as trying to figure out what part was going bad on a car. In this case, although I felt I could identify some parts that were not bad, there must be a few parts I didn't even know about yet.

I put together the things I'd learned over at the Chevy dealer and about the backfiring car. There were, I realized, a few facts in there. Maybe it was time to at least get those off my chest before they started making me lose sleep. I'd gone back to work on the Dodge that had occupied my morning until Dave stopped by, but my thoughts wouldn't stay on what I was doing. I rolled out from under the car and sat up. I had to catch up to Dave and have a

talk with him. But first, it occurred to me to talk to Mrs. Constantine.

It was a little early to quit for lunch, but I closed the shop anyway and walked home, stopping by her house on the way.

"Tell me about the argument between Floyd and the girl you were telling me about," I said. We were sitting on her front porch sipping some lemonade she happened to have already made.

"Not much to tell. All happened right on his front step. Couldn't hear what it was about, though."

"Can you describe the girl?"

"She was young. High school age. Maybe older, but not much. I remember seeing her once before when he brought her to one of the parties he had over there. Pretty thing. Blonde hair. Not too many with blonde hair around here."

It was enough. I had a pretty good idea who it was. I finished my lemonade and excused myself. It was time to look up Dave. Lunch could wait.

He was just coming out of the city offices when I found him. We leaned against the fender of his car. "Couple of things I need to pass along to you, Dave . . ." I told him about the car I'd heard speeding away right after the shots and hearing what I thought was the same car again over at the county seat. Driven by someone named Wynn Baxter who someone said was the son of Detective Baxter.

Then I mentioned that Mrs. Constantine had witnessed an argument between Floyd and a young girl about the time a cashier named Rose over at the Chev dealer had to quit to go away and help a sick relative. I told him her description of the girl who had the argument with Floyd was the same as I would use to describe the cashier.

"You didn't mention the car when we talked to you right after the shootin'," Dave said.

"Except for the fact it scared the life out of my chickens, I didn't attach any significance to it at the time."

"You're real sure about it bein' the same car?"

"You don't see too many of them in this part of the county."

Dave thought about that for a moment, then said, "Guess you'd know. I think I'll go over and have a little talk with Detective Baxter. See if there's an explanation for any o' these things." He turned as if to get into his car, then swung back to me. "If you're not real busy the next little while, I think it would be good if you came along so he gets it all first hand."

I should have been busy, but I said, "Sure," and got in his car.

"I surely don't see as any of this sheds any definite light on the matter, fellers." Detective Baxter was sitting on the edge of a small table. Dave and I were leaning against the wall next to the door, and I'd just gone through the things I'd told Dave earlier. The room was at least partly used as a storeroom and there was only one chair. Maybe he didn't have a regular office by himself, because when we started to explain what we'd come for, he ushered us in where we were. "It sort of stretches things a lot to try to connect any of this to Floyd's shootin'."

"Well, when I heard what Cliff told me, I thought it was somethin' ought to be looked at," Dave said. "That's why I brought him over right away."

"I really appreciate you two coming all the way over here, but it all could have waited till tomorrow. I'm coming over with a couple of officers to go through Mrs. Constantine's barn again, and those other outbuildings on her property there. And the sheriff has had a couple more tips he thought I ought to look into. A few more people with grudges we need to talk to."

Dave looked at me, than back to Baxter. "Was that your daughter who worked at the Chevy dealer?" he asked quietly.

Baxter hesitated a moment. "She did, but she's away. Been helping out with the family of my wife's sister. Been real sick lately and with her husband working and youngsters in the family she needs help for a little while."

"And your own car. It havin' a few problems?"

"I don't believe my car has ever been over there."

"My town, it needs for us to get to the bottom of this."

"We all surely do, fellows," Baxter said. It was the teacher talking to a couple of his less advanced students. "Longer it goes on, worse it'll be."

Dave hesitated for a moment. He was peeved. But he continued quietly, "We just wanted to let you know what Cliff picked up, see if any of it helps."

"If there's anything to any of this, I'll let you know."

"I'd appreciate it if you would. We ought to know if your daughter was ever over where Mrs. Constantine could have noticed her." Baxter looked up sharply at this and looked as if he might be forming a retort. "Meanwhile," Dave continued, "this afternoon I'll be writing up a report of what Cliff here has brought to me. These kinds of things are supposed to go directly to the sheriff, anyway. Part of my regular reports. I'll have it ready when you come over tomorrow. Maybe you'd be kind enough to bring it back. Save the city a little postage."

Baxter didn't reply to that, and after a few seconds of silence, Dave gave me a look and a tiny tilt of his head toward the door that said, "Let's go."

I finished up the day back in my shop feeling a little depressed about the whole affair, including our visit with Baxter. I began to ask myself if I'd done the right thing. If it was all a coincidence and there was nothing to any of the things I had reported, it was going to be mighty embarrassing, not only for me but for Dave. Especially for Dave. I liked him and I sure didn't want to cause him any grief.

About the time I was getting ready to close my doors for the day, I heard the car.

The Franklin with the faulty muffler and the bad timing.

Only now, it sounded like it was hardly running at all. I went to the front and looked out. It was about a half block away and moving slowly, coming from the direction of the county seat. I could tell the engine wasn't delivering its usual power. A few backfires sounded like they were punching new holes in the muffler.

The driver slowed even more as he approached my shop, finally stopping in front of the big open doorway where I was standing. He banged open his door and stomped out.

It was the kid Sonny had pointed out when he whizzed by the other day over by the Chevy dealer.

Up close, he was more than a kid. Not quite out of his teens but still taller than me by no small number of inches. Wider by the same number. And he was very agitated, hovering somewhere between anger and fear. He glanced around quickly, seeing only me and the car I had been working on.

"You the mechanic here?" A demand. Like I'd better be paying close attention.

"Yes."

"Can you fix my car?"

"What's wrong with it?" I wasn't going to tell him I already knew what was wrong with it.

"It ain't runnin' good. If you're a mechanic . . . you're the one supposed t' know what's wrong."

Right then, I was pretty sure I was looking at the one who had shot Floyd and his dog. And my ten-dollar rooster. I'd had that feeling since that day over at the Chevy dealer, but it was stronger now. I still didn't know why, although by now I had an idea that was looking better all the time. Another idea was that I ought to drag things out as long as possible.

"I'm just closing up. Bring it in tomorrow, I'll look it over first thing."

"Now!" he shouted, taking a couple of steps toward me, at the same time balling up both fists. "Look at it now!"

"Look, I . . ." He took another step toward me. "I don't have any spare mufflers . . ."

"Forget . . . the . . . muffler! Just . . . make it run!" His voice was low, but peppered with exclamation points, and his finger was making dents in my chest.

Suddenly I thought maybe it would be wise to forget delay and have a look at it now. I wanted this guy out of my shop as soon as possible and one way or another.

He'd said nothing to indicate he knew anything about me, so evidently I was just somebody who might fix his car. Fortunately, there was something I could do for his engine that was quick and dirty, and it might get him on his way quickly.

"I'll just grab a couple of tools . . ."

"Hurry up!" he said as he glanced back the way he had come.

I really needed only a couple of small wrenches for the quick approach to his problem, but I also grabbed a big monkey wrench. It was about the most useless wrench ever invented, for a timing adjustment or for anything else unless you were trying to remove the wheel of a covered wagon. But I hoped this kid wouldn't know that because it was also about three pounds of iron I thought could be used as a weapon if it came to that. I also picked up a screwdriver and a few other tools I didn't need just to make it look like I was serious.

As I raised the hood of his car, I said, "Okay, start 'er up." He climbed in and turned over the engine. It would barely maintain an idle.

I kept him in sight out of the corner of my eye as I went to work. I found what I expected to find. The clamping bolt that kept the distributor housing from moving was a tiny bit loose. The vibration of the car had allowed the housing to move slightly. That was why the timing was off and why it had gotten steadily worse. Normally, fixing this was an involved procedure lining up timing marks using some equipment I hadn't brought out with me. But I could do a rough job by simply rotating the distributor until I found a place where it would at least run better.

At first, all was going well until I adjusted the thing a bit too far in the wrong direction and the engine backfired and stalled.

"Hey, what's goin' on out there?" the kid yelled.

"It's okay, just hit the starter again," I answered as confidently as

I could. The starter ground into life but the motor refused to cooperate.

He shouted, "You've messed it up!" I could see him turn to look over his shoulder again. There weren't any guns or any other weapons visible in his car, but I couldn't see the whole inside. I was nervous and so was he. He was breathing hard and getting restless . . . and just about ready to hop out of the car and let his fists—or whatever else was at hand—continue the conversation.

"It's just flooded," I said, still trying to sound calm. "Try it again. It'll start."

"You better get it right this time, bud!" He let his gaze come to rest on a neighbor's car parked at a house about a half block away.

"Keep trying," I said, trying to distract him. By then, I was really rooting for the thing to start, holding open the throttle to reduce the mixture in the cylinders and clean them out. A moment later a couple of cylinders finally caught and a second later it roared to life. It only took a bit more tinkering to find a spot where it was at least running better than before.

It hadn't taken very long to do what I did, but it was too soon to heave a sigh of relief. "Just another minute," I said.

I spent that minute doing some other things I thought needed doing under the circumstances. I didn't want this guy coming back real soon. Finally, I finished up.

"Okay, I'll just close up the hood and—" But before I had the chance to fasten the latches, he put the car in gear and roared off without even a "thank you," scattering my wrenches and almost running over my toes. The monkey wrench fell on one of my feet, of course. All three pounds of it.

It was the first time someone had ever run off without making arrangements on my bill, but frankly, I didn't mind at all.

I returned the tools to my shop and locked up. As I started to hobble homeward, I heard another car approaching at high speed from the direction of the county seat. A few seconds later a sheriff's car squealed to a stop in front of me. Brake linings worn too close to metal, I thought. The sheriff himself was driving and the car was full of his deputies. One of them was Baxter, who was seated in back.

"You seen a blue sedan come along here in the last few minutes?" the sheriff called out.

"About five minutes ago," I said and pointed off in the direction he had gone.

"The way Baxter here says that car was runnin', I'm surprised he made it this far."

"He almost didn't. He stopped here and I made a few adjustments to his timing. It was running pretty good when he left."

"You fixed his car?" the sheriff demanded. "Helped him escape?"

"Let's deal with this guy later," one of the other officers said. "We'd better get on after him, then."

"Actually, Sheriff, you'll catch up to him, I'd say, about four or five miles down the highway. He'll be parked by the side of the road somewhere."

"What?" This from the deputy who wanted to deal with me later.

"While I was fixing his timing," I said, "I loosened the clamp on his gas line. Even if he had a full tank, I'd guess he wouldn't get much farther than that before it'll be bone dry."

The sheriff thought about that for about one second. Then he chuckled once, shook his head, and gave me a big smile. "Outta gas, huh?" he said as he threw the car into gear and sped off.

The next day about noon, Dave drove up to my shop and stopped. He was coming from the direction of the county seat. He slowly walked over to where I had just jacked up the rear wheels of a fairly new Model A sedan.

"The sheriff called me over to the county seat a little while ago for a little meetin'," Dave said. "He was still chucklin' over that li'l stunt of yours with the gas line, by the way. As for the shootin', Mrs. Constantine can relax. So can everyone else. It's all out in the open. Wasn't the dog after all. Dog was an innocent bystander just like your chickens. Shooter was after Floyd." That was all he said for a moment. When I didn't respond, he continued, "Girl who had the argument with Floyd was Rose Baxter and she was Detective Baxter's daughter, all right. Came to a party at Floyd's place and right away got with child. She was enough along to where she had to tell her folks what happened, but they couldn't get her to name the father. She was protectin' him, maybe hoping Floyd would eventually come around and marry her. At the time I'm sure she didn't know he already had a wife he was separated from. Anyway, Baxter and his wife got her to quit her job and they sent her off to a relative upstate. Figured to let her have her baby out of sight. Before she left, her brother Wynn must have wormed the truth out of her and she told him that Floyd had just laughed the whole thing off to her face."

"Doesn't surprise me Floyd would do something like that."

"After we left Baxter that day, he must have figured he had to go home and at least confront his son. I understand Wynn denied everything at first, then when things had quieted down a bit, he

grabbed his folks' car and ran. That last part, you know about. We found the car about where you said it'd be, then we found him walking on the road about a mile farther along. It didn't take long till he caved in and admitted that he simply went over to teach Floyd a lesson with his dad's hunting rifle. Thirty-aught-six, by the way."

"Whew!" I said, making it a long low whistle. "What did Baxter do then?"

"What's expected of a member of the sheriff's department. He arrested his son and then after he was booked into county jail he went into the sheriff's office and turned in his badge."

"Real tragedy, I guess."

"One tragedy sometimes leads to another," Dave said after a moment. "Baxter's not a bad man. My impression is, he ought to have known something was going on with Wynn, but he just didn't try to make the connection. Turned a blind eye to a lot of things he should'a been watchin' closer. You saw how even after we went over there to see him he didn't want to make the effort."

Dave paused, thoughtful, then continued softly, "When we went over to see Baxter . . . you had it all pretty much figured out, didn't you?"

I returned his look and shrugged. It was true I had a suspicion about what had happened. But after hearing the whole story, I took no pleasure in it. So much tragedy. Dave looked as if he might say more, but decided not to. What more was there? He gave me a half wave, returned to his car, and drove away.

The next morning all seemed well in my world. My ten-dollar roosters were supervising and my hens were laying. My wife is no longer worried about bullets flying in the yard and what people think. Billy is finally convinced no one is going to take away his Red Ryder cap pistols. In the Cliff Mills Garage I was busy fixing problems right and left. Car problems, that is. Dave's brother-in-law brought in his car and it's going to be quite a job. I was going to be richer by another forty-five hundred pounds of wheat. Dave stopped by to ask when I'd like him to deliver it. It was more than we'd need for the next year considering the number of hens we had. That evening, I talked to Lillie about maybe adding another hundred or so hens and getting another couple of those ten-dollar roosters.

I don't really want to tell you what she thought of the idea.

AN EVENING OUT

RICK NOETZEL

It was supposed to be my evening off. I had big plans—dinner and a concert with my mother, my present for her birthday. The police department pays me to be available twenty-four–seven, so I cleared everything well in advance with the captain. No work, which meant no phones, no pagers, and an escape from my professional shadow, Inspector Higgins. Everyone knew not to bother me, and to prevent any misunderstanding, I threatened Higgins with his life. Sitting in the theater watching the show, stomach pleasantly full from a nice dinner, I was able to relax for the first night in weeks. It was good, too good, so I wasn't really surprised when Higgins walked out on stage and called for me over the microphone.

I sighed and looked at my mother. Everything had been perfect up to that point. Mom's vegetarian craze was fading, so we'd stuffed ourselves at the fancy new Italian joint in midtown. She was excited about the show and had talked about it all through dinner.

"Have you looked at this list? Four bands! Four!" She giggled over her cannoli. "I don't want to date myself, but I used to listen to these guys when I was a teenager."

I grinned. "I know, Mom. That's why I picked this concert." I was pleased to see her so happy about the show. As long as she kept talking about it, my love life and career and her lack of grandchildren wouldn't be a topic of conversation. "I just can't believe you're wearing those clothes tonight."

I looked down at myself. "What? What's wrong with slacks and a sport coat?"

She patted my hand. "Son, we're going to an oldies concert. How many times did you see flower children wearing Armani?"

"I'm dressed too well?"

"You'll stand out, mark my words." She was wearing a white peasant blouse and a wraparound skirt. Put a flower in her silvery-blonde hair and she could have been back at Woodstock.

"Sorry, Mom, but all my tie-dye is at the cleaners."

"Funny, smarty-pants, but don't come crying to me when people think you're a narc."

"But I am a narc, Mom."

"So don't remind me." She stood up and grabbed her purse. "Come on. Pay the bill and let's get moving. I don't want to miss anything."

"Lieutenant Cord! Lieutenant Cord! Could you come to the stage, please?" The words echoed over the rising crowd noise.

I slouched down in my seat when Higgins called my name again. Maybe he'd go away.

"I think he's calling you, dear." My mother tapped my arm.

"I'm ignoring him, Mom."

"You better go see what he wants. The next act can't start until he gets off the stage." She patted her purse. "Besides, I can't light up while you're here."

I flashed a sharp look. "No pot, Mom! How would that look if my mother gets busted for possession?" I sighed in exasperation and stood up. "I'll be back in a minute."

She grinned and waved, a sixty-year-old imp.

I stepped up to the stage and motioned to Higgins. He spotted me and ran over.

"Lieutenant, I'm glad we found you," he said as he knelt on the stage and looked down at me.

"Higgins, did you miss my meaning this morning?"

"Come again, sir?"

"What part of 'Don't disturb me tonight' did you misunderstand?"

He blushed. "I'm sorry, sir, but the captain came up with this idea."

"Idea?"

"There's been a theft, sir." He pointed backstage. "From one of the musicians."

"Don't we have an entire unit assigned to handle robberies?"

"Yes, we do, sir." He nodded in total agreement with my obvious point. "The captain, he thought you might help out, since you're already here."

"The captain wanted me involved?"

"Well, he did after I reminded him that you were in the audience."

The crowd noise had picked up since I got to the stage, so my sigh went unheard. "All right, let's go backstage. The next act needs to get out here before it gets ugly."

Higgins helped me up onto the stage. "That's part of the problem. The next act won't perform until we find his guitar."

"Wonderful." I walked backstage with the inspector, ignoring the catcalls from the crowd.

Higgins led me through the backdrop curtains and down a hallway behind the stage. We passed several closed doors—pockets of music and laughter emanating from each one—until we reached a pair of musclebound men standing in the hall beside one of the doors.

The two men stepped aside and we walked into a large room. A thick, multicolored carpet covered the floor. Stylish metal-and-leather furniture was arranged in groupings around the room, partially obscuring the wood-paneled walls. A bank of lighted mirrors ran along the back wall and reflected a countertop covered with an array of bottles, hair dryers, and makeup tubes.

A handful of people were sitting around the room, talking intently. One man was pacing back and forth, talking to himself as he crossed and recrossed the room. No one seemed to notice us standing in the door until Higgins cleared his throat. Then all conversation stopped and the pacing man turned toward us.

"Did you find Christine?" he asked.

I was confused and looked at Higgins.

" 'Christine' is the name of the guitar, Lieutenant." He pointed toward the speaker. "Mr. LeMonde, may I introduce Lieutenant Cord?" He paused and whispered out of the side of his mouth. "Simon LeMonde, the singer."

I nodded to Higgins. "Thank you, Inspector, but I'm aware of who Mr. LeMonde is. I came to see him play tonight."

LeMonde walked over and extended a hand. "You were in the audience?"

I shook hands with the aging rock star. I remembered his days in skin-tight leather pants, silk shirts open to the navel, and a mane of blond hair flying around his face. He was a sixties bad boy who turned his good looks and guitarwork into fifty years of music. Forty-some years later and he was over sixty, with long gray-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. His baggy Hawaiian shirt reduced, but couldn't completely hide, the paunch around his middle. Lines around his eyes and mouth betrayed too many years of fast living and fun. Even so, the spark in his eyes outshone the twinkle of his diamond earring; he projected the energy of a much younger man.

"Yes, I was. Enjoying the show very much until—"

"Christine was stolen. Right out my dressing room." He waved his hand over to the corner where a trio of guitar cases stood. "Who would take her?"

"She's worth a lot of money, Simon," a new voice said. The other occupants had risen from the chairs and approached. The one who spoke patted LeMonde on the back and introduced himself to me.

"Cal Thomas. I'm Simon's road manager." Thomas was a slight man, with a narrow, angular face made more severe by his slicked-back black hair. A ponytail dangled to his shoulders and he wore enough gold around his neck to finance the Federal deficit. He grabbed my hand in a soft, two-handed clasp and made sure I got a good look at his diamond-encrusted watch. A Rolex, of course.

He pointed to two of the people behind him. "Shelley K, our backup singer. Bob Wills, engineer. They're Simon's people. Those two," he said, regarding the unnamed pair of men, "are with the theater. Now, what can we do about the guitar?"

The two men "with the theater" gave Thomas a sour look and stepped around him.

"Lucas Tanner, theater manager." He shook my hand and motioned to his partner. "This is my head of security, Charles Barkley."

Barkley shook my hand and grinned. "No relation," he said.

I couldn't help but smile back. Barkley was short, white, and would perhaps weigh about a hundred pounds if he were holding a twenty-pound weight. Confusing him with the former NBA player was unlikely, if not impossible.

"Security?" I asked the slight man.

"I have some beefy employees who tackle people, if necessary."

Thomas clapped his hands. "Enough chit-chat, people. We need Christine."

"I can't play without her," Simon said.

Tanner turned to the singer. "But you have a contract. You *have* to play."

"Wrong, Tanner," Thomas said. "Theft negates the contract."

"No it doesn't! I'm sorry it happened, but it doesn't break the contract."

"Whatever. Simon isn't playing until we find Christine."

"Thomas, I've got five thousand people out there. They're getting madder and madder by the minute, so your boy better get on stage. If not, I'll have to tell them that he refuses to play."

"He needs a guitar."

"He has three guitars!" Tanner roared. "One is missing, so use one of the other two."

"I always open with Christine," Simon LeMonde explained. "Ever since I wrote 'Little Babe' in 1962."

"Well, you're not opening with her tonight, so—"

The noise level in the room rose as everyone started talking at once.

Higgins elbowed me. "Great song, don't you think? Not as polished as his later stuff, but—"

I ignored him and raised my hands to the squabbling crowd. "Okay, enough!" I shouted. "I need some information, so I need some cooperation. Everybody sit."

Grumbling, the five people sat.

"Inspector, take Mr. Tanner and calm down the crowd. Tell them there's a technical problem or something. Gonna be fixed soon, thanks for your patience, et cetera, et cetera. We don't want five thousand geriatrics charging the stage, do we?"

LeMonde objected to that. "Hey, I'm popular with the young crowd. Just look at yourself."

"I'm thirty-eight, Mr. LeMonde. Not exactly the *younger set*, but I apologize if my joke offended you."

He sniffed, but didn't say anything as Higgins and Tanner headed out the door.

"Mr. LeMonde," I turned to the rock star, "can you tell me about the guitar?"

"She's a 1960 Gibson J-160E. A sweet little acoustic guitar that my parents bought for me as a high school graduation present."

"Is it worth a lot?"

"To me, she's priceless. Street value, with her history, would be thirty grand, maybe even forty.

I was astonished. "Thirty thousand dollars?"

"She's been around. Played by some of the best. John Lennon, Bob Dylan—some big names have fingered her strings at jams and concerts."

"When did you see the guitar last?"

"I finished tuning her up and walked backstage to listen to the Wailers and—"

"Did you take the guitar with you?"

"No. She stayed in her case." He pointed to a black case leaning against the wall, open.

"Anyone in the room when you left?"

"I like to be alone when I tune up the guitars. I concentrate better that way."

"And you came back to the room . . ."

"The Wailers were wrapping up their set. They'd do an encore and then I'd go on."

Wills spoke to me for the first time. "Between acts, I come in and

get the guitars and their stands. I take them onstage, arrange them the way Simon likes around his stool."

"That's your job?"

"I also test the microphones and the sound board. Make sure the lighting plan is all set." He shrugged. "A solo show like this one, without the rest of the group and no electric guitars, is pretty simple for me."

"So you came to get the guitars and then what?"

"Two of them were here in their cases, but Christine was missing. I thought Simon had taken her backstage, so I didn't worry about it. I grabbed the two cases and left. When I ran into Simon, I asked him where she was. That's when we started looking."

"Did you see anyone in here when you came to pick up the other two guitars?"

"Shelley K was putting on some makeup, and Cal was looking at a magazine."

"Shelley K?" I looked at the backup singer. She was tall and slender, a type the magazines call *willowy*. Her deep red hair, pulled back with a wide scarf, fell to the center of her back. She smiled at me through a spray of pale freckles.

"It's my stage name. My real name is Kay Grimaldi. I always wanted to be called Shelley, so I became Shelley K."

"When did you see the guitar last?"

She looked at the ceiling, tapping her chin with a finger. "Earlier today, right after we arrived. I was in here putting on makeup when Simon came in. He opened each case and was talking to the guitars." She grinned. "He does that a lot."

"He took them out of the cases?"

"No. He always checks them early, long before the show starts, just making sure they weren't damaged getting them here. He comes back later to tune them up."

"Thank you, Miss, uh, K." I looked around and addressed the group. "Did anyone else see the guitar after this?"

Nobody answered.

"Okay, who could have carried it out of this room?"

Barkley spoke up. "Only three people were authorized, according to Thomas's instructions. LeMonde, of course, plus his manager and the engineer. My guard would have stopped anyone else."

"What guard?"

"You should have seen them when you came in. We post a guard in the hall once the bands start to show up. Lots of expensive stuff in these rooms, plus the occasional fan that manages to sneak backstage. We keep an eye on everything."

"This guard . . . when did he show up?"

"We had someone in the hall starting at ten this morning. I added a second guard a couple of hours before showtime. We have four acts in this show, so that's a lot of activity back here."

"They saw nothing out of the ordinary?"

"Would you like to talk to them?"

"Let's go," I said.

Barkley led me out the door and over to two men in blue jeans and skin-tight black T-shirts. Shaved heads seemed to grow directly from their over-muscled shoulders. If they weren't working, they'd be tearing trees out of the ground or bending iron bars for fun.

"Lieutenant, this is P. B. and Jay." He laughed. "Peter Ball and Jay Mahoney."

I shook hands with the two giants.

Jay, the smaller of the two, relatively speaking, rumbled, "Yeah, we never get tired of hearing Charles use that joke. He teams us up just so he can use it on people."

"You two worked together today?"

"All day. Right here."

"No breaks?"

"A few. Lunch. Dinner. Smoke." He looked at his partner. "Only one of us at a time, though. Right, Pete?" He thumped his buddy on his chest. It sounded like a baseball bat hitting a side of beef.

"Right."

"No one took the guitars out of LeMonde's room?"

"The guitar cases were part of the stuff brought in around eleven this morning. They didn't leave until their engineer carried two cases out maybe an hour ago."

"Nobody walked out with a guitar not in a case?" Their look answered the question. "Sorry, guys, but I've got to ask."

I asked a few more questions of the two men, but it was apparent that they took their watchdog job seriously. If the guitar left the room, it didn't look like a guitar or anything else important.

I was deep in thought as Barkley and I returned to the room. I had hoped to learn more from his people. If the guitar never left the room, then it was still inside. I looked around, examining the walls and furniture. No closets. No room under the furniture. Maybe a secret door in the paneling, but that was pretty farfetched. I looked up at the acoustic tile ceiling. Maybe on top of the tiles?

"Barkley, I need a ladder and—"

"I checked on top of the ceiling tiles earlier. Nothing but dust bunnies." He shrugged. "I understand, though. I'll have maintenance bring a ladder down."

"Thanks." If it wasn't up there, then it wasn't in the room. Which means someone took it—

Higgins opened the door, interrupting my train of thought. He stepped into the room followed by someone. I turned toward the door and sighed. Mom.

Higgins saw the look on my face and blurted out, "She came to the stage and asked where you were. I thought I'd bring her back."

"Higgins, this is an investigation and—"

"Simon LeMonde!" my mother shrieked. "I can't believe it's you!" She grabbed the singer and hugged him. "I saw you at the Municipal Auditorium in Nashville back in 1965. I snuck backstage and got you to sign my breasts with a magic marker."

I rubbed my temples. I could feel a migraine coming on.

"I never slept with you, or if I did, I wasn't in any shape to remember it. Did we ever—"

"Mom! Enough already." I took her arm and pried her off LeMonde. He seemed amused.

"What's wrong, son? In those days I was quite a hottie, as you young people say." She patted my hand. "No reason to be embarrassed, I slept with lots of musicians in the sixties. Quite a few in the fifties, too."

LeMonde took her hand. "I don't think we did, since I'm certain I would remember someone as lovely as yourself." He kissed the back of her hand.

She practically simpered. "See, Mr. Big-shot policeman. Here is a man who knows how to treat women. I hope you're paying attention."

"I'm paying attention to my mother acting like a teenage groupie. Act your age, Mom." I immediately regretted my outburst. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't mean . . ."

She stared at me. "But you did. You always do." She walked to the door. "I'll see myself out."

"Mom, wait for me in your seat. Okay?"

"I think I'd just rather go home. Thanks for dinner."

I glanced at the others, embarrassed. Everyone was examining the walls and the carpet with great interest. "At least let me have an officer take you home. I'll come by after this and we'll talk."

"You can talk until you're blue in the face, for all I care. Just because you're flapping your gums doesn't mean I'll be there to hear you." She left the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Mom, wait." I started to follow her out the door, and then stopped. I stared at the closed door, feeling the little tickle of an idea. "Higgins, come here. I need you to do me a favor."

I speared a piece of tofu in my salad. "So, he wrapped it in some clothes and hid it in his duffel bag on the bus." I took a large swig of water. "He never brought it into the auditorium."

Mom leaned on the table. "But everyone saw it in the dressing room. I thought the backup singer watched him tune Christine."

I shook my head. "Nobody saw the guitar. Shelley K heard him talking to it, but she couldn't see inside the case. LeMonde always tuned in private, so nobody was in the room when he supposedly had them out of their cases. Once he decided to hide Christine, he had to carry on as like normal. Nobody noticed that one guitar case was empty until the engineer went to take the guitars to the stage."

"Why did Simon LeMonde do all this? Go to all the trouble of a charade?"

"Insurance. He had it insured for fifty grand and he needed the money."

"It was his guitar, he could have just sold it."

I pushed the vegetarian salad around my plate. Mom had selected the restaurant and there wasn't a piece of meat within fifty feet of my table. My penance.

"He really was attached to that guitar. He told me that selling her would be like selling his child," I said.

"Hmm. At times, that's not a hard decision, the way children act."

"Point taken." I sat my fork down. "Mom, I'm sorry I insulted you last night. I went by your house afterward, but you weren't home." I looked at my mother but she ignored me and kept on eating. "Okay, where did you go?"

"I went back to my seat, of course."

"You stayed for the concert? After that speech about going home?"

"You think I'd miss that show? I am glad you let LeMonde perform before you arrested him. He's still a sexy man."

"Speaking of LeMonde, did you really let him . . ."

"I don't think so, son. In 1965, I went through a phase where I was saving myself for Ringo Starr."

"Ringo Starr?"

"Don't be surprised. I loved drummers." She took a sip of her wine. "Once, when the Beach Boys came to Charleston, I . . ."

I grabbed the bridge of my nose and squeezed. My migraine was coming back.

UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT

S. L. FRANKLIN

MAY, 1992

DEPOSITION I: R. J. Carr,

One thing I've never done is collections, but I don't hire out, either, when a client gets behind—my point being that Andrew Deutsch, Attorney-at-Law, hadn't returned my call. Slow payers are one thing, of course, and deadbeat attorneys are another. Equivocation is their stock in trade, they know just how far they can string you out legally, and they like doing it to you—or that's been my impression the times it's happened to me.

Deutsch shared a suite of offices in an antiquated building up along Central Avenue north of Devon. I was close by one Monday afternoon with an hour free, so I decided to drop in for a little impromptu chat, provided he was on the premises. The young woman at the reception desk was the timid, uncertain type, which might or might not have helped if Deutsch had been in evidence, but he wasn't.

"I'm *very* sorry," she said. "I . . . I *really* am, Mr. Carr. I don't know where he can be, to tell the truth. One of his clients waited almost an hour . . ."

"And took it out on you?" I said.

She nodded and blushed. She had large, dark eyes and a Mediterranean face. The nameplate on her desk read Antonia Bakalis, which made her the daughter of one of the other attorneys in the suite, a man I knew slightly.

"Is your father around?" I asked.

"No. No one's here. I don't like it when no one's here." She counted herself as no one, I guess. That was part of her problem.

I glanced at my watch: three twenty. "Yeah," I said. "And it's hard to get a break, too, I suspect. I could hang around for a few minutes and answer the phone, if you need to go powder your

nose or whatever—get a Coke across the street."

"Could you?" she said. "I would be *so* grateful."

She was on her feet and out the door toward the restrooms at the end of the hall in about ten seconds flat. Thirty seconds after that I was trying the handle on Andrew Deutsch's office door. Locked, of course.

Inquisitiveness had become an ingrained habit with me after twenty-five years in the detective trade, I admit, but I also didn't like the way the business was beginning to develop. I didn't like Deutsch's lack of response to my call. I didn't like him missing a scheduled appointment that day, and I especially didn't like the faint odor I thought my nose detected there near his office door. Like a lot of people with poor eyesight, I'm sensitive to smells.

I went back to Antonia's desk and ransacked it for keys, and when I couldn't find any I headed back to the locked door, got down on my hands and knees, and put my nose near the gap by the floor. That decided me.

On my first charge, the wood splintered around the lock. After my second, I was in the office, where Deutsch was lying in a heap in the middle of the floor beneath a broken ceiling light. The glass globe formerly suspended from a chain had shattered on the carpet when the chain had snapped from Deutsch's weight, or that was what the scene seemed to convey with the length of cord digging deep into his neck, the kicked-over chair, the neatly typed and signed note that read, TO MY ESTEEMED CREDITORS: GO TO HELL.

I got out into the hall in time to head off the Bakalis girl and send her home, then I called the local district. While I waited for the first squad car to arrive, I set the chair back up on its legs so that I could reach high above Deutsch's body to grab at the dangling chain and give it a healthy yank. Just more inquisitiveness, I guess, but when the cops saw the light fixture mounting and electrical box hanging loose from the conduit strip that had formerly snaked across the ceiling . . . well, they pretended, at least, not to be happy about it.

"Finding dead bodies doesn't get any easier," was how I tried to explain it to Ginny that night. "Or I guess that's what's bothering me."

"Is it?" After eighteen years of marriage, I suppose she'd gotten pretty good at reading my mind. She sat down next to me on the sofa and waited.

"And also," I said, "I went over there feeling pretty hard and hos-

tile toward the guy over four hundred dollars. I didn't think about that when I found him, naturally, but later on I did."

"Yes." She nodded. "I—would you care to talk about it? The work you did for him, I mean?"

"All right—as long as you're willing." She leaned against me, so I put my arm around her. "It was just a routine background check, though. Nothing connected to today." When she raised her head up to look at me I added, "Probably."

She pondered for a moment without saying anything, then leaned against me again.

"This happened right at the end of March, so . . .what? Six weeks ago? Deutsch was acting as the executor of a multimillion-dollar estate in his own family. What he told me was that his uncle had died and left a complicated will, owing to the fact that he'd married three times and had a child by each of the first two wives. Marriage number one lasted about twenty-five years until the wife died, and marriage number two lasted about eighteen months. Marriage number three was one of those retirement home love stories. The daughter from marriage one was his favorite, and her husband went into the family business, electrical contracting, and is now company president and chairman of the board.

"The daughter from the second marriage was my objective. The will had one of those legally questionable wordings in it about 'living a morally exemplary life,' or something of the sort—I guess the girl's mother hadn't been particularly strong in that regard—and so I was given the girl's name and address and told to make discreet inquiries—"

"About her indiscretions?" Ginny asked. "Yes. And what was at stake? Do you know?"

I shook my head. "A healthy chunk, but he didn't name a figure. The ex-wife wasn't getting anything, of course, but the old man evidently felt a responsibility to the daughter—at least if she measured up. He'd paid child support and two years of college tuition for her—or so I was told—even though he'd never seen her except as a baby. The girl's mother drifted around after the divorce, remarried, and so on. She lives in Nashville at the moment, if Deutsch's information was up to date."

"But the daughter lives in Chicago?" Ginny asked.

"Right. Rogers Park. Twenty-three years old, twenty-four sometime this summer. Part-time student-waitress-actress."

I held off for a few seconds, just to run over the investigation in my mind, before I said, "What constitutes a morally exemplary life, Ginny? That was the hard part for me. What standards was I

supposed to apply, for one thing, and could anybody have qualified if I'd come up with some on my own that had any real meaning? I still don't know.

"The girl's given name, at any rate, is Ann Malenkov, even though she's been calling herself Hope Baxter for a while. Her stage name, presumably. I spent two days checking on her—"

"Could you describe her."

"In a minute, yeah. Background first: as Ann Malenkov she had a couple of years of college in Tennessee, still living with her mother, but then she came up here on her own and changed her name. Not what you'd call a good student, even at Columbia College, which no one will ever confuse with Columbia University. She's finally set to graduate this month. She's been in a few plays, six or seven, in storefront theater—they're all over the place on the North Side right now—only as an actress, or so I was told, she barely beats out the statue in Lincoln Park.

"What else? She and her boyfriend are always behind on the rent, and this is boyfriend number three in two years at the same address. Otherwise she's a decent tenant, meaning quiet, clean, and non-destructive of the landlord's property. No drugs on the premises, but a tremendous lot of booze—not exactly a good sign."

"You were there?"

"Unofficially—yeah. It was just the best way to handle the job. The last thing I did was to have dinner at the place where she waits tables—that night when you had parent conferences, remember?"

"Yes. You said at the time that the case wasn't worth talking about."

"It wasn't at the time. The restaurant is called Luchessi's—'Uncommon Dining in an Exotic Atmosphere.' I didn't draw Hope Baxter as my waitress, but she had the table next to mine, and that was better for a couple of reasons."

"Such as?"

"Easier to observe and overhear.

"She had a bare midriff with a large, gold ring in her navel. Exotic, I guess, but not the most appetizing approach to food service. Lots of earrings, too. Reddish blonde hair over her shoulders, maybe five feet six in height, the kind of figure that a bare midriff looks good on in other circumstances. The thing that bothered me, Ginny, was her face: extremely pretty, but petulant—not a word I ever think of, but it sprang to mind—and unhappy and essentially dissatisfied.

"On the other hand, maybe it's hard to be a waitress with a ring in your navel."

"Yes." Ginny waited for a moment, then asked, "Was she 'morally exemplary' in your report?"

"I'd say no." I shrugged. "I didn't try to evaluate the facts myself, but I don't think there's much doubt that they pointed in the other direction for the type of person who wants to pass that kind of judgment. My own feeling was that she's more or less average for someone in her circumstances. She could have been a lot better, but she also could have been a lot worse. I just got the impression that she wasn't either very smart or very pleasant to be around a lot of the time."

"Am I correct in assuming that the attorney hadn't informed her of the terms of the will?"

"Right. In fact, I'm not sure she even knew that her father had died. The separation's pretty complete by now, and the rest of the family, I'd guess—without knowing anything about it—were hoping for a negative evaluation so that they'd get bigger slices of pie."

"But since Andrew Deutsch was named the executor of the estate, the decision must have been solely his to make, don't you think?"

"About the girl's 'morally exemplary' life? Well, yeah. It must have been. That's how those things work."

Ginny sat up to look at me. "I think—" she said. "I think that we need to find out the exact terms of the will, don't you? And we also need to find out what Deutsch's judgment was."

"If he made one for publication." I considered for a few seconds, then gave in. "Yeah, all right. The cops won't care for me nosing around, though."

"No," she responded. "But that has never dissuaded you in the past, and furthermore, their displeasure is only theoretical as long as they remain uninformed."

Part of the nosing around I did took the form of a short interview three mornings later with Stephanos Bakalis, Attorney-at-Law, father to the self-deprecating Antonia, and sublessor to the late Andrew Deutsch. After some strained preliminary causerie and a heavy pause, he looked off toward the door of his office and remarked, "I cannot believe you, Mr. Carr, when you say that my poor departed friend did not file the will."

"Well," I said, "he didn't. He didn't enter the case in probate either, but that might not mean much. What does mean something is that the Malenkov folder in his desk drawer has just three things in it: a copy of the deceased's prenuptial agreement with wife number three, a homemade genealogy chart of the Malenkov family, and my report on one of the beneficiaries."

"But . . . no will?" He drew his gaze back to stare at me. "Forgive me for being perhaps too skeptical, but could not my friend Andrew simply have taken the document home to his apartment?"

"No—that's covered." I shook my head and he started to say something but then didn't.

"The prenuptial agreement was pretty clear, Mr. Bakalis. Wife number three got her share up front and has no further claim. So, am I wrong in assuming that if the will doesn't reappear, then the estate will be divided evenly between the two surviving daughters?"

Bakalis looked off again, either to consider the question or to avoid the sight of me, then he answered, "I am not, of course, conversant with the details, but I would say . . . yes. If what you say is true, then in the normal passage of affairs that would be the case, an equal division, provided, of course, that some other factor—"

I shook my head again to cut him off. "By chance," I asked, "did Andrew Deutsch ever mention the Malenkov estate to you in any context, or say anything about his connection to the Malenkov family?"

"No." He hesitated, then continued, "The first I have heard of these things ever is from you today. I . . . will be frank with you: Andrew Deutsch and I were not on intimate terms of friendship. He subleased an office here in my suite, but his legal practice and mine were not connected in any way whatsoever at any time."

"Uh-huh," I said. "And how far was he behind on the rent?"

After another, longer hesitation, Bakalis responded, "Seven months. But I would not hound a man to hang himself, Mr. Carr, for seven months of arrears."

DEPOSITION II: Tom Kennedy

Sure, I'm large. But I'm very light on my feet. The reason I make the point is because this other guy, who was even larger than I am, didn't hear me come into the apartment at all. I sensed his presence, though, the way you do. Also, his flashlight beam was bobbing around. So I let the door close behind me, and I stood there trying to think. He had the lid up on the old travel chest at the foot of the bed—"Hope's chest" is what I called it—and he was looking at her papers one by one, which to me was a damn silly thing for a burglar to do, not that we had much to steal anyway besides the TV set.

All at once the guy turned the flashlight full on me and said, "Stay right there. You must be Kennedy."

Well, I felt naked and stupid, you know, and maybe I was—stupid, anyway—but I wasn't afraid. I said, "Screw you, Mack," or something to that effect, and took a flying leap right at him.

"Oh for God's sake," he said in a disgusted tone, and those are the last words I remember hearing for a while, owing to the fact that, by rushing him just that way—me in the light, him in the dark—my jaw was a large, easy target for a roundhouse right.

And what a roundhouse right—wow.

So imagine my embarrassment, as they say, when I finally came to and saw the guy still at the foot of the bed going through Hope's stuff. He'd turned on some lights by then, and somehow I'd ended up on the bed with my head propped on a couple of pillows. My jaw didn't feel so bad until I tried to push myself up, but then, brother, I came to the conclusion that bed was the right place for me.

"I'm getting too old for this kind of thing," the guy said, not looking up. He had a couple of inches on me in height and a few pounds, salt-and-pepper hair, and a face that wasn't exactly the virgin's dream, given the heavy pair of glasses he wore and the large birthmark across his cheek.

"Me, too," I said, sort of in delay.

"If I'd had a gun out and were the nervous type, you might be dead," he remarked. "You can call the cops, if you want, but you assaulted me, so that charge won't work."

"Nope," I said. "You're right." His logic was impeccable, and my wits were definitely scattered. "What can I charge you with?"

"Oh—home invasion, probably. I don't plan on taking anything, though." He stopped long enough to look up at me. "I've been breaking and entering for twenty-five years, and this is the first time anyone ever caught me in the act—so do what you want."

"Who are you?" I said.

"Bozo the Clown. You are Thomas Kennedy, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Law student?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, you're in the right case. I'm investigating your roommate, Mr. Kennedy—in a way. Do you happen to have any idea why?"

"Hope?" I said. "She hasn't shoplifted something, has she? I mean, not that she ever did."

"Has her behavior changed in the last couple of months?"

"Hope's?" I tried to think about the question, but couldn't come up with a solid answer.

"More excited, depressed, reticent?"

"Wow. She's—she's got a secret, all right. Yeah. Who are you again?"

He took a business card out of his jacket pocket and reached over to hand it to me. CIS. Carr Investigations and Security.

"It's a secret you're not in on?" he asked.

I looked down at the card, then up at him—R. J. Carr, apparently. "Nope. She's the kind of girl who keeps her privacy private, poor kid." I examined him for a minute, trying to decide. "All right," I finally said. "There was an older man who came around—older than you, I'm saying. I didn't see him, but my buddy across the hall did. Razzed the hell out of me."

"How long ago?"

"A while. It was . . . Easter Sunday, actually. We went to Mass—don't laugh—even though she says she's Russian Orthodox, and then I went home to the folks like a good little Irish boy for Easter ham. She was in a matinee at the Shoebox and couldn't come."

"And that's when the secret started?"

"Uh-huh." I looked the guy over again, and he seemed pretty straight up. "And it ended this week, I think."

"Maybe," he said. "How do you know?"

"Vibrations."

"Good or bad?"

"Very bad."

"Did she get drunk, by any chance?"

I nodded slowly with my mouth hanging open, and after our eyes met he went back to looking at Hope's papers. A minute or so later his thick lenses fixed on something, and he held it up close to read. That was my chance to brain him, I guess, but the pillows were too soft for the job.

"I'll have to back off on what I said," he remarked, "because I'm taking this along." Whatever it was that he'd been reading, he slipped it into his pocket. "I'll write you a receipt, and you can tell your friend I'll be in touch about it in the next couple of days."

"Sure," I said. "Come back any time. I'll be waiting with a sledgehammer."

DEPOSITION III: Linda Wallace Malenkov

Well, honestly. Such a nice woman and so extremely attractive. Quite beautiful, in fact, and quite young looking. I could scarcely believe her at first when she said her daughter was a junior in high school.

She was calling on me, she said, to ask about Andrew Deutsch, my deceased second husband's nephew—also deceased. How confusing that sounds! My second husband, Nicholas Malenkov, you see, had passed on some months earlier. Ours had been an autumn romance, but filled with much affection, and we had three bliss-filled years together until his decline. But I will not cry.

As for Andrew Deutsch, I could tell the woman very little, I'm afraid. "Mrs. Carr," I said, "I am quite embarrassed to admit that I can't even seem to picture my late husband's nephew. He came twice about the will, but since I was not involved, I excused myself and watched television."

Then had my husband, she asked, commented in any particular way about Andrew? Or about the will, by chance?

Such a nice, sympathetic woman, respectful and soft spoken to a still-grieving widow! I confess that I opened my heart to her—how could I not, when her gentle solicitations brought my dear Nicky back to me so vividly.

I started quite naturally by telling her about him as he had been after that second visit, still in his health and tired, yes, but quietly exultant. "Linda, darling," he had said, taking me in his long arms and swinging me about quite giddily, "tonight I have completed a great piece of work!"

By which, as I explained to Mrs. Carr, he had meant that with one quick signature on a document, he had done justice to his three living relatives by blood. For he worried greatly, did my Nicholas—such a "study in contrasts," as they say. So tender hearted but so righteous, such a blending of strictness and loving family concern.

Regarding Andrew Deutsch, his older sister's son, he mainly felt pity—or so I explained to my new friend. How often had Nicky expressed his sorrow to me that Andrew had fared poorly in life in spite of many advantages, and at sixty years of age was twice divorced, increasingly moody, and always in debt—all through weakness of character. Nicky's shrewdness in building his own company had for many years made Andrew hostile not only to his uncle, but to Nicky's daughter and son-in-law, too, who carried on the management of Nicholas Contracting with such wonderful success after Nicky retired.

It was truly to extend the hand of family to Andrew that Nicholas invited him to write the new will, I think, and, as an incentive to doing it well, he insisted that Andrew assume the executorship of the estate upon his own demise, a most lucrative reward, I felt quite sure at the time, with so much of value at stake.

Did this remark mean, then, inquired Mrs. Carr, that I was not conversant with the actual terms of the will?

And to her inquiry, of course, my reply was no, I was not—by my own preference. A woman of my position, you see, can so easily be viewed as what is vulgarly termed a gold digger, and I wished for nothing in my marriage to Nicholas Malenkov that would compromise the purity of our mutual love and regard.

Then, I could tell her nothing of the will's dispositions of property? she wanted to know.

Nothing. But I knew that Nicholas so loved and admired his daughter and son-in-law that his ownership of the Nicholas Contracting Company was a mere formal arrangement, one that the will was designed to correct upon his death. How proud he was of that company, Mrs. Carr, I told her, which he had built to a multimillion-dollar concern through his own labor. How proud he was that it continued to do well when he retired ten years ago. Can you imagine a man who worked to the age of seventy without a week's vacation? That was my dear Nicky. "Who's minding the store?" he would grumble when Lucia and Jason would take one of their well-earned trips abroad, or even a long weekend to give one of their delicious, lavish parties. It was a flaw in him to criticize the two he loved so dearly, I admit, but such a small, forgivable flaw that no one minded. For after all, who else, even flesh and blood, could hope to measure up to his iron character?

And what about his other flesh and blood? His second daughter, by his failed second marriage?

What, indeed? was my reply. For there, I fear, my stern, loving Nicky felt baffled, having never known the child, you see, and fearing for the worst. I knew this much only—that he worried greatly for her.

Out of guilt, perhaps?

No, not guilt, I answered, correcting my new friend gently as ever I could. For how could she know or understand what a kind, sentimental heart Nicholas Malenkov had—an expression of his Russian heritage, I think. He cared about the girl, his flesh and blood, distant and divided though she was from him, and *polluted* —his very word—by a life in the home of the poor girl's mother, a woman of lies and deception and a secret alcoholic. In some ways Nicky was quite the Puritan.

"But you have no idea," she asked me directly, "how your late husband's Russian sentiment and his Puritanism combined to express themselves in his bequest to the young woman?"

"No, sadly," I replied, "not being at all in the know, as they say, in

spite of having Nicky's complete trust, I assure you. It was, as I've said, a decision of my own. If I may make a single remark in complete confidence, Mrs. Carr, not as a criticism, but exclusively and totally as a comment on our too-human nature, I did it to prove once and for all to his son-in-law that I would never, ever interfere in that portion of my dear Nicholas's life."

"An admirable forbearance in two respects, then," was her response.

But I had suddenly to correct her again, with a very full heart. "Not in two respects, but three," I cried. "For I've resisted the temptation all these months, Mrs. Carr, even to peek, in spite of the fact that a signed, sealed copy of the will lies to this day and hour in my safety deposit box at the bank! Does that not prove how much love and trust we had? Does that not prove it?"

ARRAIGNMENT: George Burke, Attorney-at-Law

You might possibly have heard someplace, or even read someplace, that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Alexander Pope, I believe, although I don't claim to be an eighteenth-century man. Regarding the Malenkov affair, I certainly did not rush in, but was both pulled and pushed: pulled by the fascination of the thing and pushed by circumstance. To wit: with my departed colleague in the law, Andrew Deutsch, I had maintained a long-standing mutual agreement to carry on the opposite's practice during vacation, illness, or other emergency. Andrew having suffered the ultimate emergency, one might say, the illness for which there is no cure, the vacation from which one does not return, I felt myself duty bound to honor our agreement in spite of the risk.

Oh, yes—there was a modicum of risk involved. Mr. Carr informed me of it *sub rosa* when he handed me the documents. Our discussion proved frank, however, and to the point, and while an axiom of my practice has ever been that haste is not good policy in the law, haste in this instance seemed not merely mandated but requisite, and therefore I hurriedly arranged a meeting at my office on the following evening for all those concerned but one.

Rather a crowded assembly: myself; the enormous, ugly Carr and his spectacular, black-haired wife; Lucia Malenkov Barrow and her husband Jason, a middling couple in every way—middle-aged, middling in size and appearance—although Lucia was rather bedecked in jewelry for such an affair; Ann Malenkov—stage name Hope Baxter—a delightfully blonde beauty with a sullen mouth, who wore, to everyone's surprise, a demure tailored suit; and her purported fiance, Thomas Kennedy, who was large and

hulking, and had shaggy hair and a tawny beard. The gathering seemed very much like a contrived scene in a courtroom melodrama, I thought to myself in the moments before we began: the concerned parties brought together in hostile suspicion for a reading of the last will and testament.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carr," I said in prologue to the others, "have asked to be present this evening as interested parties. They, as you are doubtless unaware, were instrumental in locating a second, signed copy of Nicholas Malenkov's will, the original having been lost or misplaced sometime on or before the tragic death of your cousin—"

"The original will was *lost?*" said Lucia Barrow in a tone both shrill and incredulous. "I don't believe it."

"And why weren't we told?" said her husband. "My God! It might have—and how did these people get involved?" He gestured at the Carrs in a markedly unfriendly manner, which the rest of us present did our best to ignore.

"Yes," I responded. "There was some cause for alarm, of course, but you must understand that by the time I found leisure to examine poor Andrew's case files—and so to discover the absence of the will—this second copy was already in my possession, courtesy of Nicholas Malenkov's widow, Linda."

"But how—"

"Let me explain for Mr. Barrow," Carr interjected. "You see, Mr. Barrow, I'd done some investigating for your cousin regarding the terms of the will, but our business wasn't quite finished when he . . . well, when he was found dead in his office—by me, to tell the truth. Rightly or wrongly, I had an opportunity to look into his file on the subject I'd been working on, and when I realized that the will wasn't there, I—"

"You took it upon yourself to butt in. Yes, I see that very well. And what kind of finder's fee are you looking for? And how do we know you didn't destroy the original will yourself? And how do we know that this will—"

"Jason, please!" said his wife. She raised her eyes to catch my attention. "Tell us the terms of this copy of the will, Mr. Burke—sparing the legalisms, if you can—and then we'll know, won't we, Jason, if it's the same?"

"All right, Luce," he said. "All right." He crossed one leg over the other and then folded his arms across his chest.

"Just a minute," said young Kennedy before I had a chance to respond.

"Yes?" I said, turning his way.

"I—" He stood up, then sat back down. "Exactly who's to say

whether or not this will corresponds to the supposed original? That's all. These people—Mr. and Mrs. Barrow—seem to be claiming that they'll know, but that's merely so much wind. Unless the supposed original shows up, then the only will there is, is the one you have in your hand."

"That," I said, "is correct. And therefore, why not permit me to proceed?"

I made a show of adjusting my glasses and unfolding the document before continuing. "The bequests in the will—and they, of course, are the meat of it—are quite simple. The bulk of the deceased's property was contained in his sole ownership of the Nicholas Contracting Company. That he left to you, Mrs. Barrow. The balance, composed, so it says here, 'of stocks, certificates of deposit, and real estate'—a retirement condominium, I have been informed—he left conditionally to you, Miss . . . Malenkov-Baxter, the condition being that 'upon secret and confidential investigation, you be found by the executor *morally fit, upright, and honest, and not an abuser of alcohol like your mother.*' "

"Guilty until proven innocent," she said in response, both appearing and sounding downcast. "I know."

"Would you care to explain that comment?" I said quickly in order to forestall Jason Barrow.

"No. But I suppose I have to." She looked across the room at Carr, who nodded. "Mr. Deutsch wrote me a letter," she continued, "and then he came to see me. This was . . ."

"Easter Sunday," Kennedy prompted from beside her.

"Yes. It was Easter Sunday in the evening. He said the . . . the report on me wasn't good at all. But I'm not a bad person, I'm *not*. Am I, Tom?"

Kennedy glared across the room at the Barrows and said loudly, "No—you're a darn good person, Hope."

She blushed deeply. "I'm not perfect, and I told him so. But nobody is." She looked at Carr again. "Well. He said that for the purposes of the estate, he was the judge of that, and he couldn't decide. He said that my share of the settlement would be almost a million dollars after the estate taxes were paid, and that for a—a consideration, that's what he called it, he might be able to decide in my favor.

"And that's when I was a bad person, Tom. And everyone." She looked around the room. "Because I said I'd do it. The money turned my head."

"Do what, for heaven's sake!" said Barrow in an exasperated growl.

"Pay him."

"How much?" I asked.

"A—a third of the settlement. He said it was the usual attorney's fee."

"Ahem," I muttered, clearing my throat and thinking of my friend and colleague Andrew. I had never liked him much, I decided, although this, if true, was rather a shocking revelation. "I have a sealed document here," I continued, looking again at the young lady, "which Mr. Carr claims that you wish to be read at this time. Is that so?"

"Yes. I—I don't care about the money anymore."

She did care, however. If I have discovered anything in my years of legal practice, it is that no one is above caring about a large sum of money.

I opened the envelope, unfolded the single sheet it contained, and read:

> On this day of April 6, 1992, I, Andrew Deutsch, and Ann Lee Malenkov, known also as Hope Baxter, enter into the following contractual arrangement: in return for representing her in her legal affairs regarding the estate of her father, Nicholas Malenkov, she will remunerate me at a rate not to exceed one third (33 ⅓%) of any settlement received.

"The document," I continued, "is signed by both parties, but not notarized."

"Is it legal, then?" The question came not from Barrow, but his wife.

"That's irrelevant, isn't it, sir. Deutsch is dead." Thomas Kennedy was on his feet again, aggressively, as if to protect the young lady.

"I think," I said to Lucia Barrow, "that, yes, a court of law might find the document . . . challengeable, shall we say, on several grounds. But also, yes," I nodded toward the young man. "Under the circumstances, its legality is beside the point. And please sit down, Mr. Kennedy. You are quite audible from your chair."

A brief silence ensued, broken by the low, clear voice of Ginny Carr. "I—could I perhaps ask a question about the will, Mr. Burke?"

"Please do."

"What—or rather, it's very important, I feel, for us to be told the alternate disposition of the conditional bequest to Ms. Baxter. What was to happen if she were found . . . wanting?"

"She'd get nothing," Jason Barrow said before I could respond. "Andrew Deutsch was a cheat. And a sneak. I always thought so, Luce." He looked at his wife, then at me. "And is that all? It's the same damn fool will, all right."

I would, I confess, rather have enjoyed saying to him, "No, on the contrary, it's quite different," but in point of fact the document did seem to be the "same damn fool will," and upon reflection, I wanted nothing more to do with it. In keeping with this thought, I ventured to remark, "The death of Andrew Deutsch, I must tell all of you, is going to delay the settlement of the estate for quite some time. No alternative executor is named here—a most unfortunate oversight—and therefore one will have to be appointed by the court. And then—"

"And then poor Hope will have to he snooped after and passed judgment on again, I suppose," young Kennedy grumbled. He raised his head up rather suddenly and snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute. The will requires the investigation to be secret and confidential—isn't that what you said?"

"Indeed," I replied. "The probate court is not going to look kindly upon that conditional clause in the will in any case, but especially now that the element of secrecy has been compromised."

"Excuse me for interrupting again, Mr. Burke," said Ginny Carr, "but could I ask—aren't there estate taxes to be paid as well? How, or rather, in the case of the Nicholas Contracting Company as a bequest, how are the dollar amounts that will be owed in tax to be extracted from what I suppose is called the 'book value' of the company?"

"That's why it's a damn fool will!" Jason Barrow said.

"Then—again, excuse me for asking, but—will you have to borrow money on the value of the company, Mr. Barrow, to pay the estate tax?"

Barrow's face turned a shade of deep red bordering on purple. "And *that* is none of your business, Mrs. . . . whatever your name is."

"It's Carr," said her husband in a measured tone. "And you know, it's a funny thing to me, really, that nobody here seems particularly curious about the disappearance of the original will, especially in light of the peculiar way Andrew Deutsch was . . . murdered."

The word *murdered* dropped into my tidy little office rather after the fashion that the apple of discord dropped into ancient Greece around the time of Agamemnon.

"Murdered?" said Lucia Barrow shrilly. "We were told suicide by

the police, and . . . and I'm sure it was. Andrew was unstable, unhappy, and broke."

"But he wasn't," responded Carr. "That's the point, or part of it. He was in line for a third of a million dollars through your half-sister, Mrs. Barrow—you've just heard it—plus the executor's fee of a multimillion-dollar estate."

"I don't understand what you're saying, Mr. Carr," said Ann Malenkov from the opposite side of the room. "The newspaper said Mr. Deutsch was a suicide. By hanging."

"A 'probable suicide,' " Carr responded. "But he wasn't." Then Carr stood up and stepped across to my lone window to peer out at the May twilight. "You see, the murder was set up to look like suicide by hanging, but it was done so incompetently that it wouldn't have fooled a blind man. The police officers on the scene were smart enough, though, not to go blabbing this fact around. 'Probable suicide,' when the victim has a rope around his neck that seemed to have broken free from a light fixture chain? Well, why not call it that for a while and hope the murderer gets careless?"

Carr turned back and reassumed his chair.

"On the surface of it," he went on after staring around at the assembled party, "on the surface of it, to get back to my original point, it doesn't make any sense—the will being stolen."

"Rather," said his wife, "it seems to me to have been a terrible lapse of judgment. If there had been no second copy of the will, Mr. Burke, what would have happened?"

"Above and beyond the inevitable lawsuits?" I replied, only half in jest. "The estate would have crawled through probate, diminished somewhat in value, and ultimately been shared out equally between Mrs. Barrow and Miss Malenkov."

"To the benefit of *her!*" Barrow shouted out as he jabbed a finger at Ann Malenkov. "I see what you're pointing to, now, Mrs. Carr. With no will she gets half, not just the leavings—if and when her morals are approved."

Young Kennedy bolted from his chair at this remark and was standing, fists clenched, over Jason Barrow in the literal blink of an eye. "Would you care to repeat that comment, *old man?*" he asked, and Carr, the obvious person present to do or say something to ameliorate the situation, remained silent and immobile.

Ann Malenkov finally cried, "Please don't, Tom!"

And Kennedy, after raising one large fist to within millimeters of his adversary's nose, swung angrily around and said, "But Hope, he's accusing you—"

"Am not!"

"—of theft, if not murder. Don't you get it?"

"Am not!"

They were like a pair of obstreperous children, and I wished them both elsewhere.

"Sit down, Kennedy," Carr said. "You've made your point."

Kennedy pivoted slowly to face Carr and then gave him a mocking salute. Carr waited until the younger man had lowered himself into his chair before continuing. "The question of who benefits can be tricky sometimes. On the surface, you see, Ms. Baxter would benefit greatly if the will disappeared. The trouble is, Ms. Baxter never knew the exact terms of the will. All she knew was that she was in line to inherit something. Isn't that right, Hope?"

She nodded. "I—he—I mean, I was all shocked just to hear about him leaving me anything. I . . . never met him, even."

"The terms of the will were known to Mr. and Mrs. Barrow, though," said Kennedy, and a momentary silence ensued, broken again by the voice of Ginny Carr.

"Yes," she said. "Could I ask, Mr. Burke, if any documents appear to be missing from Andrew Deutsch's other files?"

The inquiry caught me off guard, I confess. "Not . . . not any that I have discovered, no," I replied. "Certainly nothing major."

"Then the question becomes one of probability, don't you think? How probable is it that the disappearance of an important document around the time of a man's murder is connected to the murder?"

"Very probable," said Jason Barrow. "It just means that Andrew told Little Miss Actress about the will in spite of what she says."

"Jason, be careful of what you say!"

"Why, Luce? Somebody apparently killed Andrew—I'm surprised it wasn't done sooner, frankly—and somebody stole the will. Who benefits? That's the question, as the big fellow says."

"But Jason—"

Young Kennedy was on his feet again. "I'd like to know something," he said. "What's the real worth of this contracting outfit that's the other part of the golden egg? Not its 'book value.' What is it really worth, when all the credits and debits and long-term financing and amortized depreciation and unrealized gains and the whole kitchen sink plus the kit-and-caboodle are totaled in?"

"None of your business," said—of course—Jason Barrow.

"Under the Barrows' management the company is currently

almost six million dollars in debt," said Carr in virtually the same instant.

"Then what's it worth?" Kennedy asked. "A negative figure?" He turned to Miss Malenkov and said, "Guard your purse, Hope. These people—"

He halted abruptly and turned back. What he saw then was what the rest of us also saw: Jason Barrow staring at his wife with an expression of disbelief and fear.

"Luce?" he said. "You didn't . . . ?"

"You're such a fool, Jason," she responded, not looking at him. "Such a fool."

Carr then stood up and moved to a position directly behind, almost looming over, Lucia Barrow. "The whole thing was so badly done, you see, that it almost had to be an either/or proposition. Either Hope—and you, Kennedy, as a possible accomplice—or one or both of the Barrows. The police are out with a warrant right now, searching the Barrow residence. That's the real reason for this meeting—to get the Barrows away. And I'm very afraid that what they're going to find is a bundle of cord that matches up to the piece that was around Andrew Deutsch's neck."

As if on cue, the telephone rang in my outer office.

"That's probably them calling now," Carr said.

"But you could have had the money just by asking!" cried Ann Malenkov. "Mrs. Barrow? Lucia? I would have let you have the money—don't you see? We're sisters. We're family."

I couldn't wait any longer, so I raised the phone receiver on my desk and said, "Hello? George Burke speaking."

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

Time on Their Hands

DAN CRAWFORD

"We are by way, Frederick," Waldo said, putting a hand out of the window to wave, "of being geniuses."

Freddy nodded and turned the car onto the street. This car had not belonged to them yesterday and with luck would no longer be necessary tomorrow, at which time the original owner might begin to wonder what had become of it.

"The world is giving its rewards to the bold, Frederick," Waldo noted, settling back into the seat as he rolled up the window. He glanced into the back seat.

Here sat the reward of the bold: three cardboard boxes. Some might have called it loot, some evidence.

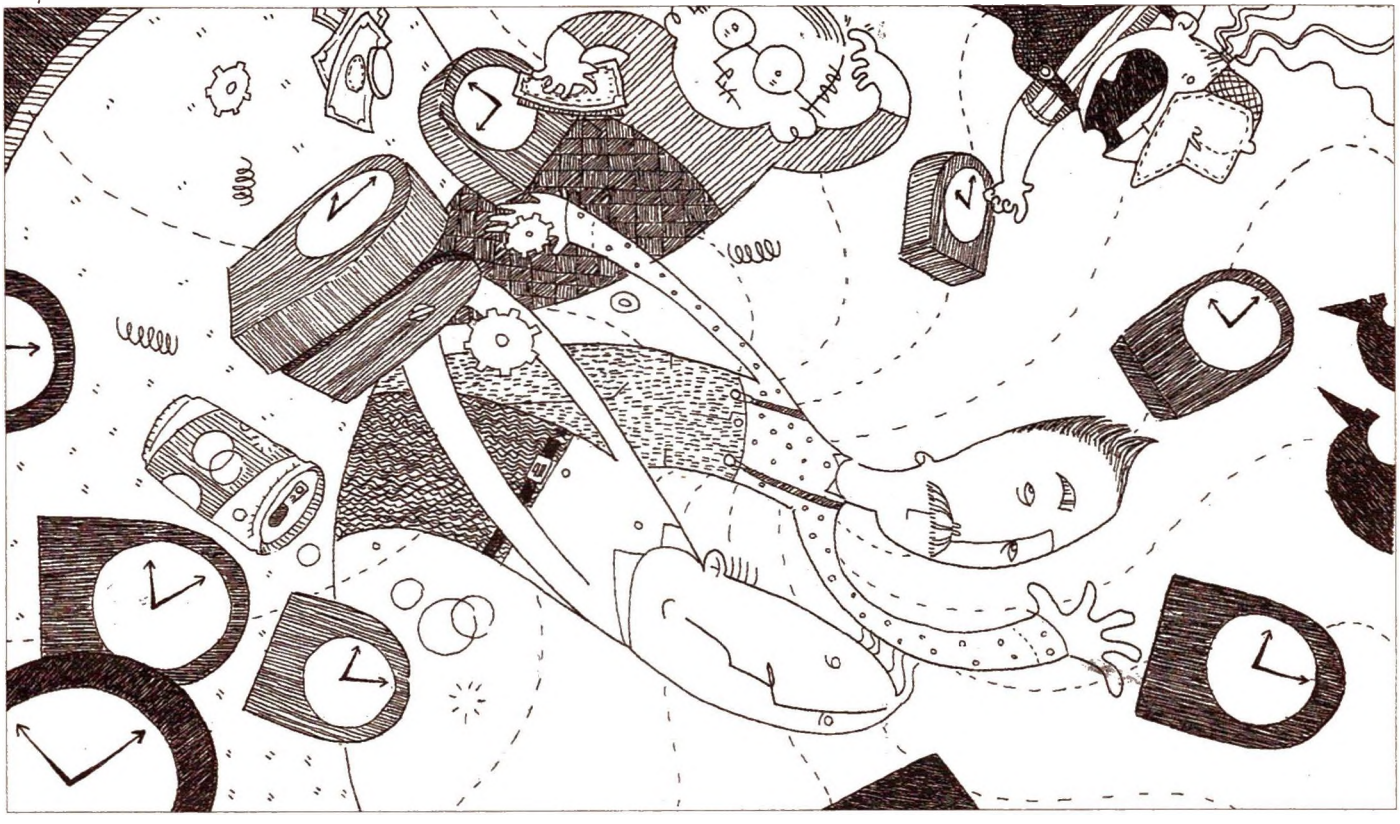
The way Waldo had done it was so quick and artful. Coming into town early, Waldo had spotted the flood damage and guided Freddy toward the storage lockers, which were standing open with a notice ordering renters to claim their dampened belongings or risk having them discarded. In moments, Waldo had a plan involving a small, not very soggy locker, a pocketknife, two old flashbulbs, and a bag of wet coffee grounds.

And in the end, the man who ran the place thanked them as they loaded the three boxes into the borrowed car. Freddy could only shake his head at the magnanimity of Waldo in including him in "geniuses."

"It would be as well to be driving well away before we are examining our windfall, Frederick," Waldo said, his eyes closing. "We are not wishing to appear vulgarly curious."

Twenty minutes passed before Waldo felt the demands of civility had been met. Then Freddy pulled the car onto the shoulder, and both men stepped around to the back seat. Freddy used his own knife, as Waldo's was back with the coffee grounds, and cut away the tape that held the first box shut. He had heard the boxes

Kelly Denato



rustle when he shifted them, so the shredded newspaper on top was no surprise. Both he and Waldo stepped back to admire the clock that rested just below this top layer.

"Showing promise," said Waldo, lifting the clock and turning it around in his hands. He pulled back the glass that covered the face, and closed it again. "No plastic here at all; our benefactor is having excellent taste. What else have we?"

Freddy reached into the newspaper and brought out a second clock, identical to the first, even to the black spirals of wood on each side of the face. Waldo took this and held it next to the first clock; the new one was perhaps two inches shorter. Waldo made no comment, and Freddy reached into the box again. He frowned a bit at the third clock, identical to the first two but taller than either.

The box held eight clocks, all the same except in size, the faces all substituting IIII for IV, which Freddy had always felt was sloppy. Waldo worked the back of one open and showed Freddy the metal gears and coils inside. Freddy nodded and took out his pocketknife again.

Waldo put a hand on his, and nodded to the eight clocks lined up next to the car. "Being so good as to repack the timepieces, Frederick. I am seeing enough to understand that we are now antique dealers."

Freddy folded his pocketknife away. "Where?"

Waldo nodded to the clocks and brought up the largest to return to the box. "We have been given the time, Frederick. No doubt the place will be appearing next."

Once the clocks were packed and the top of the box folded shut, Freddy and Waldo returned to the front seat. Freddy continued west. The morning was well advanced, and he would gladly have stopped somewhere for a little breakfast, or at least a cup of coffee, but Waldo said nothing as the miles wore away under the wheels. Freddy saw nothing exciting about the third YOU ARE NOW ENTERING sign they approached, but Waldo said on seeing it, "Pausing the vehicle, Frederick."

They stopped before the big sign with all its auxiliary signs for Lions, Rotary, and Kiwanis. YOU ARE NOW ENTERING ROSEMARY VALLEY, it read, HEART OF THE CORN KINGDOM.

"I am liking this, Frederick," Waldo declared. "Kingdom: It is speaking to me of people who are not lacking in romance and imagination." He brought a long index finger down toward a small sign wedged between competing church placards. ALL-TOWN FLEA MARKET. SATURDAY AFTERNOONS MAY TO SEPTEMBER.

"Proceeding slowly, Frederick," Waldo commanded. "At some

point on the verge of this city, we will be finding a fairgrounds."

There was such a place, but it was at the other end of town; they had to stop at City Hall (behind the police station, and about to close for the day) for directions. Many trucks had already pulled up to the long, white building. FLEA MARKET NOON TO FOUR, announced a sign. Waldo shook his head.

"Four hours," he sighed. "We shall be rushing."

Neither Waldo nor Freddy had much money, but they did have enough to pay the rent on a square spot of floor and a table to set there. Freddy used part of the change to buy a can from a vending machine. Waldo stepped away with the rest.

"Setting out the clocks, please, Frederick," he said. "And, I think, winding them. Nothing is so cheering as the tick of a clock, and nothing so suspicious as a clock lacking a tick. There are a few other things we will be needing." He disappeared into the crowd of men and women opening crates and setting out National Geographics.

Freddy opened all three boxes and verified for himself that each contained clocks, all identical in design and condition. This worried him just a bit—if this was a familiar design around these parts, someone might wonder how two strangers had come by the clocks. But he occupied himself with the winding of them, and found that Waldo was correct: The ticking of clocks was a cheerful and relieving sound. Not until he had finished winding all the clocks from the first box did he notice something worrisome.

"Waldo," he said, as his partner returned through the crowd, "The clocks work but . . ."

"Certainly the clocks are working, Frederick," he was told. "The world would not give us faulty merchandise. Here are a few trinkets to be spreading among the display, to be making the clocks look less lonely, less dominating. And this knife cost only . . ."

"Waldo," Freddy insisted, "the clocks work, but they run backwards."

Waldo looked into Freddy's face for a full minute, and then down to the faces of eight clocks. Each was provided with a second hand; each second hand swept in a wholly unorthodox counterclockwise fashion. The clocks had been set at noon; the first clock Freddy wound now held its hands at the ten and the twelve, signifying 11:50.

Waldo considered these things. His eyes rose to Freddy again. "Winding the clocks, Frederick," he said quietly. "Winding the clocks." He swept the little antiques he'd bought into his pocket. "We must be doing things differently, Frederick, but we are needing clocks that tick, all the same." One long index finger slid up

and down the side of his nose. This showed an idea was forming. Freddy returned to winding the clocks.

"Sir!" cried Waldo. The sound was so sudden that Freddy dropped the clock from his hands, catching it bare inches from the concrete floor.

He looked up to find that a man with an artistically arranged patch of gray hair at each temple had tried to walk past Waldo without success. "Sir, being so good as to examine these clocks," said Waldo. "Have you ever seen a clock like these?"

Freddy awaited the answer with some trepidation, as the man had the air of a well-aged chief of police. The man studied the clocks for a moment, puzzled, and then smiled.

"Sure. Last time I put the batteries in my own clock backwards."

Waldo smiled as well. "Ah, but an electric clock cannot tick, can it, sir? And the tick is what is doing the job."

"Job?" the man inquired.

Waldo folded his hands together. "Now sir, I cannot be claiming that the ticks of a clock that is moving backwards actually make a man grow younger. I have not been running all of the tests the government is requiring, and no matter how young one is, life is too short for filling out paperwork. But I can say, sir, that it is making me *feel* younger. I am standing before the clocks, sir, listening to the tick, and when I am next looking in the mirror, I can hardly believe I am ninety-eight."

Freddy had finished the second box of clocks and was starting the third when he felt a tug on one sleeve. Looking up, he found a large but not unpleasantly round young woman with overalls and red hair that had been forced through the back of a cap advertising a seed-corn company.

Her head jerked toward Waldo, bouncing the bundle of hair. "Is he really ninety-eight years old?"

Freddy took up the seventeenth clock and shrugged. "I don't know, ma'am. I've only been working for him since World War II."

"You will no doubt be noticing, sir, that I am trying not to look into the faces of these clocks here," Waldo went on. "Were I to be doing something so reckless, I might be feeling my wisdom teeth shrink back into . . ."

"Make him prove he's ninety-eight," said the redhaired woman. Three or four people who had stepped up behind the graying man concurred.

Waldo waved the long forefinger. "The wisdom of checking before buying is not to be denied," he declared. "I am having my driver's license right here."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change, which he spread on the table to get out of his way. Freddy noticed that he had spread the coins so that anyone could note the buffalo on the nickel and the feathered headdress on the pennies. Next came a pocketknife, which showed at least one lifetime of wear, and a rusted ring of what Freddy knew as the churchkey design, though he had never heard this applied to actual keys. A ration book and the armband of a civil defense warden followed.

"Do you know," said the man with graying hair, "I have to get home and fix the porch. How much do you want for a clock?"

"Several dollars," said Waldo, not looking up as he pulled out a big silver coin with the pictures almost completely worn away.

"This much?" inquired the man, handing over a collection that included several twenty-dollar bills.

Waldo grasped the money with a firm hand. "Be so good enough as to be handing over one of the . . . smaller timepieces, Frederick."

Freddy did so. The redhaired woman was obviously not happy, but before she could speak again, a woman pushed forward to buy a backwards clock, and two men followed her, with money held out. Freddy had difficulty finishing the last clocks, with all these interruptions, but finally, just as the woman's red hair swirled and she turned away, he set the last of the twenty-four clocks on the table.

He rose and limbered his aching fingers. At the same moment, all the clocks emitted a low, throbbing "Bong." The hands on each clock sprang to attention at the XII.

And in the next moment, he was seated again, a clock on his lap. His fingers were turning the key in the wrong direction. This struck him as pretty silly, and he tried to stop. His fingers did not move to his command; they went on unwinding the twenty-fourth clock.

The thatch of hair poking from the seed-corn cap swirled again, and the redhaired woman was facing Waldo, who spoke bizarre gibberish to the tall man with the white mustache. Something appeared to be quite wrong, but Freddy did not comprehend the magnitude of it until he witnessed the incredible sight of Waldo handing money back to a customer. He looked at the clocks on the table as he tucked this one back into its box. The second hands were moving clockwise again.

He looked up to Waldo, who looked back, alarm in his eyes. But people continued to talk backwards and move the clocks they had purchased back into place on the table. Waldo put the silver dollar back into his pocket, the armband, and the ration book. Freddy went on unwinding clocks and packing shredded newspaper

around them. Eventually, the redheaded woman, the man with the graying hair, and even Waldo, went away again. Freddy set the last clock on his lap and unwound it.

He shuddered as it ceased to tick, and raised his hands to his eyes. Then he shuddered again, and found himself turning the key again, now winding the clock. He wound eight clocks, and Waldo reappeared through the crowd.

"Waldo," he said, "the clocks work but . . ."

"Certainly the clocks are working," Waldo said again. But there was that in his eyes which suggested he would have said something else if he could.

Freddy went on winding clocks. Waldo bellowed "Sir!" Freddy nearly dropped the clock again. Waldo began his announcement, the redhaired woman tugged at Freddy's sleeve. All was as it had been before. Freddy licked his lips, looking at the still-unopened can from the vending machine. No one else looked thirsty, or hungry, or desperate. Maybe since he and Waldo owned the clocks (so to speak) they were the only ones who realized what was happening. Perhaps everyone in the room could simply go through the motions without feeling the passage of time. Would the whole world go back and forth until he and Waldo dropped from thirst and exhaustion? Would even that do any good? Had these backward clocks doomed the universe to repeat forever one hour of a Saturday afternoon?

He wound the last clock again, flexed his hot red fingers, and all but sobbed as the twenty-fourth clock landed on his lap and he began again to unwind it. Looking up to Waldo, he could see that handing back the money a second time was just as painful as the cramps in his hands.

Bouncing a little as he worked, Freddy found that he could move his chair just half an inch closer to the table. This was encouraging, though in normal time he should have been right over next to that can of pop by now. But it did show that if he couldn't alter them much, he could still alter his movements just a little. His thirst had been his main thought, with the coolness of the can resting on his worn thumb and forefinger second. Now he wondered if he couldn't do even more.

He waited. There was no way he could forget how this worked; he'd done it three times now. He waited for that cry of "Sir!" and jerked his hands. This did no good. His hands moved almost as much as he had hoped. But that cry of "Sir!" came AFTER what had happened, at least going backwards. He licked his lips. He'd have another chance in a few minutes.

He wound the last clock . . . the first clock. He was alone again.

He made the attempt to switch hands, or at least fingers, so he could wind with thumb and middle finger. He failed; the metal of the key cut into his fingertips again.

Waldo reappeared once more, to be told again of the unorthodox behavior of the clocks. The artifacts were swept into the pocket again.

"Sir!" he cried. Freddy jerked his hands back flat against his chest. They were therefore nowhere near the falling clock as it hit the concrete. Its case shattered. One hand went skittering across the floor.

The man with the gray patches studied the destruction. "Bad luck," he observed, and moved on.

Waldo sagged against the table. "How marvelously, wonderfully clumsy of you, Frederick. I would not be claiming I have led a perfect life, but I'm furthermore not believing I was meant to finish my days selling clocks in a converted livestock gallery."

Freddy had seized the can of pop and drained it in a single draw. "Oh, Waldo!" he gasped, "I . . ."

He frowned at the table; the sound he'd been hearing for centuries was gone. "Waldo, the clocks have stopped."

Waldo took up the nearest clock. "I am glimpsing possibilities in such machines, Frederick. Better to pack them up again while we are contemplating..."

Now he frowned, hefting the clock. He turned it over and opened the back. His nose wrinkled, and he raised the clock for Freddy to see. All the gears and metal coils were gone.

Freddy opened his mouth to ask a question, but Waldo had spun around. "Madame!" he cried, pulling at the sleeve of a familiar young woman with red hair and overalls. "Are you fearing the marauder by night and the prowler in darkness? Would you not be finding sleep easier if you had an elegant hiding place for your valuables?"

Every single clock proved to be empty; Waldo succeeded in selling all twenty-three, albeit at a price far below what he'd asked for the youthening clocks he had sold several times today. The remains of the broken clock were sold for pocket change to a clock hobbyist, and he had time as well before four o'clock to sell the silver dollar and the ration book.

The old pennies and nickels he threw in with the rest of their receipts. "Counting it, Frederick," he sighed, as they meandered back to the borrowed car. "Breaking the news gently to me, if you please."

Freddy counted the money twice, deducting the price of the booth and table, the can of pop, and what Waldo had spent on the table

decorations like the pocketknife. Then he put the key in the ignition.

"We did make a profit, Waldo," he said. "We have twenty-three cents more than we did."

Waldo did not open his eyes. "The parking meter at the City Hall?"

Freddy went over his figures again. His shoulders dropped. "We're two cents down, Waldo."

Waldo nodded, still way back in the seat. But as the car pulled away from the building, he sat up. "It was having possibilities, Frederick, if we might only have been given a chance to be planning the matter." That long finger tapped the dashboard. "If we had only been knowing at the outset what sort of clocks they were . . ."

The car bounced over the little dirt threshold at the gate of the fairgrounds and he settled back again. "The world is giving its rewards to the bold, Frederick, but time enough to use them the world is irritatingly difficult about."

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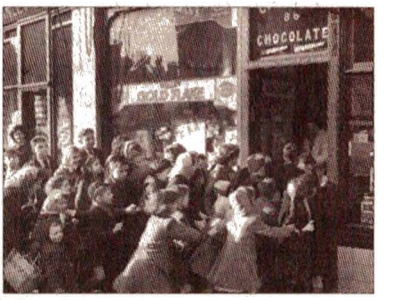
The Story That Won

The February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by John Thomen of Katy, TX. Honorable mentions go to Ruth Ketvirtis of Midpines, CA; Eric Rachut of Moody, TX; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, MI; James Hagerty of Melbourne, FL; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, MD; K. L. Friedman of Sherman Oaks, CA; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, TX; Kate Karp of Long Beach, CA; and Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, FL.



German Chocolate

JOHN THOMEN

Detective Mulde screeched his unmarked up behind the crime scene van and charged in through the back door. He quickly took in the scene and another huge bite of his sandwich. A white-coated technician was sorting the mayhem that used to be an orderly candy store. Small, brown smudges covered almost every surface between three and six feet off the floor. It was littered with little papers, small shoe prints, and broken glass. A man, dead, lay half in one of the broken glass candy displays. His long white coat was covered with similar brown spots and shoe prints. A uniformed officer at the front door held the mob at bay.

"Look at those mothers out there." Then Mulde yelled out at the mob, "What on earth do you think is going on here! You little twirps think there's free chocolate in here or something? This is a crime scene, for heaven's sake!" A piece of lettuce spittled to the floor.

Mulde turned to the deceased and began to work another large bite. "The stiff the owner?"

"We believe so."

The cacophony out front increased. Mulde screamed, "Get rid of the kids! I can't think with all that noise!" A gnash of tomato hit the technician. He immediately joined the uniform in sending the children away.

"What makes you think the stiff's the owner?"

"His wallet. Fresh receipt for putting his initials out front over the CHOCOLATE sign.

"Yeah? What's the stiff's name?"

"Friedrich Rochmon Ernst Eibauer."

Editor's Notes, continued from page 5

BEST TELEVISION EPISODE TELEPLAY

Monk: "Mr. Monk Takes a Vacation", teleplay by Hy Conrad

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit: "Waste", teleplay by Dawn DeNoon and Lisa Marie Petersen

Law & Order: Criminal Intent: "Tuxedo Hill", teleplay by Rene Balcer

The Wire: "The Target", teleplay by David Simon. Story by David Simon and Ed Burns

NYPD Blue: "Ho Down", teleplay by Nicholas Wootton and Bill Clark

BEST MOTION PICTURE SCREENPLAY

Gangs of New York, screenplay by Jay Cocks, Steven Zaillian, and Kenneth Lonergan; story by Jay Cocks (Miramax Films)

***Chicago* by Bill Condon (Miramax Films)**

Catch Me If You Can by Jeff Nathanson (Dreamworks)

Insomnia by Hilary Seitz (Warner Bros.)

Road to Perdition, screenplay by David Self, based on the graphic novel by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner (Dreamworks)

BEST PLAY

***Easy* by Philip DePoy (Horizon Theatre)**

The West End Horror by Anthony Dodge and Marcia Milgrom Dodge (Bay Street Theatre)

The Chronology Protection Case by Mark Shanahan, Paul Levinson, and Jay Kensinger, from the story by Paul Levinson (Stage Shadows Productions)

Monster by Derek Nguyen (East-West Players)

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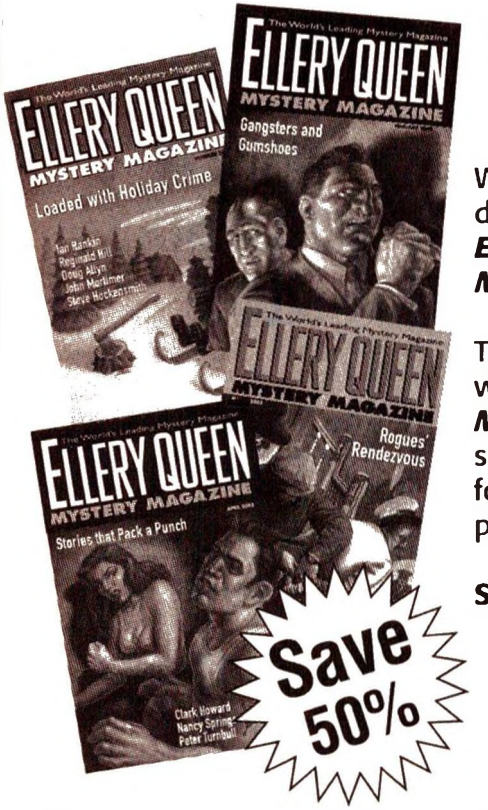

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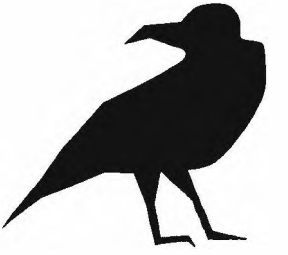

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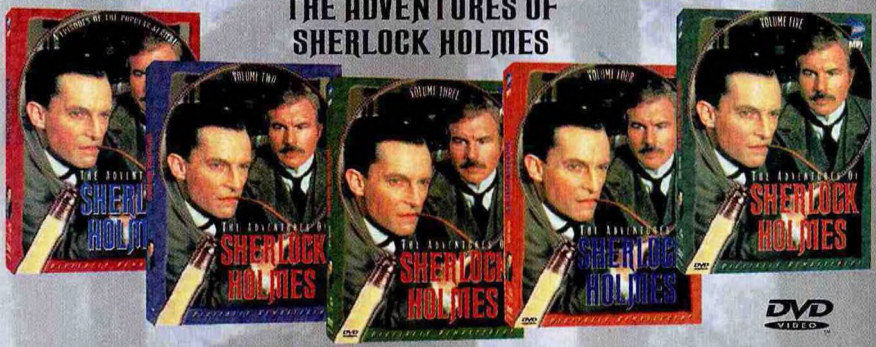

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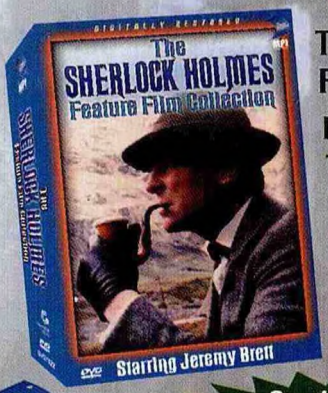

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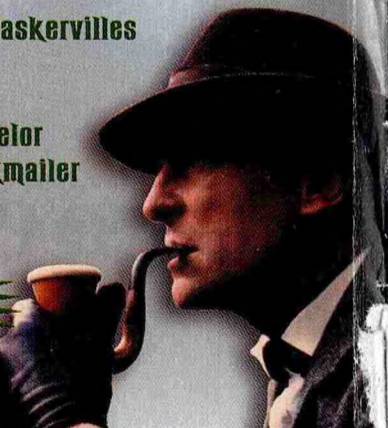

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