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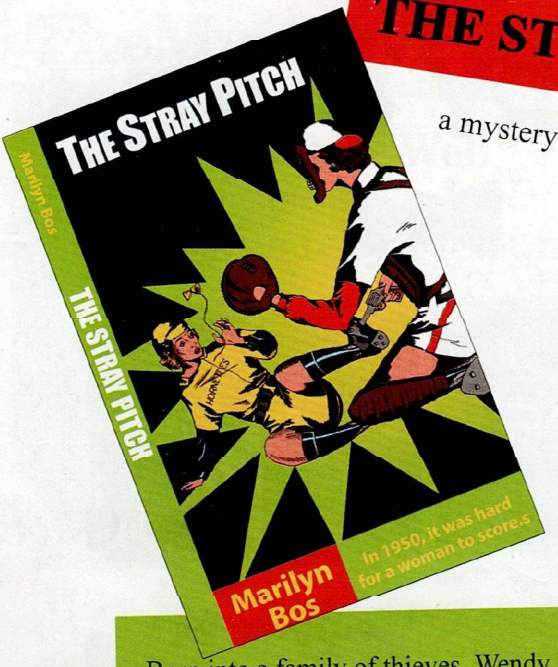

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE®

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Writing the Wrongs

Crime and Mystery authors write the wrongs, but don't always right them. On display in this issue is a variety of transgressions, and appropriately for a double issue, the stories in our summer edition proceed two by two--almost. Fixers: retired fixer "The Big Hit" Jones returns to help his protégé Akin retrieve his stepfather's Harley from the clutches of a payday loan operation in "Stimulus Money" by Dan Warthman; while Robert S. Levinson's former LAPD detective turned fixer to the Hollywood stars, Chris Blanchard, hears the confession of a bit player on death row in "In the Land of Make-Believe." Procedurals: a routine stop leads to an unusual case for Maine Border Patrol Agent Peyton Cote in "Autumn's Crossing" by John R. Corrigan; while an apparent dueling death may prove deceiving in O'Neil de Noux's "For Love's Sake." Private Investigators: Professor Minerva Woodhouse goes undercover to investigate possible misdeeds in a nursing home in "Murder Will Speak" by B. K. Stevens; while Beat poet Ellery Delgardo solves a murder to preserve his good standing in a Greenwich Village coffeehouse in the 1950s in "The Red Envelope" by Robert Lopresti—the winner of this year's Black Orchid Novella Award. Unclassifiable: James L. Ross offers a tale with few redeeming characters on either side of the law in "The Freezer"; and our Mystery Classic "Go-Between" by Fred MacIsaac concludes in the second of two parts.

Finally, it is a pleasure to congratulate B. K. Stevens on the nomination of her story "Thea's First Husband" for an Agatha Award for Best Short Story. "Thea's First Husband" appeared in our June 2012 issue.

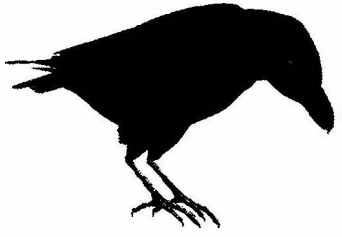
LINDA LANDRIGAN, EDITOR

The Lineup

AHMM published JOHN R. CORRIGAN's story "Shooter" in the April 2011 issue. His next novel, *This One Day*, under the pseudonym K. A. Delaney, is due out this winter from Five Star.

O'NEIL DE NOUX is the Vice President of Private Eye Writers of America. His latest novel is *New Orleans Homicide* (Big Kiss Productions, January 2013), the sixth in a now reissued series.

RON GOULART is the author of *The Hardboiled Dicks: An Anthology and Study of Pulp Detective Fiction* and *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, among other nonfiction. He also writes fiction, and has been nominated twice for an Edgar Award.



Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly*, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

In conjunction with the publication of ROBERT S. LEVINSON's novel *Phony Tinsel*, the Los Angeles City Council honored the author as "An Angel in the City of Angels." The next and eleventh book in that series, *Finders, Keepers, Losers, Weepers* (Five Star/Gale), is slated for a 2014 release.

2012 Black Orchid Novella Award winner ROBERT LOPRESTI first appeared in AHMM in 1981; this appearance is his twenty-first. He is the author of *Such a Killing Crime* (Kearney Street Books).

JAMES L. ROSS's latest novel is *The Last Crimes of Charles Mistinguett* (Perfect Crime Books, May 2013). His novel *Long Pig* was nominated for a 2012 Shamus Award. This is his third apperance in AHMM.

At press time, **B. K. STEVENS's** story "Thea's First Husband" (AHMM, June 2012) has been nominated for an Agatha Award. She is the writer of a one-act mystery play that was staged early this year by the The Geneva Theatre Guild. This is her twenty-fifth appearance in AHMM.

DAN WARTHMAN's story "A Dreadful Day" (AHMM, January/February 2009) won the 2010 Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Short Story. He has since appeared four more times in AHMM and once in EQMM.

AUTUMN'S CROSSING

JOHN R. CORRIGAN

The 9mm rounds, fired through a silencer, sounded like quarters dropping to the snow around her.

U.S. Border Patrol Agent Peyton Cote rolled to her left, felt her shoulder strike the base of the pine tree, and moved like a turtle on its shell, burrowing through the snow, until her back pressed firmly against the thick trunk.

A slug hit the opposite side of the tree, causing light snow to fall from the tree's branches to the ground around her. The ironic quality of the scene—tranquil, light-falling snow amid gunfire—was not lost on Peyton. How the hell had "May I see your license and registration" led to this? The stupid bastard had even given her the documents, watched as she took them to her government-issued Chevy Tahoe, then inexplicably fired a round through her windshield.

Her wool winter field coat was sweat soaked and felt like wet tissue paper against her back; coupled with her eight-pound Kevlar vest, it gave her all the mobility of someone lugging a sandbag.

The tree vibrated again and a chunk of wood, like pale flesh, leapt into the air, tumbled end over end, landing softly in the snow.

There were three of them. That much she knew.

She also knew she had to keep them off her, to maintain at least sixty feet between herself and the shooters. They didn't look like professionals, and sixty feet was a long shot with a pistol. Given that border patrol agents are among law enforcement's elite marksmen, she liked her chances.

The afternoon sunlight was fading. It got dark before three thirty P.M. during the winter months in Aroostook County, Maine. Peyton twisted around the tree, saw a dark mass running toward her. They were on the move, attempting to surround her. She fired once, twice. Pulled back behind the tree, leaned against it, breathing hard.

"Marty!" someone yelled. "Jesus Christ, look at the blood. Marty, say something. Oh, Jesus, Tommy, look at Marty. Look at the blood. I think she . . . Marty, no! Who's going to tell Mom?"

The was a moment of silence, then the man shrieked. "Who's going to tell Mom?!"

Tom Pokinko

The man she had shot was, at the very least, badly wounded, probably dead. The frantic man had obviously stopped approaching the tree. But where was the third man? If he, too, rushed her, she would be forced to fire on him as well. The situation was spiraling out of control.

"We can't leave her out there," a different voice shouted. "She knows. This has to end here."

Now that the gunfire had stopped, the voices echoed among the pines. Peyton heard the chuffing breaths, footfalls thudding through dense snow. They were approaching again.

She leaned, spotted the short squat leather jacket struggling through three feet of snow, heard him wheezing.

"She knows," someone said again.

"She killed my brother. She's mine."

He was weaving, muttering. Stoned? Drunk? Could that explain the senseless escalation? Unlikely.

She sited her .40 on his left kneecap and squeezed.

His leg went back as if kicked by a horse. The motion was awkward, like a man inexplicably chasing his own leg. He turned halfway around, landed on his back in the snow, and screamed.

She couldn't see the third man, and she instinctively retreated behind the tree and hunched low. She heard her own rasping breath. Where was the third man, the one who had said she knew all and that it had to end here? Her head swiveled, both hands on the .40, barrel pointing straight out in front of her—not textbook technique, but right now that didn't matter. She cared only about was making it home to her son, Tommy. A single mother to a nine year old, her priorities were ironclad.

Again, dead silence.

Had the man gotten so close he had stopped? Had he swung wide to prepare a flank attack? How had it come to this?

Peyton exhaled slowly and pushed thoughts of Tommy aside. She had to *focus*. She leaned out again, saw the flash of a gray hoodie twenty feet away, then the orange flame, and heard the man's revolver's bark. Instantly, she recoiled. The snow to her right danced like windswept sand.

Breathing hard now, she tried to listen.

She couldn't take the chance that he was coming toward her, couldn't allow him to get within point-blank range.

He had to know she was right handed. Every shot she'd fired had come from the tree's right side. Shooting from her left may provide the element of surprise, but it would also be awkward and would certainly put her in harm's way—there was no way to lean out and shoot across her body without exposing her full torso, and she wasn't about to shoot with her left hand.

Then she heard him.

A wheeze, no farther than ten feet away.

She dove to her left, spotted the mass, and fired once, just as his hand leapt and blazed, the bark of his revolver deafening.

And the hot poker struck her chest.

Patrol Agent in Charge Mike Hewitt looked like he always did: not a hair out of place, clean shaven, blue eyes piercing whatever they focused on. Right now, they were focused on Peyton.

"I'm here as your boss," he said.

"That makes sense," she said, "since you are my boss."

His hard-ass stare could bend metal.

"But I know what you meant," she said, rebounding.

They were alone in the E.R. She sat on a bed, wearing a hospital johnnie, her Kevlar vest beside her.

"My collarbone looks like I got hit by an eighteen-wheeler."

"Thank God you were wearing that." Hewitt pointed to the dime-sized hole in the vest.

"When I felt the burn, I forgot I had it on," she said. "I thought I was hit. I was thinking of Tommy. Staring at the stars, thinking of Tommy, wondering what would become of him."

Somewhere, a cart rolled down the hall, its wheels whining.

"You have no idea what they were talking about?"

"None," she said. "I assume nothing was in the car. If they had something, they'd have fled, not come after me."

He shook his head. "They had something, all right."

She waited.

"An infant girl."

"Isn't she just absolutely darling?" Margaret Picard said, bringing Peyton coffee.

It was Monday, four in the afternoon, and Peyton's chest still ached, but the baseball-sized, plum-colored bruise was subsiding. She sat at the Picard's kitchen table, holding the infant girl, who, according to a birth certificate—which had yet to be validated and which no one at Garrett Station thought would be—was Autumn Randolph, age four months.

"Her birth certificate says she was born in Charlotte, North Carolina," Margaret said. She was sixty-six, the mother of three grown girls, two of whom had gone to Garrett High with Peyton. Margaret and her husband Morris Picard, chair of the high school's history department, had served as foster parents to more than twenty children over the past thirty years.

"I imagine this is the quietest this house has been in some time," Peyton said.

"Actually, we haven't had a foster child here in five years or so," Margaret said.

"Really? That's surprising."

"Yes, they were a big part of our lives."

Peyton held the girl in the crook of one arm, the baby's dark eyes blinking at her from inside the pink blanket. With her free hand, Peyton stirred creamer into her coffee.

"It's good to have you back in town," Margaret said. "How was El Paso?"

"Good for an agent, not so good for a single mom."

"I wish all parents put their children first."

"You must have seen some terrible cases as a foster parent."

"Every foster parent has one in particular that keeps them up at night and keeps them taking in kids." Margaret paused to sip coffee, set her cup down carefully, then leaned forward, touched the baby's cheek, and continued. "Her name was Samantha Smith. Her mother was addicted to PCP when Samantha was born. Do you know what that means for the baby?"

Peyton nodded.

"We had her for two years and made great strides with her. Well, guess what the court did when Samantha was two? As soon as her mother shows even mild improvement, Samantha gets sent back. The mother's boyfriend abused Samantha sexually." She looked away. "Samantha died—bled to death internally after his . . . abuse."

"Jesus Christ," Peyton said.

"Even He couldn't help that little girl," Margaret said.

They drank coffee in silence until the front door opened and Morris Picard entered.

"You haven't aged a day," Peyton said. "You look exactly like you did when I was a junior in high school."

"You're too kind," he said. "What brings you here?"

He was moving to the coffeemaker and poured himself a cup, black, and stood at the counter.

"You still sound like Sean Connery. I loved your classes so much I thought I would be a history teacher. I minored in it at UMaine."

"Thank you. What brings you by?"

"I wanted to see the baby. Is she of Hispanic descent?"

"As I hope you can see," Morris said, "she's in good hands."

"Never a doubt of that," Peyton said. "Do you know her nationality?"

"It never crossed my mind. What really brings you here?"

"It's my case. Just checking in."

Morris Picard then went to the living room and sat on the sofa. Peyton handed the baby to Margaret and followed him.

"Mr. Picard—"

"Peyton, you're not in my history class anymore. You may call me by my first name."

"Morris," she said with trepidation, "I must admit that I'm also here on behalf of my class reunion committee. We thought you'd be the perfect guest of honor. Would you be willing to say a few words?"

"The guest of honor for your class's reunion?"

She nodded. On the coffee table between them, she pulled a pamphlet from beneath a high-school yearbook and opened it.

"You are amazing," she said, "both of you." She pointed to the pamphlet.

"The orphans at St. Joseph's?" Margaret said, entering the room. She saw the pamphlet and took it from Peyton, put it under the book, and tidied

the coffee table. "Morris is on the board of directors at that orphanage. He always does what's right for kids. He's got a special connection to them."

"I'd be happy to make the speech," he said.

Peyton was descending the stairs as a light snow fell around her. She slipped once and caught herself, then moved carefully. The next major storm was on its way, and Peyton knew black ice would be hiding beneath the snow on Route 1. Twelve to sixteen inches of snow had been predicted. She was glad she had driven her eleven-year-old Jeep Wrangler. Having selected the canvas-top option before Tommy was born, while living in Texas, she still enjoyed it, willing to suffer the interminable northern Maine winters to ride convertible-style and without doors all summer.

A battered Ford F-250 plow truck swung into the Picard driveway as Peyton reached her Jeep. The driver dropped the plow, killed the engine, and stepped out. The driver was not what Peyton expected—that is, not a bearded, cigarette-waving man garbed in flannel—but rather, a thin, blonde woman no older than twenty-one, in a Christmas sweater and designer jeans and wearing large sunglasses.

If Peyton had spent eighty dollars on a pair of jeans, the last place she'd want to sit was in a truck that looked like this one.

She waved at the blonde as she started her Jeep.

The woman was at the top of the stairs and started to return the gesture, but the front door opened, and Morris Picard grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her into the house.

"Here's what we have," Hewitt said, when Peyton was back at the station house. "The baby's birth certificate is about as valid as my membership in the Baseball Hall of Fame."

"Never knew you played baseball."

"Never did."

"I see," Peyton said.

They were sitting in Hewitt's office. The windows were black against the office lighting, but she could hear the blowing snow, which sounded like sandpaper scraping the glass.

"That doesn't say much for our friends working the border in the Customs office the other night."

"No," Hewitt said, "it doesn't, and I need you to look into that."

By mid afternoon the next day, Peyton had parked at the foot of the Crystal View River and worked her way into the break room of the U.S. Customs House, located directly across the bridge from Youngsville, New Brunswick, and their Canadian customs counterparts.

"I don't appreciate the tone of your question," Customs Officer Timothy Smythe said.

"I only asked you to explain your procedure," Peyton said.

"I used the same procedure on that car that I use on every car."

"Good to know you're consistent," she said.

"Is that a crack?"

She offered her hundred-watt smile. "Have any coffee?"

"No."

"Seriously? You're not going to give me a coffee?"

"It's out in the bull pen. Help yourself."

She did. When she returned, Smythe was pretending to read the sports page. But Peyton could tell he wasn't. She'd done this often enough to catch his glance and ensuing frown. He was sweating this interview, and rightfully so: He'd botched the border check. Now three men were dead, and a baby was in DHS custody. And he had a border patrol agent sitting across his desk asking tough questions.

"You were the officer of record for that vehicle," she said. "Tell me what happened."

"I already have. And your tone indicates I missed something."

"Three armed roughnecks pass through with an infant?" Peyton said. "That might seem suspicious to some people."

"Go to hell," he said.

"Did you question them?"

"I didn't see a baby. If I had, I would have searched the whole damn car."

"See a car seat?"

"There wasn't one."

"You're certain of that?"

"I've viewed the surveillance video six ways from Sunday to be sure I didn't miss it."

Peyton leaned back in her chair.

"You married?" he asked.

Her coffee cup was to her mouth, but she didn't drink; shook her head instead.

"Divorced," she said. "Why?"

"Seeing anyone?"

"Jesus Christ," she said. "I'm working here—so are you." But she thought of Hewitt, of how loaded that question was, personally and professionally. She refocused. "So what you're telling me is that when the three men I shot—"

"You're the agent who shot them?"

She looked away. "They were going to kill—"

"No, I didn't mean that. I know it was self-defense. It's just that you don't look—"

"Anyway, you're saying when they came through the border, you saw no sign of the baby girl?"

"They didn't have a baby."

"That's different," she said. "I'm saying you saw no sign of an infant. The car had a trunk."

"Come on," Smythe said. "You think they hid the baby in the trunk?"

"When I was in Texas, I found a dead month-old baby in the trunk of a Dodge Neon."

"Shit."

They both paused to sip coffee then, each thinking of the dead baby. It was a pause that went with the job, as if recalling bad dreams was a professional obligation. Sometimes she thought it was.

"I still think they got the baby after they crossed the river," Smythe said.

Peyton nodded. "And I think you're probably right."

She was in her kitchen fixing dinner for Tommy and herself when the doorbell chimed. She pulled it open to see Peter Dye. She gave him a familial hug, but immediately sensed him tense.

"I haven't seen you since the summer before our senior year in college," she said.

"A long time," he said and stepped inside. He had snow on the shoulders of his jacket. "I see your sister a lot. That's sort of why I'm here."

"To see Elise?"

"No, ah, Elise said you weren't seeing anyone. I thought, maybe, well . . . we used to get along good . . . and this is a small town, so . . . And I'm not dating anyone."

"Oh, Pete . . ." she exhaled. She didn't want to hurt him; she told him the truth: "I'm seeing someone."

"Who?"

She shook her head. "Look, growing up, you were the brother we never had. Remember when we put Alka-Seltzer in the fish tank in eighth-grade biology?"

The rejected man had to smile at the memory.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"I'm truly flattered," she said. "How is school?"

"Much different than when you and I went there. I'm thinking of getting out of education."

"What's changed?"

"For one, teen pregnancies are up three hundred percent in the past ten years."

"What!? That's an epidemic."

"Three hundred percent?" Mike Hewitt said. He was in the kitchen now, sipping a beer, sitting at Peyton's table.

"That's what he said."

"What was he doing here?" Hewitt asked.

Peyton was looking at the tomatoes she was dicing. She looked up and smiled. "You really want to know?"

"Yeah." He took a sip of his Heineken, which she kept in the fridge for him.

"He'd come here to ask me out."

"Jerk," Hewitt said.

"You're cute when you're jealous."

"What did you say?"

"You really have to ask?"

"No. I just want to hear you say it."

"Well, I couldn't say I'm seeing my boss, so—"

"So, you're going out with the guy?"

She turned to face him now. "Gotcha. I just said I was seeing someone."

"Glad it's funny to you." Hewitt stared at his beer bottle and shifted in his seat. "Peyton, I'm thinking of putting in for a transfer."

"What? You're kidding."

"No. I'm serious."

"What about us? What about the past year?"

"I'm thinking about the past year. This is your hometown, and Tommy has settled in here. I wouldn't ask you to move. And I want to continue seeing you, without risking my career or yours to do so."

She turned down the stove, moved closer to him.

"I'm in charge of Garrett Station," he went on. "Every day I feel like I'm lying to the twenty-one other agents who work there. But I would never give up what we have."

"Mike, don't transfer."

"We can't keep this hidden, Peyton, not forever."

"Three hundred percent is an exaggeration," Susan Petigrew, the high-school counselor, told Peyton the next day in the school's counseling office. "I mean, that's quite an indictment of this school and of me in particular."

"Not really," Peyton said. "Some people would say it's an indictment of the area's parents."

"If you were an educator, you'd know that the majority of parents pass the buck onto the educational system."

Peyton didn't have time to listen to the woman vent, but she didn't want to rush her, either. That could turn the interview into a stilted, one-sided conversation.

"It must be tough to see," she said, "these pregnant girls?"

"Very. Most are throwing away their futures—their college hopes—to enter a life dependent on tough men."

"Where's Virginia Woolf when you need her?" Peyton said.

"Not in Aroostook County."

"Can you give me a list of girls who gave birth last spring?"

"There was only one girl," Petigrew said. "Another sad thing about this epidemic, as you called it, is that most of the girls have abortions."

"Even here, where so many people are French Catholic?"

"Like I said, it's very sad."

"What was the girl's name?" Peyton said.

"Erin Dumont."

"Did she put the baby up for adoption?"

"I don't know. She dropped out of school. I've seen her a few times since, but she never had the baby with her."

Peyton hadn't liked the feeling in her stomach when Susan Petigrew said she'd seen the girl three times without her daughter. She didn't like the girl's reaction, either, when at two fifteen that afternoon, under a bright sun, Peyton walked past a red Camaro and knocked on the trailer door. The fifteen year old opened the door and burst into tears when she saw the uniformed agent.

"Erin Dumont? My name is Agent Cote. I'd like to ask you some questions."

The girl was shaking now. She wore soiled jeans and a Captain Morgan T-shirt that was totally inappropriate for someone her age, Peyton thought, but which hung on her as if it belonged to someone much larger. Her Champion sneakers had come from the local Walmart.

The trailer was in Locusts Hill, a park not far from the station and near the Crystal View River, not far from the border crossing where the baby had been found.

"Am I in trouble?"

"May I come in?"

"It's messy in here."

"Are your parents home?"

"They don't live here."

That answer forced the issue. "I'd like to come in," Peyton said. She had more authority than a state cop, and people in this border town knew it. Erin Dumont held the door.

The clutter and clothing strewn across the floor made the inside of the trailer seem much smaller than it was. Peyton saw Budweiser cans near the kitchen sink, which was full of food-stained dishes. The girl's face reddened when she followed Peyton's eyes.

"You live here alone?"

"No. This is Jimmy Morgan's place. I'm staying with him."

"Is that his car? Is he here?"

Erin Dumont shook her head. "The car is mine."

"It's nice," Peyton said, although she was not a fan of Camaros. "Tell me about last year."

Erin Dumont stared at the toe of her sneaker as she worked it back and forth trying to get gum out of the brown shag carpet. "I went to school for a while."

"Until you got pregnant?"

"How do you know about that?"

"Small town. Did you have the baby?"

"Yeah."

"Boy or girl?"

"I have to get to work. I work nights at the potato-processing plant."

"The night shift doesn't start for almost two hours, Erin. What sex was your baby?"

"Girl."

Peyton nodded. Something tightened in her stomach; a connection seemed imminent.

"Where is she now?"

Erin shook her head.

"Erin, this is important. You need to tell me where the baby is now."

"I can't."

"Sweetie, this can go a couple different ways. You can talk to me here, or you can sit in an interrogation room and talk to me and a few state cops."

"No. I really can't." The girl was crying now. "I don't know where she is."

"Tell me about it," Peyton said.

"And she never saw the baby again?" Hewitt said.

Peyton was on her cell phone in the parking lot of the Irving gas station, where she'd gotten a small coffee.

"That's what she says, Mike, and I believe her. This kid sobbed on my shoulder for a good twenty minutes. She ought to be in counseling."

"Well, we're not the school guidance office."

"The man lied to her," Peyton said. "He convinced her that she couldn't give the baby what she needed and told Erin she could see her baby anytime, that she would be nearby. She never saw her little girl again."

"Or the man?"

"That's right."

"Have a description of him?"

"I do."

"And?"

"I think I shot the bastard. Name is Martin St. Pierre."

Peyton was at her desk in the bull pen, checking e-mails. A friend, an agent still stationed in El Paso, had sent photos following a record-sized marijuana bust. Peyton thought of Autumn Randolph and felt more like a DHS officer than a border patrol agent.

"Peyton, I got something for you," Stan Jackman said, approaching her desk. Jackman was the elder statesman of the office, nearing the mandatory retirement age of fifty-seven (plus twenty years' service). "That Camaro you wanted me to look into? It's this year's model, purchased new."

"She said she works the night shift at the potato-processing plant."

"That pays about twelve bucks an hour."

"What's the Camaro cost?"

"Over thirty grand," Jackman said and sipped coffee from paper cup. "She's got a checking account. State Police say there's—" He looked down

at his notebook. "—three hundred and forty-seven dollars and twenty-eight cents in it. The most she's had in it at any time over the past twelve months is close to eight hundred."

"So she didn't buy the car," Peyton said. "Let's run the VIN number, see where it was purchased and by whom."

"Already did all that," Jackman said. "Sonny Gagnon of Youngsville, New Brunswick, purchased that Camaro at the Chevrolet dealership in Houlton."

"I know that name," Peyton said. "He's one of the men I shot."

Jackman nodded.

"Follow the money," she said.

"I'm working on that."

Peyton went to the dojo. She needed to work out—it had been a few days—but mostly she needed to think. Martin St. Pierre had coerced seventeen-year-old Erin Dumont to give up her baby, convincing her it was best for the infant girl and promising Erin she could see the baby whenever she wanted. Had Sonny Gagnon sweetened the pot by offering Erin a new red Camaro? Apparently no cash had been exchanged, which was smart. Had the car been additional payment, the proverbial icing on the cake? If the Camaro was the only payment, a thirty-thousand dollar buyout, it would explain why the teenager had no more than eight hundred in her checking account.

After an hour of training and one sparring session, Peyton walked to the shower sweat soaked and with several additional questions for Erin Dumont.

Among them: How could one trade a baby girl for a car.

Peyton was up early working on her second cup of coffee, packing lunch for Tommy, when her cell phone vibrated.

"Peyton," Stan Jackman said, "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"I've got a nine-year-old son."

"Good. Listen, I'm calling with bad news."

Peyton's reaction was not unique. Those five words had caused law-enforcement agents to brace for more than a century. Her mind ran to Mike Hewitt. Had there been a shooting? Then, selfishly: Had word of their relationship leaked and Hewitt been stripped of his leadership position? And, selfishly again: If so, what would become of her?

"This investigation just took a turn," Jackman said.

She was nearly relieved. "How?"

"We just added homicide to the mix."

Something inside her tightened.

"Erin Dumont was strangled last night."

"Raped?"

"No. That wasn't the motive. No sign of forced entry, no burglary, no rape. She knew the killer."

"So where are we?" Hewitt asked Peyton at the start of her next shift.

"State police investigate murders, but they know this is probably linked to our baby, and they know I interviewed the girl. So I'm in the loop, at least for a while."

"And?"

"I'll start at the beginning again," she said.

"Mike, I have something." It was Stan Jackman leaning in the doorway. "I've been following the money."

It was ten thirty A.M., and a secretary in the front office had said Morris Picard had a free period. Peyton did not knock on his door. Instead, she entered his classroom and sat in the chair nearest his desk. Picard looked up from a stack of papers, red pen in hand.

"Hello, Peyton. You startled me. What brings you by?"

"Nothing much," she said. "It probably could have waited, but it's been a slow morning."

Picard waited.

Peyton stood and went to the window. "Doesn't seem like ten years have passed since I sat in this room."

"Peyton, I really need to get these papers graded."

"Yeah, you're really busy. Teaching and serving on the board of directors at the St. Joseph's Orphanage in London."

"St. Joe's holds a special place in my heart."

"I can see why."

"What does that mean?" He put the red pen down now and was leaning back in his chair, arms folded across his chest.

"You were raised there."

"How do you know that?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. I guess not."

Peyton nodded. "No, it doesn't matter, does it? That's small potatoes. What you don't want me asking about is how Sonny Gagnon of Youngsville, New Brunswick, got the money to buy Erin Dumont a red Camaro. And you don't want me asking why you and Sonny are on the security video in the Bank of New Brunswick converting forty thousand Canadian dollars into U.S. currency—enough to pay for Erin's Camaro and to pay Sonny for transporting the baby from tiny Youngville, New Brunswick Airport, into the U.S."

He sat staring at her, opened his mouth, but then closed it.

"Where was she going, Morris? What was the plan? I know all about Samantha Smith—that one little girl who—"

"You don't know anything about Samantha," he interrupted. "Twenty years. Twenty. That's how long I took in foster children. Samantha was the extreme case but not the only hard one. The courts send them

back to abusive homes, back to drug addicts, back to—" He looked down at the floor. "—back to hell in Samantha's case. She was raped—to death!"

"I know," Peyton said, "so you tried to save little Autumn."

He shook his head.

"We've matched the DNA, Morris."

He exhaled loudly. "It's not what you think."

"Taking Erin's baby, telling her she would see her again."

"You don't understand. She knew she was too young. I'm helping these babies, saving them. Someone needs to."

"Sounds like you're playing God."

"I'm placing kids in safe, happy, healthy homes."

"How many kids?"

He shrugged.

"Where was Autumn going?"

"That's not her real name."

"I know. We got the original birth certificate from Erin's trailer."

"We were doing it backwards this time," he said.

"Backwards?"

"Instead of flying children from England to New Brunswick, then bringing them into the U.S.—where *I* selected *suitable* families for them—we took Erin's baby and hid her in Canada for a while."

"You were placing English children in the U.S.?"

"Do you have any idea how difficult it is to adopt now? How many families—young people like you, who can offer a child a loving home, are turned down? I've seen the foster system. I know what it's like."

"You were an orphan. You know."

"Damn right I know. Erin couldn't take care of the baby."

"She didn't deserve to die," Peyton said.

"*You* killed three men."

"She was a seventeen-year-old girl," Peyton said.

"She wanted to find you. Said she was going to your office. I had to stop her—for Autumn. Erin was in no position to raise that baby. I have a wonderful young couple in St. Louis waiting for the baby."

"And now she'll be in the foster system," Peyton said.

"I want a lawyer."

"You'll need one," she said, as two state police detectives entered the classroom.

Tommy excused himself from the dinner table and went to the TV room. Peyton looked across the table at Mike Hewitt.

"When the state cops got done with Morris, he formally confessed to killing Erin."

"You did some great work on this case," Hewitt said. "Your work led to that confession."

"I wore a wire into his classroom." She drank some wine. It went well with the pasta primavera she'd made. "The ironic thing is that he actually saved seventeen kids," she said. "He smuggled seventeen English babies into the U.S. before Autumn and placed them with families. He would not say where. I don't think he ever will."

"So they can't return the babies to the orphanage?" Hewitt asked.

"Right."

"He saved seventeen babies, but he killed one teenage girl."

She nodded. "I'll never figure people out, never understand what makes them tick."

"All I know," Hewitt said, "is right now, I'm really enjoying your company and this veal."

"Which do you like more?"

"Tough call."

"You transfer and you'll miss my cooking."

"True," he said, "guess I'll stay."

Peyton looked across the table at him and raised her glass.

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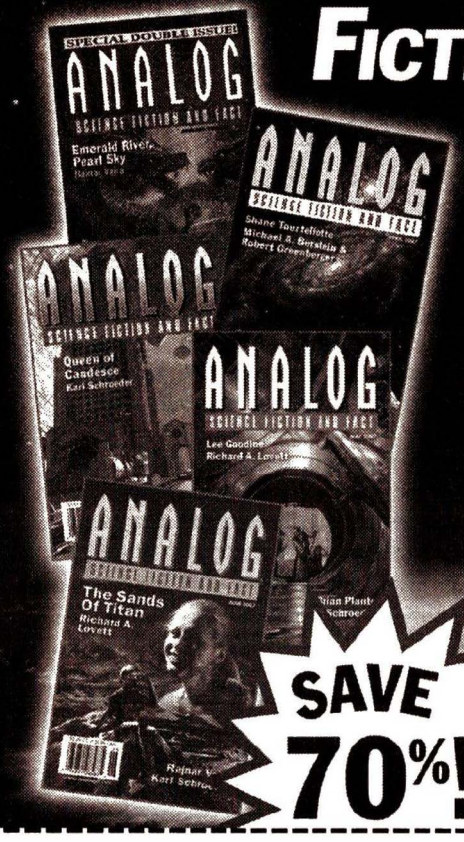

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FOR LOVE'S SAKE

O'Neil De Noux

Tuesday, 1 September 1891

The body, like so many others, lay between the two huge trees called Dueling Oaks. Detective Jacques Dugas stepped from the hansom and moved through the fog-shrouded oaks directly toward the body. Spanish moss, dripping from the heavy branches, looked ghostly in the fog. The sharp cawing of a crow echoed. The unseasonably cool air was filled with the musty scent of decaying leaves.

Dugas approached the uniformed copper standing near the body, and the cop turned and pushed back his sky-blue bowler, which matched his sky-blue New Orleans police shirt. Dugas opened the lapel of his gray suit to show his gold star-and-crescent detective's badge. The copper nodded and stepped over to a tall man standing beneath the closest Dueling Oak. The tall man held two stovepipe hats in his hands, two suit coats draped over his arms. Beneath the other Dueling Oak stood a man in shirtsleeves and a woman in a dark blue dress.

Going on his haunches next to the body, Dugas studied the dead man's clean-shaven face. Lying on his back, the deceased appeared to be in his fifties, over six feet tall, with black hair, graying at the temples. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up, his black suit pants neatly pressed without even a dead leaf on it; there wasn't a visible mark on the exposed skin or shirt. Dugas felt the man's wrist, which was already cold. No pulse. He checked the carotid artery. Nothing. The man's eyes, half opened in that death-glaze expression, confirmed the obvious.

A noise turned Dugas to the woman as she stepped up. She pushed the scarf off her head and shook out her long blond hair, peering at Dugas with bright blue eyes that looked at him with a piercing directness. She extended her hand to shake. As he rose to his feet he saw she was about five six.

"Emma Eislebon. I'm with the *Gazette*." She had a firm handshake.

"You're a reporter?"

She leaned close, "Actually, I answer letters from the public. But no one else is here from the papers, so I have an exclusive. You're not going to run a lady off, are you?"

"No." He caught a whiff of her perfume as he introduced himself,

then added, "How did you come to be here?"

"That man—" She pointed to the tall, thin man holding the hats next to the cop. "—came running out of the park." She nodded over her left shoulder. "Over to Saux's Coffeehouse on the avenue to fetch the copper. I followed them in and saw this." She pointed to the body.

Dugas took out his notepad and pencil, waved the copper over, and noted the date and time before asking the cop his name. Officer Joe Murphy stood a good two inches shorter than Dugas but was much thicker and many years older. At twenty-six, Dugas was the youngest detective on the mostly Irish-American New Orleans police force. Six feet tall, one hundred eighty pounds, with dark brown eyes, dark brown hair parted down the middle, and his mustache neatly trimmed, Dugas reached under his coat to readjust his .38 revolver in its leather holster attached to his belt.

"Apparently," said Murphy, "there'd been a duel."

"What weapons?" Dugas saw no foils, no guns, smelled no burned gunpowder in the air.

"Fists."

"Fists?" It sounded more like a fight than a duel.

Murphy pointed to the smaller man, the one who'd been standing with Emma. "Says he threw one punch."

"Who's the third man?" Dugas nodded to the tall man holding the hats.

"A doctor. Says he was the second for both the gents."

Dugas stepped over to the doctor. He identified himself as Benjamin Adams of Baronne Street and said, "I've examined him. He'd dead." Adams looked to be in his sixties, with hunched shoulders and a face lined with wrinkles. "I tried to get them to settle this in another fashion."

Dugas felt Emma move behind him.

"The deceased is Edouard Bansatre," Adams went on. "A man of substance. Owns a dozen ships, all steamers."

"Who's the other duelist?"

"Alfred Tarleton. A man of little, if any, substance," the doctor said with disdain.

Dr. Adams confirmed it was fisticuffs and only one punch was thrown, by Alfred Tarleton, which struck Bansatre on the jaw.

"He went straight down and didn't move. I rushed forward but could find no pulse."

Dugas looked up from his notes. "Did the man appear in good health before the fight?"

Adams's eyes flickered. "He didn't seem himself. He was stiff and seemed in pain."

"What was the fight over?"

"A Miss Rogan. Mr. Tarleton's fiancée." The tall man leaned closer. "Miss Rogan was once enamored of Mr. Bansatre."

Alfred Tarleton folded his arms as Dugas approached, Emma trailing

with her own notepad. Tarleton stood about five eight, with a thin build, clean shaven with straight black hair. He said he was twenty-two and lived on Girod Street. Dugas looked into the man's hazel eyes and asked what happened.

"It was an affair of honor, sir. A duel with fists, rather than deadly devices. I struck him once and he fell." Perspiration collected above Tarleton's upper lip as he shivered in the cooling breeze. "I don't see how I could have killed him." He looked around Dugas toward the body. "Not that he didn't deserve to die." He looked back at Dugas. "Maybe it was divine providence that took him."

Of course, God did it.

"What was the fight over?"

Tarleton stood taller. "He had taken liberties with my fiancée, Miss Diana Rogan, when she was young and impressionable. He was a wealthy cad."

Emma was taking furious notes on her pad, probably getting the quotes straight as Dugas turned back to the hansom cab that brought him and wrote a note for the driver, instructing him to take it directly to the central police station. He paid the driver and gave him a tip. The hansom sped off. Dugas waved Officer Murphy aside and asked him to stand with Tarleton to make sure he didn't wander off.

"He's under arrest?" Murphy asked in a quiet voice.

"Soon as the police wagon arrives."

A smile crept across Murphy's face as he moved over to stand next to Tarleton and the pretty blonde woman. Dugas noticed Emma and Tarleton seemed chummy. Just getting her story, he surmised.

A clanking drew everyone's attention to a white ambulance pulling through the oaks. Dr. Adams came forward and said he'd summoned it from Charity Hospital. "I'd like to accompany the body to the morgue, if I may."

Dugas returned to the body and searched it carefully with the doctor, who, as the dead man's second, took possession of the man's wallet, with fifty-five dollars inside, along with the man's gold Swiss watch. Emma Eislebon came to observe.

"Did Tarleton tell you anything else?" Dugas asked Emma.

"Not really. He thinks you're gonna run him in. Violating the law against dueling. He thinks it humorous, figuring a jury would never convict a man for fistfighting."

As the body was slipped into the ambulance, Dugas brought Tarleton his hat and coat from Dr. Adams and asked the young man, "When did you challenge Mr. Bansatre to this duel?"

"A week ago yesterday. He's been avoiding me." Tarleton didn't seem as shaken now that the body was gone. He spoke as if impatient for Dugas to be finished with him.

"As the one challenged, he chose the weapons?"

"Yes," Tarleton acknowledged. "He knows of my proficiency with the blade and my keen eye with firearms."

Dugas wrote the remarks in his notes, along with the earlier quote: "I don't see how I could have killed him. Not that he didn't deserve to die."

A freshening breeze blew away some of the fog, rustling the dead magnolia leaves on the ground, allowing the morning sun to peek through the oaks for a minute. It felt as if they stood in a heavenly cathedral, with sunbeams dancing on the gray moss and fog withdrawing in the distance.

By the time the police wagon arrived, Dugas had secured Tarleton's address on Girod Street, confirmed the name of his fiancée, Diana Rogan of Constance Street, and Tarleton's occupation. He was a law clerk for the venerable maritime law firm of Hyperion and Balfleur.

"Turn around." Dugas had Tarleton lean his hands against the nearest Dueling Oak and patted him down before handcuffing him behind his back.

"I'm under arrest?" Tarleton seemed surprised.

"Yes, actually." Dugas led him toward the blue police wagon with Murphy ahead and Emma Eislebon behind them.

"Charged with violating the law against dueling?" asked Tarleton.

"No. Manslaughter."

Tarleton gasped as Dugas helped him into the back of the wagon.

"Unless," Dugas added, "the district attorney sees premeditation in your week-old challenge. Then the charge would be murder."

Emma stepped in front of Dugas as Murphy secured the wagon's barred door. She batted her eyes and asked if he could give her a lift. Newspaper Row was on the way to the central police station.

"Well, you have your scoop," Dugas said as he helped her in. The driver grinned as she slid next to him so Dugas could climb inside. Emma patted Dugas's arm and nodded toward the Dueling Oaks as the wagon turned away.

"It's called the Code Duello," she said.

"I know. I'm French."

"The old Creole code. None dare refuse a challenge."

Dugas was more than familiar with the code. His father had fought two duels right here at Dueling Oaks with rapiers, drawing first blood, wounding his adversaries to end the duels quickly. It was the Americans who used the increasingly accurate firearms to end duels with finality. While Creoles sought satisfaction by drawing first blood, Yankees were strictly out for blood.

"I think we should place a sign back there," said Emma, "between the Dueling Oaks. Declaring this site was the favorite location for many duels fought by hot-blooded young blades in the romantic antebellum era of the South. Here French and Spanish gentlemen settled their differences with swords and rapiers. This was the field of satisfaction for wounded pride and honor."

Dugas smiled at her eloquent remarks as Emma looked through her notes. She carried a narrow reporter's notebook. He smelled perfume in

her hair and tried not to stare at her face in profile, those lips, the cut of her round chin.

"Why a charge of manslaughter?" she asked without looking up.

"Manslaughter is what we charge someone who kills someone in a fight. Technically it's killing in the heat of passion. Mr. Tarleton may have a worse problem, though. The District Attorney may feel the week-long challenge was more than enough time for his blood to cool. He may feel this was premeditated, a younger man attacking an older man. The D.A. could charge Mr. Tarleton with murder."

Emma looked up from her notes. "What if he claims self-defense? They were both fighting."

"Under Louisiana law, the aggressor cannot claim self-defense. Tarleton issued the challenge, threw the first punch, he was the aggressor." Dugas knew Tarleton could hear this, and he wanted those thoughts rattling around the man's head before he questioned him further at the Detective Bureau.

The line of buildings known as Newspaper Row ran along Camp Street between Poydras and Gravier Streets. The drab, closely spaced buildings housed eleven newspapers, from the French language paper *L'Abeille* to the German language *Deutsche Zeitung* to a Spanish language weekly, an Italian weekly, and a host of English language papers, including the *Eagle* and *Louisiana Gazette*. As Dugas helped Emma Eislebon from the police wagon, she squeezed his hand, thanking him, then kissed him on the cheek before hurrying into the Gazette Building. The driver didn't say anything as they pulled away but eventually muttered, "Lucky bloke."

Alfred Tarleton declined to sign a statement and did not answer any further questions, so Dugas took him to parish prison for booking. Returning to the Detective Bureau, Dugas found a young woman with sandy blonde hair and vivid green eyes waiting for him. She wore a pale green dress, and her hair was pulled up in a bun, loose curls dangling down her neck and along her cheeks. She tried to push one back into place. While he'd thought Emma Eislebon pretty, this woman was beautiful.

"Are you Inspector Dugas? The sergeant downstairs said I could wait here for you."

"Detective Dugas." He extended his hand, which she shook lightly.

"I'm Diana Rogan."

Dugas opened the low gate to let her into the squad room. "My desk is in back," he said, leading her to a chair in front of his desk at a rear corner of the wide room. He moved to the venetian blinds to close them so the sun fell softly on Diana's face. She thanked him as he looked at her again, at a face that should adorn the cover of *Collier's* magazine. She was as lovely as any Gibson Girl.

"What can I do for you, ma'am?"

A sad smile came to her nervous face. "I'm only twenty-two, sir. Not a ma'am yet."

Dugas smiled and waited, knowing she'd get around to answering his question.

She took in a deep breath first. "Alfred Tarleton. Is he under arrest?"

He told her the circumstance and the charge.

She looked at her hands in her lap. "I have a confidential matter." Her chin rose and those green eyes searched his. "Can I trust you, as a gentleman, monsieur?"

Dugas nodded slowly.

She bit her lower lip for a moment and looked around. They were quite alone at the back of the room. "I need to retrieve some letters."

"From Tarleton?"

The eyes widened. "No, from Eddie. Edouard Bansatre. They're in his house." She looked down again. "I wrote them when I thought I was in love with him."

"Is this why Tarleton challenged Bansatre to a duel?"

Her mouth fell open. "No. Alfred knows nothing of the letters and I don't want him to ever see them."

Dugas watched her closely and said, "Alfred told me it was an affair of honor. That Bansatre took advantage of you when you were young."

Diana shook her head and sighed, looking at the window now. "It's not my *honor*. It's Alfred's pride. The thought of any other man touching me . . ."

"I understand."

"No, you don't." Her voice dropped. "There have been others. Beyond Eddie. I'm not pure, monsieur."

"Few of us are."

She turned damp eyes to him, her lips quivering as she sat up straighter. "Are you familiar with Miss Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry?"

"Just *Sonnets from the Portuguese*."

She nodded and looked at the window again and Dugas waited for her to start reciting poetry. If that kept this pretty woman close by, he could stand a little poetry.

"Can you get the letters back for me, Detective Dugas?"

He didn't promise to get them for her, but promised he'd go to Bansatre's and secure them, telling her the D.A. might use them as evidence in court. She became pale.

"At least, if I get them, the press won't get them."

"Until they're read in open court."

Dugas had to nod, then told her it was good she came to him because when Bansatre's family got ahold of the letters, they would assuredly give them to the press.

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "Must you give them to the District Attorney?"

"Let me see what they say. If they're relevant." That was all he could promise. There was no way he was keeping evidence from the D.A.

☠☠☠

Edouard Bansatre lived in a two-story Italianate on Carrollton Avenue, one block from Metairie Road. The house was spotlessly white with yellow trim, four white Doric columns supporting a second-story gallery, two attic dormers facing the avenue, a pair of oaks dominating the small front yard. Bansatre's housekeeper let Dugas inside. She was in her mid sixties, maybe older, and announced she was a widow, "Mrs. Ama Religon. Not religion—*Religon*."

He asked if she'd heard what had happened, and she said Officer Murphy had come by to tell her. She wiped her nose with a lace handkerchief. Already in all black, she led Dugas to a stuffy, formal living room to sit in high, straight-backed chairs.

"Can I get you anything to drink, Detective?"

"No, ma'am." The room smelled musty. "Has any of Mr. Bansatre's family been by this morning?"

"His only kin lives in Illinois. A nephew. I'm sure he'll come along to claim his inheritance."

Dugas said he needed to look around.

"Lookin' for anything in particular?" She gave him a wary look.

"Perhaps you can assist. Where does Mr. Bansatre keep his papers?"

Mrs. Religon kept an eye on Dugas after leading him into Bansatre's office, which was on the first floor, across the foyer from the formal living room. Two walls were filled with books, floor to ceiling, with a ladder propped in the corner. The desk was immense, the carpet Persian, and the curtains velvet. There wasn't any dust, but the place still smelled musty.

Mrs. Religon went to fix coffee, which came dark and strong. Dugas found Diana Rogan's letters fifteen minutes later. They weren't in the desk, but when he looked at the books, he discovered they were organized with fiction and poetry along one wall and encyclopedias, atlases, scientific and maritime books along the other.

Sandwiched between *Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience* by William Blake and *The Poems of Robert Browning,* he found a thin green box with the letters inside, an even dozen wrapped in red ribbon. The letters were postmarked between August and November 1888. Diana Rogan had been nineteen when she wrote them.

He slid the empty box back between the books and returned to the desk to slip the letters into his coat pocket. Mrs. Religon peeked in and asked if he needed more coffee. No, he thanked her and asked what she knew of the duel.

"I don't know this man who killed him. I work for . . . worked for Mr. Bansatre four days a week."

"For how long?"

"Goin' on eleven years."

"Then you know Diana Rogan."

"Who?"

Dugas described Diana but Mrs. Religon said she'd never seen the woman, never even heard of her.

He read the letters at his desk at the rear of the Detective Bureau. Wasn't much to them, mostly about love, laced with poems from Mrs. Browning, along with stanzas from Poe's "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven."

Diana began six of the letters with the refrain, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways . . ." She ended every letter with, "If thou must love me, let it be for naught but for love's sake only."

He recognized the former from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, but wasn't sure about the latter. The letters, however, only hinted of a physical relationship, love letters with nothing that should embarrass anyone, except maybe the lovelorn young author.

If the press got these letters, however, they'd take the hints of intimacies and blow them into a tempestuous sexual affair. Dugas rewrapped the letters in the ribbon and put them in his bottom desk drawer, the only drawer that locked. As he slipped them into a cigar box, he pulled out the torn edge of a five dollar bill and remembered the woman who'd told him to keep it as a keepsake. Her name was Marie Gainne, whose light brown eyes, sad smile, and quick intelligence drew Dugas to her. He wondered if she was still in Mississippi at Magnolia College. Her mother's body was resting in a walled tomb in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2. The elder woman was victim of the Gorilla Murderer, a case which Dugas solved not quite two years ago.

He put the torn bill back into the cigar box and locked the drawer. As he slipped the key into his pocket he wondered if Marie Gainne ever thought of him. Probably not. It would reminder her of her mother's murder.

Wednesday, 2 September 1891

Over a cup of hot coffee-and-chicory at Café Michelle, nestled along the first floor of the lower Pontalba House, the old redbrick apartments with ornate, black-lace iron balconies overlooking Jackson Square, Dugas read the account of the death of Edouard 'Eddie' Bansatre in *L'Abeille* before turning to the account in the *Gazette*, by E. Eislebon. She got her byline.

Emma's story was not only more detailed, but better written, with nice touches of humanity, uncommon in most journalistic endeavors recently. Although she included the reason for the duel, she left out Diana's name. Dugas finished the coffee and hurried to his office to complete his report on the case. He planned to go to the *Gazette* and personally compliment Emma, maybe ask her to lunch, if she had no plans.

She didn't and accepted his invitation and arm graciously. They strolled up Camp Street, along Newspaper Row, Dugas in his navy blue suit, Emma in a maroon dress. Neither wore a hat, both confessing they only wore hats in cold weather, both disliking the way hats messed up their hair. Emma's blonde hair, worn up today, looked elegant and smelled of perfume again.

They dined on fresh oysters and boiled shrimp at Ames Oyster House

on Canal Street, having to talk louder than usual over the bluster and raised voices from the bar. Ames catered to longshoremen and businessmen, but few women. Those who ventured in were usually accompanied by men.

Dugas complimented Emma on her article, and she laughed, telling him he was the first one to do so and the first man who'd praised her writing before praising her looks. He gulped down a raw oyster and she laughed again.

"I know you like the way I look," she said. "That's obvious. I like the way you look. It's just refreshing for a man, especially a man of renown, to compliment my mind before my body." She went on about how the men at her office had pointedly ignored her and her story that morning.

As the boiled shrimp arrived, Dugas had to ask why she referred to him as a man of renown.

"You are well known along Newspaper Row, Detective Jacques Dugas. Smartest detective on the force. Your captain has been quoted saying this more than once. Most of the boys at the *Gazette* say it's because you are French rather than Irish and they mean it as a compliment because most of them are Irish.

"I don't think one's descent has anything to do with intelligence," Dugas said.

"So you're saying you're smart all on your own."

Dugas chuckled, remembering his struggles through grammar school, the nun's ruler slapping his knuckles again and again, the problems he had mastering the multiplication table.

"It's not that," he said after composing himself. "It's more persistence, never giving up on a case. Ever."

"You don't fool me." A wily look in her blue eyes focused on Dugas now. "You're sharp. I'd better watch myself with you."

Dugas fought to keep from laughing aloud as they finished their meal, both drinking iced sarsaparilla instead of the preferred beer served at the oyster house. Deep inside, Dugas knew, he was a little sharper than most of the other detectives. But the truth of the matter was that it wasn't intelligence, but the application of it. Most of his fellow bulls, as they called themselves, were bumped-up street cops, used to the bullying ways of thugs and lowlife thieves. Few were used to exercising the proper brain cells at the right time.

As they strolled out, Dugas noticed the appreciative looks from the men at the pretty blonde woman on his arm. Emma had a way of turning heads. She wasn't as lovely as Marie Gainne, not near as pretty as Diana Rogan, but Emma Eislebon carried herself with such confidence that she drew envious looks from women and longing from most men. Returning to the Gazette Building, Dugas was reluctant to let go of Emma's arm, especially when she kissed him on the cheek again and thanked him for lunch.

"You should ask me out to dinner, monsieur," she said, a mischievous gleam in those blue eyes.

"What about Saturday night?" he heard himself quickly ask.

She smiled broadly and said, "I'm definitely going to have to watch myself with you. How does eight o'clock sound?" She gave him her address on Metairie Road, not far from Carrollton Avenue, not far from Bansatre's house. He remembered she'd been up early yesterday morning at Saux's Coffeehouse, which was near her house, and wondered if she had coffee there often. He had fond memories of Saux's, beyond the food.

The post-mortem exam of Edouard Bansatre revealed a surprise.

The manner of death was homicide, but the cause of death was not from a blow. The coroner, Dr. J. J. Jones, a retired naval surgeon, tall, thin and hunched, declared, "He had more than a sufficient amount of arsenic to kill, to render him incapacitated at least an hour before death. He must have been in agony when he went into the park for a duel. Or pigheaded enough not to stay away."

"None dare refuse," Dugas mumbled under his breath.

Dr. Jones added, "I found no indigo or soot, however, in the body."

"What?"

Dr. Jones smiled, looking almost feline with his narrow eyes. "Rat poison, my lad. Easiest way to get arsenic. You can buy it anywhere, but it's always mixed with indigo or soot."

"Can it be easily extracted?"

The doctor nodded. "You can boil it down. Arsenic is heavy and sinks to the bottom. But it would take extensive boiling to rid it of all traces of indigo or soot. One could, however, if one were patient enough and didn't mind the stink."

Stink? Dugas fanned his coat as he left the reeking morgue and the stench of dead flesh and formaldehyde.

Mrs. Religon, still in all black, let Dugas into Bansatre's house while shaking her head and bemoaning the latest telegram from Bansatre's Illinois nephew, who was boarding a train that very afternoon from San Francisco, where he'd been vacationing.

"I met him once," Mrs. Religon said as she led Dugas into the formal dining room. "The lad's been on vacation his entire life, when he wasn't getting kicked out of schools." She turned back to Dugas with, "I just made a fresh pot o' coffee. Have some with me."

The coffee was strong and thick, mixed with fresh cream and sugar. After his first sip, Dugas complimented Mrs. Religon then got to the point of his visit. "What did Mr. Bansatre have for breakfast yesterday morning?"

"He left before I could fix him his usual bacon, eggs, and French toast." She added, "There were two cups next to the sink. Smelled like cocoa inside."

Dugas knew better but asked anyway. "Did you wash them?"

"Of course."

Opening his notebook, Dugas jotted the information and said, "Did Mr. Bansatre have cocoa often?"

"Doesn't even keep any around the house. I checked in case he got some on his own. I usually do the grocery shopping, but on occasion, he buys things. Different breads from the bakery, different wines, fresh fish."

Dugas looked up. "Does he keep any rat poison around?"

"Heavens no. We can look in the pantry if you'd like, but I've never seen any there."

She led him to the kitchen pantry. No rat poison. No cocoa.

"Why do you ask about rat poison?"

He didn't want to tell anyone yet about the arsenic, so he made up a story how he was having problems with mice and rats near his Creole cottage in the Faubourg Marigny and figured Mr. Bansatre would use the best product available, if he used rat poison.

"It's no wonder you have a rodent problem," Mrs. Religon said, leading Dugas back to the front door. "Living by the river and all."

Dugas had one more question. "Do you have any idea who Mr. Bansatre could have had cocoa with yesterday morning, a neighbor perhaps?"

"Neighbors? Heavens no. He didn't like his neighbors. Liked his solitude." She shook her head and pulled a handkerchief from her inside her apron. "I have no idea who he would have drunk cocoa with. No idea."

Stepping away from the front door, Dugas turned and asked, "Could he have had cocoa the night before?"

"If he had, the residue would have been dried up," said Mrs. Religon, caution coming to her eyes now. Dugas hoped he hadn't perked her curiosity too much. Then again, a nosy housekeeper could be of assistance.

None of Bansatre's neighbors saw him the previous morning, or saw anyone near his house until Mrs. Religon arrived at her usual nine A.M. Dr. Benjamin Adams, who lived six blocks away on Orleans Avenue, did not have cocoa with Bansatre, who'd met him at the doorway on the way to the duel.

Adams confirmed Bansatre looked gray and wobbled once, probably from the stress of the impending fisticuffs, which Adams tried to talk him out of. No, he saw no one else at Bansatre's, and his friend never mentioned seeing anyone that morning.

Dugas spent the afternoon canvassing Bansatre's neighborhood, asking passersby if they'd seen anything around the man's house, inquiring of the two hardware stores in the general area and the three pharmacies about rat poison sales. All sold rat poison. No one knew Bansatre nor remembered anyone fitting Banastre's or Tarleton's description buying rat poison.

Dugas performed a similar canvass of Tarleton's Girod Street neighborhood hardware store and two pharmacies with the same results. It was getting dark by the time he knocked on Diana Rogan's wood-frame shotgun house on Julia Street, around the corner from Tarleton's house. Diana's lightweight, white cotton dress was so plain it made her beauty stand out even more, especially in the evening light.

Her parents were visiting neighbors, so they remained on the front porch, her sitting in the swing suspended from the gallery, him in a straight-backed chair. Diana seemed nervous, even after Dugas assured her he'd secured her letters.

"Will you be able to give them to me?"

"I'll try to keep them out of the case, but I can't promise anything."Then he told her there really wasn't anything incriminating in the letters. She blushed and looked at her hands.

"What will become of Alfred?" she asked.

"He will stand trial. Perhaps one of the lawyers from his firm or one of their friends who knows criminal law will defend him. With a vigorous defense, he might not go to jail."

He couldn't tell her that Alfred Tarleton wouldn't stand trial unless Dugas could link him to the arsenic. That would come out soon enough, and it pained him to see this woman in such distress. He stood and moved to the far end of the porch. Turning, he said, "I live in Marigny and we have rodent problems. Do you have any?"

"Oh my, yes. We poison them, but . . ."

"What poison do you use?"

Diana went inside and came back with a small orange box. Field's K. C. rat poison, manufactured in Kansas City. The black lettering on the box along with a skull and crossbones warned of poison inside. He looked at the ingredients. Active ingredient: arsenic. Inert ingredient: soot.

"Where do you get it?"

"Sharlene's Pharmacy. Around the corner." Dugas had canvassed the place.

"Does Alfred have the same problem with rodents?"

Diana put the poison box on the porch rail and moved a few steps away, shaking her head. "He never mentioned it." She looked down at the ground, a sadness returning to her face for a long moment.

Dugas moved toward the porch steps.

"Excuse my manners," Diana said. "Would you like some iced tea or coffee?"

"No, thank you. I'll be going now." Dugas eased down the steps and heard her step behind him.

"Thank you for helping with the letters."

He turned and smiled, and in the waning sunlight Dugas could see the outline of Diana's body through the cotton dress and tried not to stare. Getting back to business, he returned to the hardware stores and pharmacies in the area, inquiring if any woman had purchased an inordinate amount of rat poison recently. He even described Diana, but the answer he got was no.

On his way home, he thought about Emma and their impending date Saturday night, but it was Diana's face he kept seeing and the curves of her body through thin, white cotton.

☠☠☠

Thursday, 3 September 1891

Before meeting with his captain, Dugas returned to Carrollton to canvass the area around Bansatre's house one more time. Passing Jean Marie Saux's Coffeehouse at the convergence of Metairie Road, Alexander, and Dumaine Streets, where Emma had spotted Dr. Adams coming to fetch Officer Murphy, he glanced in the windows at the diners and remembered Kay Alford. She was a saucy waitress with reddish brown hair and freckles. Theirs was a brief, intense romance, before she ran off to New York with an actor in a traveling theater troupe. He missed her—not that they'd been in love, but he missed her laughter.

He asked at the hardware stores and pharmacies if a woman had purchased an inordinate amount of rat poison recently and was surprised when two of the pharmacies reported yes, a woman had purchased a half dozen boxes recently. He asked for a description. The description did not fit Diana Rogan; however, it fit Emma Eislebon like a fine glove, blonde hair, blue eyes, and all.

On his way back to catch the Carrollton streetcar, Dugas dropped by Bansatre's to ask Mrs. Religon another question. She invited him in, but he remained on the porch to ask the black-clad housekeeper, "How long had Mr. Bansatre known Miss Emma Eislebon?"

Mrs. Religon huffed. "Too long. I guess maybe six months. Last time I saw her was the Fourth of July weekend. What a row." She leaned closer. "Not one of Mr. Bansatre's finer moments. He physically threw her out. I thought the poor thing was hurt, but she just walked away."

Dugas waited, knowing she'd go on.

"I liked her. But she was too strong willed for Mr. Bansatre. They were just no good for each other."

"Have you seen her since?"

"No, sir. You sure I can't get you some iced tea?"

Dugas declined, thanked her for the offer, and left.

Captain James Gray was at his desk in the center of the squad room. Gray was twenty years older than Dugas and sported a full beard and twenty extra pounds, although they both stood six feet tall. Gray wore black suspenders with his black suit, his coat and derby on a nearby coat rack, as Dugas sat in the chair in front of his commander's desk.

Holding up the morning's *Gazette*, Dugas pointed to the story where the D.A. painted Alfred Tarleton as a hothead who would pay dearly for crushing the life from such a prominent citizen as Edouard Bansatre. The article, byline E. Eislebon, went on to describe how the D.A. felt the power of a strong young man's fist could easily snuff out a life.

"We have a problem," Dugas said.

Gray nodded. "I forwarded your report and the coroner's report to the D.A., but seems like he didn't read them." Gray leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Arsenic, right?"

Dugas nodded.

"I was waiting for you to come in so we can both mosey over and ruin the D.A.'s day." Gray stood up and reached for his derby and coat. "This Tarleton fella could have administered the arsenic, I suppose."

Dugas told Gray about the cups of cocoa and Gray had to agree, it was unlikely the duelists drank hot chocolate together just before their fatal encounter at the oaks.

"Boyo, this job can try a man's soul at times," Gray said.

On their way to the District Attorney's office, Gray asked Dugas if he was in a quandary over this case. His captain seemed to be reading his mind. Dugas said he was.

"Good. Keep at it." Gray patted Dugas's shoulder. "You'll figure it out."

"Really?"

"You always seem to."

The D.A., a squat, bald man in a silver-gray suit, literally bounced in anger once he'd learned of the cause of death. He accused Gray and Dugas of making him look foolish, which the man seemed to do regularly, without anyone's help.

Dugas waited until after eight P.M. before dropping by Emma Eislebon's Metairie Road bungalow. Painted tan with black trim, the single-story bungalow had a red tile roof and a small front porch.

Emma, surprised to see Dugas, put a hand on her hip and smiled, "I thought we said Saturday."

"This is a business call. May I come in?"

"We'd best stay on the porch, with the smell and all."

He'd smelt it, but hadn't thought it came from Emma's bungalow until she opened the door wider to step out in a bright yellow dress. She apologized immediately.

"What is it?" he had to ask.

"Rat poison," she said.

He was too stunned to say anything as Emma moved closer. He could smell her perfume now, thankfully. She smelled very nice.

"When I boil it, it always stinks like that."

Dugas wondered if his mind was playing tricks. Dugas stared into her blue eyes as she inched closer, tilted her head to the side, and brushed his lips with hers.

"Now sit over there." She directed him to one of the rockers. She sat in the other.

He managed to get the words out. "Did you say, *boil it?*"

"To get the arsenic, silly."

He felt his heart thumping. "Whatever for?"

She smiled and patted her right cheek. "Keeps my skin soft as a baby's. It's a cosmetic, silly. Do you think I'll use it to knock off reporters who think I should stay behind a desk answering inane letters? Although that might not be a bad idea . . .

"I have to boil it to get rid of the soot. Can't put soot on my face."

Dugas had no idea what to say. A cosmetic? Did women really use arsenic for their complexion? Apparently so.

Emma's eyes narrowed, a grin still playing across her lips. "English women started it. In Queen Victoria's court. You're staring strangely at me. I didn't sudden grow another head, did I?"

All he could manage was to shake his head. It took some doing to extricate himself. He balked at asking how well she'd known Bansatre. Something told him he needed to hold that card close, so he asked her the same questions he'd asked in the canvass of Bansatre's neighbors. Did she see anyone near his house as she'd passed in on her way to Saux's? She hadn't.

On his way home, Dugas checked with two pharmacists who confirmed arsenic was the cosmetic rage in England, but not easy to come by in America. Unless you boiled it from rat poison.

Friday, 4 September 1891

A note was waiting for Dugas at the office in the morning. It read: "Got another arsenic death. You might want to come over. Dr. J.J.J."

Dr. Jones was in his office and took Dugas immediately down to the morgue. "Came in late last night from Charity Hospital. They labeled it a natural death, the idiots."

The body lay atop a wooden autopsy table. The doctor pulled the sheet away from her face and Dugas rocked back on his heels. Diana Rogan, the beauty drained from her lifeless gray face, her hair hanging limp, those bright green eyes half open and dulled with the unmistakable, unfocused look of death; she lay beneath a cold sheet in a room that reeked of formaldehyde and other antiseptic chemicals.

The doctor continued talking, but Dugas couldn't hear the words.

He hailed a hansom outside the coroner's office and proceeded directly to Julia Street, stopping in front of the Rogan house. Four men sat on the small front porch of the narrow shotgun house, two of them smoking, all looking dazed. One turned and wiped a tear from his eye as Dugas approached.

Turning the lapel of his dark brown suit coat to show his badge, Dugas introduced himself to a man who said he was Diana's father. Mr. Rogan, in his forties, a thick man with a receding hairline and red-rimmed, green eyes, had a day's growth of gray-black stubble on his pale face. He wore a blue work shirt and black work pants and boots.

In a broken voice, Diana's father explained he and his wife had been out late last night, later than usual, playing cards with friends. When they returned home, just before midnight, they found Diana on the kitchen floor. They could not find a heartbeat. Mr. Rogan roused the neighbors and they took Diana to Charity in a friend's wagon, but she was gone.

"So young," the big man said, burying his head in his hands to weep. It

took a few minutes to learn a young doctor at Charity told them her heart had simply stopped.

"Is Mrs. Rogan inside?" Dugas asked. Mr. Rogan nodded and Dugas asked if he could go in and speak with her. Rogan nodded again.

Mrs. Rogan was a tiny woman with sandy hair. She sat at her small kitchen table and stared trancelike at Dugas. She was surrounded by seven women, who introduced themselves as friends and relatives, all talking over one another.

The kitchen was stuffy, and Dugas felt perspiration working its way down his back as he asked his questions. Did anyone see Diana last night? Did she have any visitors? This brought a scowl from two of the women. No, no one had seen anyone. Not even Dugas on his visit.

He looked at the kitchen sink and saw it was empty. Several mugs were drying next to it and many of the women were drinking coffee. He asked if there were mugs in the sink when Diana was found.

There had been. Two, both with coffee inside. They had been cleaned. Dugas's heart thundered as he thought—coffee this time. He asked if Diana Rogan used arsenic as a cosmetic. Mrs. Rogan just stared mutely at him. Diana's aunts never heard of such foolishness. He asked to look into the pantry. There was the box of Field's K. C. rat poison on the shelf, but he found no cocoa.

On the porch, he asked the assembled men if they'd seen anyone around the house last night. None had. He spotted a group of neighborhood kids assembled across the street, all watching the house, a couple picking up a rock to toss down the narrow street, for something to do.

Crossing over to them, Dugas took off his coat and threw it over his shoulder. The sight of his gun usually brought curious questions from kids, and four minutes after stepping off the Rogan porch, Dugas solved the arsenic murders.

Kids saw just about everything in a neighborhood. A pair of boys, out late last night, saw two women on the Rogan's porch. One was Diana, the other was a blonde woman in a yellow dress. They didn't see her face, but she looked young.

Dugas headed straight to Emma's house, rather than the Gazette Building, feeling that's where she'd be. Along Metairie Road, he spotted Officer Murphy and stopped the hansom, paying the driver before climbing out.

He asked Murphy to come along and led the copper to Emma's bungalow and up the steps. The door was cracked and Dugas inched it open. He could hear movement inside and waited. When the sounds stopped he knocked loudly on the door.

"Okay," a male voice called out. "I think the carriage is here."

Alfred Tarleton came into the foyer and stopped immediately when he saw Dugas step in with Murphy.

"How did you get out of jail?" Dugas reached around for his revolver.

Tarleton folded his arms and smiled. "It's called bail. I'm sure you've heard of it."

Tarleton and Emma. How could I be so dumb, Dugas thought.

Emma walked in at that moment and Dugas realized they were both dressed for traveling, each with a coat on. Behind Tarleton were several suitcases and two trunks. Dugas locked eyes with Emma and asked, "Going somewhere?"

No answer.

"Who's idea was it?" Dugas watched them carefully.

Emma folded her arms now, and Dugas remembered these two seemed chummy out by the Dueling Oaks. He felt perspiration rolling down the side of his face, but resisted wiping it as he glared at Emma, then turned to Tarleton and asked, "Why Diana?"

Tarleton's eyes became wide and he took a step back, turned to Emma who wouldn't look at him and stammered, "Diana? Diana?"

"She's in the morgue," Dugas said.

"No!" Tarleton took another step back, still staring at Emma, whose blue eyes looked back at Dugas like small icebergs.

They used Murphy's handcuffs to manacle Tarleton. Dugas handcuffed Emma, fighting through the scent of her perfume. While they awaited the police wagon, Dugas found six empty boxes of Field's K.C. rat poison in Emma's trash and a half empty box of cocoa in her pantry.

Captain Gray took Emma into one of the small interview rooms at the Detective Bureau while Dugas took Tarleton to the morgue. Dr. J. J. Jones pulled the sheet away from Diana's face and Dugas made Tarleton look and watched the young man crumble, tears swelling in his eyes, shoulders sinking, breath coming out in short gasps.

When they returned to the Bureau and went into the other small interview room, it took Dugas less than ten minutes to get Tarleton's to confess. Sitting next to Tarleton, instead of across the table, which Tarleton would use as a buffer, Dugas played sympathetic with this pathetic murderer to get the story, to get it on paper, to get Tarleton's signature.

It was Emma's idea, both getting back at Bansatre. She'd approached Tarleton at Saux's one morning. The cocoa was her idea, a peace offering to Bansatre before the duel.

Tarleton had fallen in love with Emma Eislebon, deeply in love. "Have you ever been so much in love with a woman, nothing else matters?" Tarleton asked Dugas.

"Diana Rogan mattered," said Dugas. "Bansatre too."

"Diana wasn't part of the plan," Tarleton swore through streaming tears. He'd known he'd break her heart; "But not . . . murder. It was Emma's idea."

When Dugas met Captain Gray outside in the squad room, Gray showed him Emma's statement. According to her, it was all Tarleton's idea, his plan, his vengeance. Even killing Diana.

"She's a slick one," Gray said. "Trying to flirt with me. 'Zif that would do any good." He patted Dugas on the shoulder. "Nothing like getting them to blame one another. Good work, lad."

Dugas felt anything but good. He kept seeing Diana Rogan's lifeless face, kept hearing her voice as if she was speaking those lovelorn words from her letters, still in his desk, "If thou must love me, let it be for naught but for love's sake only."

They booked Emma Eislebon and Alfred Tarleton for both murders and forwarded preliminary reports to the D.A. so he could preen before the newspapermen. After explaining it all to the bewildered Rogans, Dugas returned to the central police station. The desk sergeant waved Dugas over.

"There's a woman waiting upstairs for you." The big sergeant turned away quickly as two coppers dragged in a combative drunk. Dugas stepped out of their way and went up the stairs to the Detective Bureau.

He recognized those large, light brown eyes, the shy smile, the exquisite face. Marie Gainne was lovelier than he remembered. Her long brown hair up in a perfect bun, she wore a cream-colored dress as she stood waiting for him.

"Well, hello," he said.

"Hello yourself." Marie was five five and looked delicate, almost fragile. As he stepped up, she handed him a note.

"My new address," she said. "In case you wanted to contact me." There was a sly look in those wide eyes. "I've graduated."

Dugas smiled at her, staring into those eyes now as he congratulated her, then said, "Why don't we celebrate over dinner this evening?"

The shy smile widened and Dugas felt his heart racing.

"That would be nice," she said. "Very nice."

MURDER WILL SPEAK

B. K. STEVENS

"It's not about the money, really," Rose Crane said. "Mostly, we're just concerned about our mother."

"Yeah, we're really concerned about our mother," Glen Kramden said. "It's not just about the money, mostly."

You could pretty much tell they were sister and brother—same sandy-colored hair, same pale blue eyes, same rigorously straight nose, same smoothly oval face climaxing, abruptly, in a squared-off chin. Both looked around forty, both in good shape, both fashionably dressed.

"But you *are* upset by the changes in her will," Miss Woodhouse said. Nothing fashionable about her—almost six feet tall, big boned, lean, black-gray hair pulled back hard and caught at the nape of her neck with a thick blue rubber band, boxy beige suit, zero makeup. In my opinion, though, she had Rose Crane and Glen Kramden outclassed.

"The changes in the will are symptoms," Rose said, "of problems that obviously go deeper. Until two months ago, Mother was *fine*. Oh, she got depressed after Father died—they'd been happily married for over fifty years. She felt lonely in that big house, all by herself. That's why she moved to Aden Harbor."

Professor Woodhouse looked up. She's built on a smaller scale than her daughter and wears her hair in a long gray braid, but they have the same strong, sharp features. "Aden Harbor," she said. "The nursing home."

"The west wing's a nursing home, yeah," Glen said. "But Mom's in the east wing. That's a retirement community, for people who're healthy and not at all—well—you know."

"Not at all what?" Pushing her safety goggles on top of her head, the professor set her soldering iron down on a small table laden with key rings, hoop earrings, brass knobs, belt buckles, and sink weights. "Not at all senile? Is that what you meant? Why would you hesitate to say that word?"

He gulped. "Just went blank, I guess."

The professor looked him over. "A disturbing lapse in one so young. You should consult a physician. Little Harriet, I seem to have misplaced my pliers."

"Here they are." I scooped them up from the basket of power tools at her feet. We sat in the sunny parlor that serves as the office for Woodhouse

Linda Weatherly

Investigations—the professor in her rocking chair, Miss Woodhouse behind her big mahogany desk, Rose and Glen and I in sleekly polished captain's chairs. I handed the professor her pliers, and she pushed her goggles back down and started soldering a belt buckle to an earring.

"At any rate," Rose said, "Mother's first year at Aden Harbor went well. Glen and I take turns visiting her—one of us sees her every month—and she always seemed alert and happy. Then, two months ago, she started spiraling downward."

"It happened after the director died," Glen said. "Hal Aden. Mom thought the world of him. One day, he keeled over in his office—managed to call 911, but then he passed out, died a few hours later. Well, he wasn't so young himself. And he was a drunk."

"That's too harsh," Rose said. "Yes, everyone knew he kept a bottle of crème de menthe in his desk and took a drink now and then; but whenever I talked to him, he seemed perfectly sober."

"Well, he was a character," her brother said. "The Southern gentleman type, with a thick drawl. And he was dedicated. He had this tape recorder he carried around, no bigger than a pocket calculator, and he was constantly recording reminders about ideas for new activities, replacing light bulbs, like that. Remember, Rose?"

She looked impatient. "Yes. Well, his death hit Mother hard. And last week, when I visited her, I saw alarming changes. She speaks oddly, dresses oddly. I was so concerned that I asked Glen to see her right away."

"That's when she told me about her will," he said. "Before, she'd left everything to Rose and me, split down the middle. Now, she's leaving it all to Aden Harbor."

"I see," Miss Woodhouse said. "Her estate, I take it, is considerable?"

"Yes," Rose said. "Our parents started their own real-estate company and did very well. That makes Mother a tempting target. We're afraid she's being drugged, or improperly influenced in other ways. Hal Aden was a good man, but his niece runs the place now, and—"

"His niece," Miss Woodhouse cut in. "Not his wife?"

Rose shook her head. "He never married. Luci started working for him last year, as assistant director. I don't think she did much; I think he gave her a title so he could give her a paycheck. Luci's pleasant, but she's weak and—well, dim. She probably couldn't devise a scheme herself, but somebody might persuade her to go along with one. Or perhaps somebody's acting without her knowledge. Given the sudden changes in Mother's behavior, I think we have grounds for suspicion."

Miss Woodhouse braced her hands against each other, tapping her chin lightly. "I agree. First, we should have your mother examined by a physician not affiliated with Aden Harbor."

"We've already asked her," Glen said. "She turned us down flat."

"Then I'll visit her," Miss Woodhouse said, "and explain why you're concerned. I'll also interview Luci Aden and—"

"Nonsense!" The professor pushed her goggles up again. "Just what,

Iphigenia, would that accomplish? You'd merely put the culprits on their guard, making them subtler in their machinations. As for speaking to Thelma Kramden, I doubt she'd listen. No, this situation calls for an undercover operation."

"Great idea," I said. I love undercover operations. It's the only way I get out of the house. Supposedly, I'm Miss Woodhouse's apprentice, but that usually translates to filing, making tea, and scrounging up craft materials. At this rate, I'll never become a real private detective. "I'll volunteer to help with water aerobics or whatever, chat with Mrs. Kramden, snoop around, and before you know it, we'll figure everything out."

"Admirable ambition!" the professor cried. "I commend you for responding to my proposal with such alacrity. Unfortunately, volunteers seldom penetrate the inner workings of the places they serve. And Mrs. Kramden is unlikely to open her heart to one so young. No, someone close to her age must take up residence in Aden Harbor, insinuate herself into her confidence, and observe employees closely and constantly."

I'd never seen Miss Woodhouse turn pale before, but she sure turned pale then. "You can't be suggesting, Mother, that you—"

"Can I not?" the professor shot back. "I can. I do. Do you doubt my competence?"

"Certainly not," she said hastily. "But I know how you hate to leave the house, and how you abhor the thought of nursing homes, or anything resembling them."

"True—because I know you intend, ultimately, to shut me up in such a place." Snapping her goggles down, she jammed two key rings together. "Oh, you're clever. You make some trifling sacrifices and tend to me docilely for a decade or two, all to lull me into complacency so I'll suspect nothing when the men in white coats show up. Do you imagine, you nasty girl, that I have failed to penetrate your plans?"

Miss Woodhouse wilted. Much as I love the professor, she can be brutal to her daughter. I don't know much about it—nobody tells me much—but nearly twenty years ago, the professor had some sort of nervous breakdown, misbehaved in public in spectacular ways, lost her tenure as a classics professor, and insisted Miss Woodhouse leave the police force and break her engagement. That's when Miss Woodhouse started her private detective agency. The professor still bullies her, and Miss Woodhouse still just takes it. Why? I don't know. And while the professor's mind is as sharp as ever, in some ways, she's—well, unusual.

"Fortunately," Professor Woodhouse continued, "since I have never been deceived about your perfidy, I have made it my business to stay informed about all nursing homes within a sixty-mile radius of Annapolis. Aden Harbor has a program for potential residents. The Getting-to-Know-You Weekend—that's its cloyingly cute name. People arrive on Friday and leave on Sunday. It is now Tuesday. That, Iphigenia, gives you time to make arrangements."

"Just a minute, Miss Woodhouse," Rose said. "Your *mother's* going to investigate?"

Miss Woodhouse rubbed her forehead. "That seems to be her wish, yes."

"We won't pay for that," Rose said. "We want a professional private detective."

Glen lowered his voice. "Maybe it's the best way to get Mom to open up. Think about how weird she's been acting. Those two might hit it off."

Rose hesitated. "All right. But Mother follows local news closely. She's often spoken of Woodhouse Investigations—that's why we came here. If she hears a Professor Woodhouse is visiting Aden Harbor, she'll get suspicious."

"Then I shall pose as little Harriet's grandmother," Professor Woodhouse said. "My name shall be Maria Teresa Fiorenza Russo. I have long dreamed of being an Italian grandmother; now, I shall fulfill that ambition. Mamma mia! I'm-a gonna have lotsa fun with this one, you betcha!"

She'd fallen into some bizarre accent, some new-to-the-planet blend of Italian and Swedish and God knows what else. I put my hand over my eyes. This wouldn't be easy.

Looking more optimistic than I felt, Glen strolled over to the professor. "That's pretty," he said. "Linking all those doodads together—it's cool. What's it gonna be? A necklace?"

She tossed a large sink weight into the air and caught it smartly. "No. My creation is, as you say, pretty. But its purpose, I assure you, is not merely decorative."

Miss Woodhouse worked hard the next few days—making calls, cashing in favors, using computer codes she probably shouldn't have, and, judging by the results, doing some quiet late-night forgery. By Friday, Maria Teresa Fiorenza Russo had a Social Security number, an impressive bank account, and reservations for a weekend at Aden Harbor. And I had a cover story: My grandmother and I had moved here from Cleveland; I had a master's in history from Case Western and a teaching job at Sir Isaac Newton Academy. That's a stretch for someone who in fact has an associate's in office administration from Cuyahoga Community College. At least I'm really from Cleveland. If someone asked me about the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, I'd be ready. If someone asked me about the War of 1812, forget it.

On Friday morning, Professor Woodhouse strode downstairs, magnificent in a long black silk dress, a black lace mantilla, and the biggest crucifix I've ever seen.

"*Buongiorno!*" she exclaimed. "Harriet, my spicy little meatball! You ready to help me start my *vita nuova?*"

"You don't have to talk like that, Professor." With every word she spoke, I died a little. "My grandmothers don't talk like that. Nobody I've ever known talks like that."

"Bambino!" She flung an arm up and out. "You so cute. Don't worry. You and me, we *molto buono.*"

Miss Woodhouse stood by the door, spine rigid, and handed me her

mother's trunk-sized suitcase. "Mother, if you begin to feel uncomfortable—"

"Impossibile!" And then the disguise fell away. "But I warn you, Iphigenia. This is the first time I've left you alone in this house in almost twenty years. No wild parties. No liquor, no dancing, no stains on my carpets. I want you in bed by nine thirty. And you are not to see or speak to That Man. Do you understand?"

That Man was Lieutenant Barry Glass, the fiancé Miss Woodhouse had cut off so abruptly so long ago. He'd never married. He still waited, helping Miss Woodhouse with her cases, hoping that someday, somehow, she'd come back to him.

Miss Woodhouse nodded, once. "I understand, Mother. Good luck."

"Buona fortuna!" Maria Teresa Fiorenza Russo cried, and we were off.

From the outside, Aden Harbor looks like an overgrown mansion, white and sprawling, with a wide front porch offering a dazzling view of the Chesapeake Bay. The lobby has a nautical air—not all that unusual for places in Annapolis—with powder blue walls, hardwood floors, white crown molding, a spectacular staircase with white spokes and railings, plus watercolor paintings of sailboats, autumn woods, the bay in winter.

Luci Aden looked tiny behind the oversized desk in the director's office; the framed prints of horses and hunting dogs didn't suit her, either. Probably, she hadn't redecorated since her uncle's death. She was in her late twenties, with small facial features and long, light brown hair. As she shook the professor's hand, she nodded quick little nods and twitched her mouth into quick little smiles.

"Welcome, Mrs. Russo," she said. "I'll show you and your granddaughter around."

"Buono!" the professor said. "This place—*belissimo!* What you think, Harriet, my petite pepperoni?"

God, how I just wanted to leave and never come back. "It's nice, Grandma."

The professor put her hands on her hips. "What you talking, 'grandma'? Always, you call me 'Nonna.' Santa Maria! What's gotten into you, my sweet stromboli?"

I winced. "Sorry, Nonna."

Luci's mouth twitched. "If you'd rather see our west wing—"

"No, thanks." I understood why Luci thought the nursing home wing might be a better fit. But Thelma Kramden was in the east wing, so that's where we went.

As she led us through the library and two sitting rooms, Luci described activities ranging from book clubs to bowling leagues. We entered the dance studio and saw two staff members, a man and a woman, guiding five gray-haired women through slow, graceful movements. Four women wore white blouses and swirling flowered skirts; the fifth wore purple pajamas and a black hooded jacket. Thelma Kramden, I thought, remembering

what Rose Crane said about how her mother was dressing. Thelma is marginally overweight but looked strong and vigorous, with a vibrant complexion and quick, dark eyes. While the other women moved in easy harmony with each other, she jerked her fists up and down, swinging her hips, bending left and right. I'm pretty sure I'd seen those moves in a YouTube video about sixties dances; I think it's called The Monkey.

"You're doing great," the male staff member said. Thirty or so, he looked like a miniature bodybuilder—barely five feet four but muscles like you wouldn't believe, with arms so toned they barely seemed human. "Now, at 'all the glory,' lift both arms high. Then bring them down in an arc, like this. For 'all the strength,' do three slow bicep curls. Make 'em count, ladies—make 'em count! Then—oh, hi, Luci. Ladies, you're on your own."

Both staff members joined us, and Luci introduced them as Earl, the fitness coordinator, and Grete, the arts coordinator. Grete, about forty, was tall and slender, with large, intense blue eyes. She grasped my hand tightly.

"Harriet, it's so caring of you to keep your grandmother company today," she said. "And Maria, you picked a great weekend to get to know us. Our annual talent show is tomorrow night. Sound like fun?"

"Christopher Columbus!" Professor Woodhouse exclaimed. "More fun than a barrel of biscotti! These ladies—they in the show?"

"You bet," Earl said. "They're doing a dance routine, using moves from our Weekday Workout class. We're getting ready for tomorrow's dress rehearsal."

Four of the women fluttered their arms up and down as the CD player blared Bette Midler's voice. Detaching herself from the group, Thelma came over to us.

"Giuseppe Verdi!" Professor Woodhouse said. "They dance so graceful, like gondolas in Venezia!"

"Like gondolas in Venezia!" Thelma echoed. She ran around us in a circle, flapping her arms clumsily. "And I'm flying higher than an eagle! I'm like an eagle!"

"You sure are!" Earl said. "A powerful eagle, soaring high!"

"You're like a swan!" Grete said. "A beautiful swan on a crystal lake!"

"Yes, like a swan," Luci said. "A really pretty swan!"

Naturally, I thought. Thelma changed her will, leaving Aden Harbor a fair-sized fortune. They don't want her changing her will again, so they let her do whatever she wants and praise her for doing it.

Thelma halted in front of the professor. "Am I like an eagle?" she demanded. "Or a swan?"

Professor Woodhouse shrugged. "You like a fish outta water. This music, it no right for you. Or maybe you not so much a dancer. Maybe you and me, we put together a different act."

"Not so much a dancer!" Earl sounded shocked. "Thelma's a *fantastic* dancer. She can't leave the act—she's our star!"

"Yes," Grete agreed. "But if she'd rather do something else, fine."

Thelma considered, then pointed at the professor. "I'm doing an act with *her.*"

"But you've gotta stay in the dance act, too," Earl said. "I worked so hard on it."

"Don't pressure Thelma," Grete said. "Luci? Whatever Thelma prefers, right?"

"Absolutely," Luci agreed. "Well, I'll show you the pool next."

"Luci, dear," Grete said, "why not take Maria to her apartment next, so Harriet can drop off the suitcase? She shouldn't have to keep lugging it."

Luci looked startled. "Oh, gosh. Sorry. We'll go to the apartment right away."

Earl took the suitcase. "Do things in any order you want, Luci. I'll drop the suitcase off. Just give me the master key."

Luci reached first into her jacket pockets, then into her pants pockets. "Oh, gosh—I don't have it. It must be in the office. I'll go look for it."

"Don't bother. I'll find it." He smirked at Grete and walked off.

When we left the dance studio, Thelma tagged along. Eventually, we came to a room with a sign reading WELLNESS SUPPLIES. A short, wiry woman sat at a desk, using a box cutter to slice open a carton of latex gloves. Her pale green smock was rumpled, her frizzy gray hair looked like she'd forgotten to brush it, and her nose looked swollen; but an elegant diamond bracelet glittered on her left wrist. Behind her loomed a chaotic jumble of walkers, privacy screens, canes, a rack of smocks, braces. She smiled briefly.

"You must be Maria," she said. "Welcome to Aden Harbor."

"*Grazie,*" Professor Woodhouse said. "*Bontà mia!* You got lotsa fancy stuff here. What your name, honey?"

"Well, my name's a mouthful," the woman said. "It's Polyxena. So most folks—"

"Ah, Polyxena!" The professor's eyes shone. "Fairest of all the daughters of Priam and Hecuba! She captured the heart of Achilles, she survived the fall of Troy—only to be sacrificed at the hand of Neoptolemus when the ghost of the lover she betrayed demanded her death as the price of winds to waft the Achaeans home!"

Polyxena looked at her uneasily. "So most folks just call me Polly," she finished.

The professor's shoulders jerked back. "Polly? So *grazioso!* I can say *that* name, no problema."

"No *problema!*" Thelma repeated joyfully, kissing her fingers and tossing them upward.

Luci twitched a smile. "Polly's our head nurse. If you need medical supplies, just ask her."

"Right," Polly started, then grabbed a tissue from the right pocket of her smock, sneezed noisily, and stuffed the tissue into her left pocket. "Sorry—can't shake this cold. Anyway, I also dispense medications. We keep them all locked up here. That way, folks get exactly what they need, and nobody's

tempted to share or swap. Don't give meds away, don't gather meds up—stick to your own, I always say. So Maria, please give me all your meds."

"*Sì.* I do that *pronto.*" The professor reached into her purse, pulled out a quart-sized blue bottle, and smacked it down on the desk. "Cod-liver oil. Ever since I a *bambino,* my mama give me one spoonful in morning, one when I go beddy-bye. My poor mama *morta* now, many years, but still I take it, just the same."

"Fine." Polly rummaged in her desk for a full minute, found a label, filled it out, and slapped it on the bottle. "And your prescriptions?"

The professor lifted her hands. "Prescriptions? I not *infermo.* You take cod-liver oil, you no need nothing else."

"Amazing." Polly walked to a large metal cabinet and jammed the cod-liver oil in amid uneven rows of bottles and boxes. "Well, if everyone stuck to cod-liver oil, we'd avoid certain—problems." She turned to Luci, sharply. "Right?"

"What?" Luci said. "Oh. Problems. I guess so."

"No problema," Thelma said, not so joyfully this time.

Peering around, Professor Woodhouse pointed to a door at the rear of the supply room. "What's that?"

Polly looked over her shoulder. "Oh. That's our Resting Room."

Thelma snickered. "Some resting room. That's where they park the stiff when somebody croaks. They don't want to roll it through the lobby, so they hide it until the undertaker's van undertakes it away. Nobody's supposed to die at Aden Harbor."

"Well, people don't," Luci said. "That is, yes, eventually. But everyone does, eventually. It's not—"

"Your uncle died at Aden Harbor," Thelma pointed out.

Luci winced. "Yes. But he wasn't old. That is, he wasn't young, but he didn't die *because* he—"

"He died on Thursday." Taking a crumpled greeting card from her jacket pocket, Thelma stroked it affectionately. "And just before he died, he sent me this, because it was one year since I came to Aden Harbor. I got the card on Friday. That's today."

"Well, it's a different Friday," Luci said. "But yes, he always sent residents cards on their one-year anniversaries."

Thelma looked up. "*My* card was special."

"Absolutely," Luci agreed. "Because *you're* special. I just meant he always—he—well." She squeezed out a smile. "Who's hungry?"

The dining hall is more restaurant than cafeteria, with linen-draped tables and waitresses wearing crisp white shirts, shiny red vests, and trim black slacks. Earl and Grete, already seated at the largest table, waved us over, and we sat down and examined the menu cards. Some dishes were predictably bland, but there was gazpacho as well as chicken soup, crème brûlée as well as rice pudding.

"You *have* to meet our chef, Mrs. Russo," Luci said, and sped off to the kitchen.

I pointed to a large raised platform at the far end of the room. "What's that?"

"The stage for tomorrow's talent show," Grete said. "I hope you'll come. We've got some amazing acts. Just look at the props—that's the Chamber of Mystery for Irving's magic act, and the balcony's for Harry and Myrtle's *Romeo and Juliet* scene."

"The balcony's looks shaky," Earl said. "Myrtle doesn't need another broken hip."

Grete smiled a small, tight smile. "The balcony's fine. I checked it."

"Luci should check, too," he said. "She's the director. If there's a lawsuit—"

"Luci doesn't need to check," Grete cut in. "*I've* checked. And let's not talk about lawsuits during lunch. Maria, how's the menu?"

Before she could answer, Luci returned with the chef—roughly the same age as Earl, but about eight inches taller and at least fifty percent cuter, with an olive complexion and curly black hair one endearing inch too long. Luci's eyes glowed with adoration; her mouth had gone slack.

She wasn't the only one who admired him. "*Paesano!*" the professor cried. "I just know you Italian!"

"Greek and Brazilian, actually," he said, shaking her hand, "but very glad to meet you. I'm Roth. I hope you like the menu."

The professor pursed her lips. "*Così così.* Grilled salmon, lamb medallions, those very nice. But where's the pasta?"

"We have pasta often," Roth said. "On Monday, I'm making tortellini with—"

"But Maria leaves on Sunday," Thelma said. "We need pasta sooner. The special dinner before the talent show—make that all pasta."

"Giada De Laurentiis!" Professor Woodhouse exclaimed. "That sound *delizioso!*"

I probably didn't really hear Roth sigh—he was obviously holding back. "You asked for a luau tomorrow, Thelma. Everything's bought—the kitchen's bursting with pineapple and mahi-mahi. And I've got half my prep done."

Thelma pursed her lips petulantly. "I don't want a luau now. I want a pasta night."

"Sorry. It's too late to change." He turned to Luci. "Right?"

"Absolutely," Luci said, "I guess. Unless Thelma really wants—"

Thelma started banging her fists on the table—not loudly, but not softly. "Pasta," she chanted. "Pasta, pasta."

"Luci, dear," Grete said, "we mustn't make Thelma unhappy."

Luci looked anguished, forced to choose between displeasing the woman whose money she coveted and the man she clearly liked. I could almost feel sorry for her, if she weren't such a ridiculous little ninny. She turned to Roth. "Would you mind?"

"Yes, I'd mind," he said. "It'll mean extra expense, extra work. And Thelma's being unreasonable, and it's a mistake to give in when people get unreasonable. But if you say I have to, I will."

"Please don't put it that way. But I'd appreciate it if you'd—"

"Luci," Earl said, "you're the director. Take a firm stand."

Unable to speak, Luci looked at Roth and nodded.

"Fine," he said, anger quick in his eyes. "I'll chop up the roast suckling pig and stuff it in ravioli. And I'll try a piccata style mahi. But what the hell do I do with all the breadfruit and poi?"

"You'll think of something," Luci said. "You're so clever. You—"

"And I'm shorthanded," he went on. "Ray quit last week, Fran's out sick, and I don't have any volunteers today."

"I'll help." The words just came out; I hadn't planned them. "I'd like to volunteer here, to be near my grandmother. And I'm a pretty good cook." That was a lie. I make a passable tuna sandwich. Not much else.

For the first time, Roth looked at me directly. Did I imagine it, or did his anger soften? "Thanks, but you should get your grandmother settled."

"That won't take long. I'll come back afterwards."

"See?" Grete said. "Problem solved."

"Not really," Roth said. "I'll still be here past midnight. But it will be a big help. Thanks, Miss—"

"Harriet." I did not flutter my eyelashes. I wanted to, but I didn't.

He went back to the kitchen. "Roth's a pain," Earl said. "You need someone to handle these staff issues for you, Luci. You should appoint an assistant director."

Grete bristled. "She will, Earl. When the time's right, Luci will appoint the right person. We shouldn't discuss it now."

"We'll discuss it Monday," Thelma said, "at the staff meeting."

Nobody looked happy, but nobody objected. So Thelma even attends staff meetings, I thought.

Grete cleared her throat. "Luci, don't forget we're meeting at two, so I can help with the cleaning supplies inventory. I'll get things organized in advance. Just give me the master key."

"Sure." Luci reached first into her jacket pockets, then into her pants pockets. "Oh, gosh. It must be in the office."

"No, I've still got it," Earl said, and handed it to Grete.

Just as our meals arrived, Polly joined us, sneezing wretchedly, not feeling up to anything but chicken soup. Too bad. The food was amazing. After lunch, Luci showed us to the guest apartment—almost spacious, definitely upscale. Maybe the professor would actually consider moving here, I thought; maybe then Miss Woodhouse could finally have a life of her own. But no. The professor would never leave her neat, narrow old house in Annapolis's historic district. It was hard even to imagine her anywhere else, even for a weekend.

She seemed content, though, as I hung five more long black dresses in the closet and put things in drawers, and she and Thelma strolled off to Weekday Workout. I raced to the ladies' room to freshen my makeup, then headed for the kitchen. Luckily, Roth assigned me simple tasks such as chopping onions and seeding tomatoes, so I could fake my way through.

We didn't chat constantly, but I worked in a casual reference to my recent breakup with my boyfriend, and he worked in a casual reference to his divorce. Good—both single. Decks cleared.

Leaving tonight's dinner preparation to a lanky young man named Barnard, Roth ransacked the room-sized freezer for ingredients, focusing on concocting dishes for pasta night; occasionally, he'd ask me to taste something. Frankly, I didn't consider the breadfruit parmesan a complete success. But I could honestly say that adding toasted coconut took tiramisu to a new level. The only awkward moment came when he asked about my grandmother's favorite pasta dishes. Since I've never seen Professor Woodhouse eat pasta, that was tough. Flailing, I suggested penne with olives and onions. He added chicken basted in huli huli sauce, producing something oddly delicious.

At five, I took off my apron. "I should check on my grandmother. Will you really be here past midnight?"

"Probably. I still have the ravioli to do, and I have to figure out how to work poi into the antipasto."

I offered to help again in the morning; he said he couldn't impose; I insisted; he grinned and gave in. Excellent. Time to find the professor. I tracked her to Creative Crafts and asked Grete how things were going.

"Maria's so enthusiastic." She smiled, just barely. "But I'm afraid she doesn't grasp the concept for today's project."

I've yet to meet the concept Professor Woodhouse can't grasp. "What's the project?"

"I got some lovely wooden frames," Grete said, "so people can decorate them with pretty things—paint, buttons, sequins—and give framed pictures of themselves to family members."

"Sounds simple. What's the problem?"

She looked at me compassionately. "Come see."

At a small table, Thelma was smearing a tenth or maybe a twentieth coat of black paint onto her frame. Professor Woodhouse had left her frame untouched. Instead, she'd cemented three two-inch stacks of buttons to the glass.

She looked up happily. "Harriet, my tiny tortellini! How you like what I make? It's a present for Miss Luci."

"That's sweet," Grete said. "But shouldn't we get those stacks off the glass and glue them to the frame? With all those buttons on the glass, how will she see the picture of you?"

The professor looked puzzled. "This not a picture frame. This a key rack. See?" She held it up. "Miss Luci, she sometimes not sure where she left her keys. Now, she put this on office wall, hang keys on little button hills, always know where to find them."

"She'll always find them," Thelma said, grinning. "No problema!"

Grete smiled thinly. "Very creative. But the concept was to make gift picture frames. Well! Time for cleanup."

I helped shelve supplies, then watched as Professor Woodhouse strode

off to dinner, arm in arm with Thelma. The professor's plan seemed to be working—Thelma seemed charmed. Did that mean she'd open up about what was going on? God knows, I thought. And would the professor be okay, spending a night away from home? Presumably, God knew that too.

On my way out, I stopped at the Wellness Supplies room, where Earl leaned over Polly's desk. "C'mon, Polly," he said. "The whole staff's in the *Alice in Wonderland* skit. You've got just three lines. You can learn them."

"I'm not worried about learning lines." Polly checked a list, opened a bottle, and poured an inch of brown liquid into a small plastic cup on a tray. "But I won't play that character. It's inappropriate."

Earl sighed. "Be a good sport. The committee decided you'd be perfect as the caterpillar, because you're so short."

Polly looked at him coldly. "*You* play the caterpillar."

He thrust his shoulders back. "Be that way," he said, and stalked off.

I smiled awkwardly. "Hi, Polly. My grandmother forgot to pack her hand lotion. Do you have something she can use?"

"Sure." She stood up—too quickly, bumping against the tray. The tray flipped up, the plastic cup flipped over, and the brown liquid splattered onto her smock.

"Damn!" Ripping off her smock, she grabbed the tissues from its pockets and mopped up the sticky globs dotting the desk.

"Sorry," I said. "Can I help clean up?"

"It's done, it's done." She stuffed the smock in a laundry bin, pulled a pink smock off the rack, put it on, and filled its right pocket with fresh tissues. "Look, I've gotta get evening meds ready. I'll bring some lotion when I bring the cod-liver oil. Okay?"

"Thanks. I hope you feel better tomorrow, Polly."

"I might," she muttered, focusing on her list again. "About one thing, at least, I just might."

I drove to Woodhouse Investigations and found Miss Woodhouse in the living room, dusting. Not that anything needed dusting. I've never spotted a speck of dust anywhere in that house; I think it stays away out of fear. She wore a bathrobe and had a towel wrapped around her head. Poor thing, I thought. Without her mother here, she's so disoriented that she's showering in the afternoon.

She wanted details about everything that had happened at Aden Harbor—every word, every gesture, every facial expression. Finally, she sat back.

"Mother's doing well," she said. "I wish I'd made as much progress. I checked on all the employees at Aden Harbor—not a criminal record in the bunch. And I tried to get an autopsy report for Hal Aden. Unfortunately, no autopsy was done. I talked to his doctor, though."

"Why check on Hal Aden?"

She shrugged. "Mrs. Kramden's decline seems linked to his death, and his death seems odd. He was sixty-three. And yes, his doctor says he was a moderately heavy drinker, but he seemed in good health. Mr. Aden's sud-

den death from respiratory failure surprised him, the doctor said, but he saw no reason to be suspicious. And the niece didn't request an inquiry. By the way, when the nurse opened the medicine cabinet, did you notice any liquid morphine?"

"I didn't notice anything," I said, "except that the cabinet was a mess—the whole supply room was a mess. Why do you ask?"

"Only because liquid morphine has a bluish color. Crème de menthe does too, and that was Hal Aden's drink of choice. And a morphine overdose can cause respiratory failure. But it's probably nothing. You did well today, Harriet."

"Thanks." I hesitated. Miss Woodhouse and I have never socialized. But I hated to leave her alone in that house. "You know, I don't have plans tonight. Let's grab some dinner. I know a place near the city dock that has fantastic crab cakes."

She smiled briefly. "Another time. I need to catch up on some things tonight."

"Paperwork? Do that tomorrow. It'd be fun to—"

"Thank you," she said, "but I'll probably go to bed early. Oh, I left some envelopes on my desk. Could you mail them?"

What a shame, I thought, watching her sprint upstairs. Her mother dominates her so completely that she doesn't even feel up to going out to dinner. In the office, I noticed bright bits of things in the wastebasket. Packaging for Rose Petal blush, Misty Midnight mascara. Professor Woodhouse must've used those for her Maria Teresa Fiorenza outfit. That was the only possible explanation, since Miss Woodhouse never wears makeup.

On Saturday, I showered, fussed with my hair, decided my black silk blouse wasn't too dressy, spent fifteen minutes on makeup and ten choosing earrings, and still made it to the Aden Harbor kitchen by seven. Roth was already there, already fuming.

"Just look," he said, pointing to the massive stainless steel counter. "When I left, this place was immaculate. Now, all this stuff—ketchup, tuna, soy sauce, maple syrup, pickles. What the hell was she trying to make?"

I winced. "Thelma?"

"Must be. The security guard just lets her wander—nobody's allowed to make Thelma follow the rules. So I guess last night she wandered in here. And I don't dare complain. Luci would fire me."

No she wouldn't, I thought; she has the hots for you. But I just nodded sympathetically and helped him clean up. About eight, Luci stopped by, looking vaguely concerned—Luci always looks vague—and asked if we'd seen Polly. We hadn't, so she left. I decided to check on Professor Woodhouse. She sat with Thelma, whispering, sketching things on her paper placemat. When I approached the table, she flipped the placemat over.

"My precious prosciutto!" She kissed me on both cheeks. "You come check on your old Nonna? That so nice! Well, me and Thelma, we both fine. You go away now."

"What's this?" I reached for the placemat.

She slapped my hand. "That for our psychic act, for talent show. It's surprise. You go back to kitchen, stir oatmeal."

You don't argue with the professor—I learned that long ago. So I went back to the kitchen and found ways to keep busy. At nine forty-five, Roth turned off the stove.

"I'd better get into costume," he said. "Dress rehearsal starts at ten. Why don't you take a break and watch?"

"Thanks," I said, "but I've still got lots of meatballs to roll."

"Take a break, Harriet." He walked over, put his arms around my waist, and untied my apron. It wasn't an embrace, but it was intimate; it made me take a quick, sharp breath that I hoped he didn't hear. "You're working too hard. And I'd like to find a way to thank you. Are you coming to the show?"

"Yes," I said, hoping.

"Then maybe afterwards I could buy you a drink to show my appreciation." He paused. "Well. Not just to show my appreciation. Would that be okay?"

"It'd be fantastic." I have a gift for understatement.

He walked away, and I gripped the counter for support. The most adorable man I'd met in years actually seemed to like me. And if we get married, I thought, I'll never have to learn to cook.

In the dining hall, people rushed about, checking scripts, carrying props. I spotted Luci in a wide-skirted blue dress and white apron—Alice in Wonderland, obviously; I spotted Earl wearing rabbit ears and sporting an oversized pocket watch; I spotted Grete in red dress and gold crown, carrying a scepter that looked like a rolling pin encased in gold foil. Then the professor seized my wrist. She wore a long silver cape decorated with felt stars and a top-heavy, multicolored turban fashioned from towels.

"Harriet!" she cried. "My cute cannoli! We need a curtain, a wall, something people can stand behind. What you think we should use?"

"I've got an idea," I said, and headed for the Wellness Supplies room.

A bored-looking nurse sat in Polly's place, trying to open a carton with a nail file. The desk was even messier than usual, covered with stacks of papers. "Isn't Polly here today?" I asked.

"She must be," she said. "Her car's in its usual spot. But nobody can find her. So *I've* gotta handle deliveries. Plus she must've decided to reorganize order forms, but she left a mess, so *I've* gotta straighten up. You need a pill?"

If I'd said yes, would she have just given me one? "No, I need a prop. Could I borrow a privacy screen?"

She looked at the screens—white plasticized fabric stretched over wheeled metal frames, used to give patients an illusion of privacy while doctors do embarrassing things. "Gee, I don't know. They're medical supplies, sort of."

"It's for Thelma," I said.

"Thelma?" She sighed. "Sure. Take 'em all."

I chose one with a rip in it. If it got damaged, I wouldn't have to feel too guilty. When I wheeled it to the dining room, the professor looked delighted.

"*Che bello!*" she exclaimed. "But Irving, he do his act now. *Quieto!*"

A man with thick ice-white hair stepped onto the wooden platform. He called Grete onstage and pulled a stream of colored scarves from her ear. He called Earl up, asked him to pick a card, and made a fool of him. I looked at the audience and saw Roth wearing a bright green jacket, an oversized bow tie, and a green top hat. So he was the Mad Hatter. Anyone else would look silly in that outfit, I thought. But Roth—well, okay, he looked silly too. But he still looked good.

"Now," Irving said, "the Chamber of Mystery! Now, I shall transform a human being into a stuffed duck! For this illusion, I'll pick a volunteer at random. Bertha! Come on down!"

Bertha, a spry gray-haired woman in a spangled housecoat, threw her hands up in surprise. I know how this works, I thought. Bertha's his confederate. And the Chamber of Mystery, a closetlike plywood thing, is in front of a curtain. Obviously, it doesn't have a back wall; maybe Irving's rigged mirrors to make it look like it does. Bertha will enter the chamber, Irving will close the door and wave his wand, she'll slip behind the curtain and set a stuffed duck in the chamber, he'll open the door, and we'll all gasp. Then Irving will shut the door and wave his wand again, and Bertha will toss the duck backstage and step back into the chamber. It's a good trick.

Bertha stepped onstage. "First, I must hypnotize you," Irving intoned.

As he waved his wand, Bertha lifted her arms, zombielike. "Now," Irving commanded, "enter the Chamber of Mystery!"

Slowly, rocking back and forth, Bertha approached the Chamber of Mystery. Slowly, she opened the door. And Polly's body tumbled out, her pale green smock stained with dark, wide splotches of blood.

Bertha screamed. Irving screamed. I think everybody screamed. I know I screamed. Roth jumped onstage, pressed his fingers against Polly's neck, shouted for someone to call 911. Soon, I heard sirens racing toward us. I can't remember much about those first terrible minutes, except that I was grasping the professor's hand, stroking Thelma's hair as she collapsed, sobbing, against my chest.

Once the police arrived, it got easier to bear, if only because there were things to watch. And things to prevent. Lieutenant Barry Glass, Miss Woodhouse's long-ago fiancé, was the first officer to arrive. His shirt was wrinkled, his tie sloppily knotted—odd, since whenever I'd seen him before, he'd looked crisp and neat—and there were bags under his eyes, as if he hadn't rested well last night. Even so, he had a sort of jaunty air. When Professor Woodhouse saw him, she let out a long, slow hiss.

"I'll explain things to him," I whispered, "so he won't blow our cover."

Growling, the professor released my hand. I sidled over to Lieutenant

Glass and mumbled an explanation. It was complicated, and I was grieving for Polly. Even to me, I sounded incoherent.

Somehow, he understood. "Got it," he said. "Don't worry about the Kramden case, Miss Russo. Go comfort your nonna."

My nonna? How did he know Professor Woodhouse wanted me to call her that? Well, it didn't matter. I watched as he conferred first with other officers, then with Luci. She nodded and turned to face us.

"Everyone," she said, "the police want us to leave, and to all stay together in the sitting rooms. Roth, maybe you'd serve juice or—"

"Nobody goes in the kitchen," Lieutenant Glass cut in. "And folks, if you think you know something we should know—"

Earl stood, pointing at Polly's wrist. "Her bracelet's gone."

Lieutenant Glass looked down. "What bracelet would that be, sir?"

"A really nice diamond bracelet, a gift from her husband. Ever since he died, three years ago, she's worn it every day. She never takes it off. Never."

"That could be useful information," Lieutenant Glass said. "Thanks. If anyone else has potentially useful information, we'd like to hear it—but one at a time, privately. Miss Aden, could you lead these folks out? But the kitchen staff stays. One person per table, and don't talk to each other."

Why focus on the kitchen staff? Well, it looked as if Polly had been stabbed, and kitchens are full of knives. And she'd been found in the dining hall, and that's right next to the kitchen, connected by doors that probably never get locked.

And she'd probably been killed last night, and last night Roth had stayed in the kitchen late, alone, to stuff ravioli. Damn.

I squeezed the professor's hand. "I should stay, since I've been helping in the kitchen. Will you be okay?"

"Yes." She'd dropped the accent. "But Thelma and I need to talk to you. Come as soon as you can."

I watched as people filed out, a sadly bizarre-looking bunch, colorful costumes contrasting with stunned faces. Finding a table, I sat down and looked at my fellow suspects—lanky young Barnard, texting; the waitresses, looking frightened; Roth, running his hand through his hair, tapping his foot against the floor impatiently. Did he realize how much trouble he might be in?

Lieutenant Glass came over. "Only kitchen staff stays, Miss Russo."

"I volunteered in the kitchen," I said, "both yesterday and today."

"Well, that's a lucky break for us. Iphigenia's always saying how bright and observant you are. Later, I'll want to hear your impressions of all the kitchen workers."

It was a long time before he got to me. He started with Barnard, then spent half an hour with Roth. Twice, officers took him aside and showed him things. After the second time, Lieutenant Glass returned to Roth's table, took a card from his pocket, and read. Roth stood, putting his hands behind his back. A uniformed officer handcuffed him and led him out through the kitchen. Just as they left, Roth glanced at me, trying to smile.

Lieutenant Glass sat at my table. "Thanks for waiting, Miss Russo. If you want to go now, fine. We've got this figured out."

"No," I said. "I want to know what's going on. Will you tell me?"

He scratched his head. "I really shouldn't. But since it's you, and since Iphigenia will wanna know—okay. It's one of those sad, stupid cases, just stuff coming together in the wrong way—coincidence, greed, anger, panic. And the upshot is, you've got two lives thrown away for no reason."

"That doesn't tell me anything. How do you think it happened?"

He sighed. "Well, this nurse, Polly, evidently decided to work late, reorganize files. The cook worked late too. We can't know just what happened next—not till he confesses—but probably the nurse left the supply room at some point. Her bracelet fell off because the clasp was broken—"

"You know the clasp was broken? You found the bracelet?"

"Yeah, we found it, stashed behind sacks of potatoes, next to a butcher knife that'd been wiped clean but still has traces of something on it. We'll confirm it's the nurse's blood. So the cook must've found the bracelet and pocketed it, and the nurse must've realized it was missing and gone looking for it. She must've confronted him, he must've denied it, she got mad, he grabbed a knife—you know how that goes. It all happens fast, nobody ever meant to hurt anyone, but in three seconds it's over and can't be undone. Damn shame."

"What does Roth—what does the cook say?"

"He denies it—they all do, at first. He says he worked until midnight, didn't see anyone, cleaned up, went home. That's a lie. That kid, Barnard, said the kitchen was a mess this morning. So after the cook killed the nurse, he must've panicked, stashed her body in that box because he didn't know what else to do, run off without cleaning up. Then he figured he'd better come back this morning, brazen it out. Well, he won't hold out long, especially since we found bloody dish towels in the basement, right where the laundry chute from the kitchen empties out. It's all pretty cut and dried."

"It's all garbage," I said. "For one thing, I don't believe Polly stayed late just to reorganize files. She had a terrible cold."

He lifted his shoulders. "There's no indication she ever went home. She's wearing the same clothes she wore yesterday, the same smock—"

"No," I said. "She wore a green smock for part of Friday, yes. But late in the afternoon, she spilled medicine on it and changed into a pink smock. Check the laundry bin in the supplies room. You'll find the soiled green smock—probably a pink smock too. Another thing. The smock she's wearing now—are there tissues in the pockets?"

"I don't remember any. I'll check."

"I bet you won't find any. But Polly kept her pockets stuffed with tissues—she had to because she sneezed constantly. I bet the killer saw Polly wearing a green smock yesterday and put another green smock on her after killing her, to make it look as if she never left. But I bet she did. I bet she

came back later for some specific reason, probably long after Roth—the cook—left."

"But the knife, the bracelet," he said. "The bloody dish towels, the mess—"

"It's a setup. Everyone knew Roth would be working late—he said so at lunch, in front of several employees. So the killer decided he'd be a convenient person to frame. I saw the mess this morning. It was mostly things Roth had no reason to use—someone else spread them around, to make it look like he left in a panic. You said Miss Woodhouse thinks I'm bright and observant. Well, I don't know Roth well enough to be sure he's a good person. But I spent hours with him, and I do know he's not stupid. And he'd have to be damn stupid to make all the mistakes you think he made."

He looked shaken. "I'll give that careful thought."

"Good. Has the coroner determined time of death?"

"Not yet. That takes time."

"Well, remind him there's a room-sized freezer in that kitchen. If someone put a body in a freezer for an hour or so, could that make it harder to set time of death?"

"It sure could." He paused. "This cook—are you sweet on him?"

Damn. "A little. But the points I've raised are still valid. Even if I *do* like him—"

"Hey, don't apologize for liking him." Good God. Was he misty eyed? "Love—it's a beautiful thing. When you find it, you gotta cling to it, no matter what stands in the way. Well. You better go see your nonna."

By now, officers had questioned the residents and sent them on their ways. Professor Woodhouse was in Thelma's room, sitting on her bed, holding her hand.

"You took a long time to come to us, Harriet," she said.

"I've been talking to the police. What's going on?"

The professor looked at the bedspread. "You seem to have guessed part of it."

"That Thelma's only pretending to be senile? And that you know it? Yes. Not until this morning, but I've guessed that much. I still don't know why."

The professor patted Thelma's shoulder. "You must tell little Harriet, Thelma."

Instead of speaking, Thelma walked to her bureau, opened the middle drawer, and took out something the size of a pocket calculator. "This is Hal Aden's tape recorder. He always carried it with him."

"Your son mentioned that. What about it?"

She looked at it sadly. "The last message—when Hal recorded it, he was dying. Then he sent it to me, with that card I showed you. He put the recorder in the envelope—it's probably the last thing he did before he passed out, the last thing he ever did. Listen."

She pushed the play button, and we heard short, shallow gasps. Then a man with a deep Southern drawl spoke in ragged bursts: "Something's happened to me. This dizziness—it's like—I don't know. But if someone—Thelma, last night. In the Wellness Supplies room—I went again. I was

right. More proof. But I still don't know who. It has to stop. If you can—but be careful. Maybe Polly—no. I'm not sure. Don't trust her. And don't—call the police. Not yet. Just listen, and look around, see if you can—find out. But if it's Luci—oh, God! It can't be. But if it is—just let it go. Remember that."

The recording went dead. "What did he mean?" I asked. "What was he right about?"

She sat down again, looking smaller and older, so much older. "About thefts of drugs from the Wellness Supplies room. He'd suspected it for months. People were running through their prescriptions too quickly, for pain pills, sedatives, stimulants. It was never dramatic. People would be short just two or three pills, and not the same people every month. And Polly was so disorganized—people shrugged it off, assuming she'd made mistakes. But it happened too often, for too long."

"And he confided in you about it?"

She looked up proudly. "Yes. We were friends. We respected each other. And he couldn't trust anyone else. Not even Luci. That was his biggest fear, that his own niece was stealing drugs and selling them on the street. He didn't want to risk getting her arrested. But as assistant director, Luci had a master key that unlocks every door at Aden Harbor. She could've easily stolen the drugs."

"Anyone could've stolen them," I said, "since Luci's so careless with that key. Did he ask Polly about the thefts?"

"He tried, but she got offended and said it was impossible. So Hal started keeping a private inventory, coming in late at night. He thought that's when the thefts were happening. He never caught anyone, but maybe, the night before he died, the thief saw him in the supply room and got scared." Her voice hardened. "His death was too sudden. I'd had lunch with him, minutes before. He was fine. I think he was poisoned."

"Miss Woodhouse wonders about that too," I said. "So that's why you changed your will? So you'd get special privileges and be able to observe people, try to figure out who killed him? And you pretend to be senile so nobody will get suspicious, no matter what you do?"

She nodded. "And no matter what I say. I say bizarre things to see how people react—I look for signs of a guilty conscience, of keeping secrets. I haven't learned much. Oh, I've learned about power struggles among employees. And I've learned they're greedy. I figure if they're greedy enough to play up to a senile rich lady, they might be greedy enough to steal drugs. They almost all flunked that test. Roth's the only one with real character."

"He just got arrested for murdering Polly," I said. "Thelma, give the police that tape. If they know someone was stealing drugs—"

"The tape won't convince them." She seemed close to crying. "Hal never mentions drugs. They'll think that I'm imagining things, that I *am* senile. I feel terrible about Roth, but the tape won't help him. I feel terrible about Polly too. If she'd gotten suspicious about the thefts—"

"Do you think she had?"

Thelma shrugged. "Lately, she's been cranky. And what she said about avoiding problems if everyone stuck to cod-liver oil—maybe the 'problem' was stealing drugs."

"Could be," I said. "She said another strange thing. Earl wanted her to play the caterpillar in the *Alice in Wonderland* skit. She refused—she said it was inappropriate."

Professor Woodhouse stood up. "The caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* smokes a hookah. He sits on a magic mushroom that makes Alice grow larger and smaller. That character has long been associated with hallucinogenic drugs. If Polly had come to share Mr. Aden's belief that drugs were being stolen and used in improper ways—"

"—then she sure wouldn't want to play the caterpillar," I said. "Maybe she came back late at night, like Hal Aden did, to try to catch the thief. But maybe the thief caught her. Thelma, if you won't give that tape to the police, let me take it to Miss Woodhouse. She'll figure this out."

"Do not bring her here." The professor's voice grew stern. "That Man might come back—we cannot risk an encounter. She must stay in the house, where she is safe."

This time, I found Miss Woodhouse in the kitchen, baking an apple pie. How sweet, I thought—a welcome-home pie for her mother. True, the professor prefers blueberry, but maybe she'd enjoy a change of pace.

Once again, Miss Woodhouse wanted to hear every detail. We sat at the small maple table as the warm smells of apple and lemon and cinnamon filled the kitchen, as she drummed her fingers against the tabletop.

"So the killer put the smock on Polly," she said, "and the smocks are kept in the Wellness Supplies room. And the privacy screen you borrowed is ripped, and today the nurse used a nail file to open cartons. But yesterday, Polly used a box cutter. And Polly sneezed frequently. Now, this Resting Room at the rear of the supplies room—if that lets undertakers remove bodies discreetly, it must have an exterior door. Does the kitchen have an exterior door too?"

"Sure. For deliveries."

She smiled. "So everything fits. Of course, it's just a theory."

"What theory?" I said. "I don't understand."

"You don't?" She looked stunned—tactless of her, I thought. "Oh. Well. I'm assuming Polly had indeed become suspicious. She returned to Aden Harbor very late to catch the thief, parked in some remote spot, and hid behind a privacy screen. After the thief arrived, Polly sneezed—"

"—and the thief panicked, grabbed the box cutter, and stabbed her through the screen." I remembered what Lieutenant Glass said: Three seconds, and it's over and can't be undone. "That'd explain the rip. But I didn't see any blood."

She shrugged. "A plasticized screen would wipe clean easily. The box cutter would be bloody, though, and the killer might've worried about being able to remove every trace. That box-cutter is probably at the bot-

tom of the bay. Now, the killer wouldn't want the body found in the Wellness Supplies room—the police might suspect Polly's death could be drug related, and that might lead to awkward inquiries. And someone had to be framed, to end the investigation quickly. So the killer put a green smock on Polly, took her out through the Resting Room, and drove her, probably in his or her own car, to the kitchen, entering through the exterior door. I'm assuming the killer had a master key."

"So maybe it's Luci," I said, "but not necessarily. Maybe the thief—the killer—took Luci's key, long ago, and made a copy."

"Perhaps. At any rate, the killer still had work to do: stabbing Polly with a kitchen knife to obscure the original wound, wiping the knife off but leaving traces behind, breaking the clasp on Polly's bracelet, stashing the knife and bracelet away, creating a mess in the kitchen, going back to Wellness Supplies to clean up and dump papers on the desk, parking Polly's car in its usual spot. Perhaps, as you suggested, the killer stowed Polly's body in the freezer during that time."

"I didn't suggest that," I said. "That is, I suggested it to Lieutenant Glass, but not to you."

"Really?" she said. "I thought you had. So. At some point, the killer put Polly's body in the Chamber of Mystery—and then went home, to return to Aden Harbor this morning and act surprised when Polly couldn't be found."

"Sounds plausible." I frowned. "But we need evidence. Well, if the killer did all that, he or she must have left fingerprints somewhere."

"Probably not. When you first met Polly, she was opening a carton of latex gloves, was she not? So much for fingerprints—physical fingerprints, at least. The drug thefts have fingerprints of another sort all over them, and it's probably safe to assume the thief is the killer. But we need more tangible evidence to show the police. My mother and Mrs. Kramden are planning a psychic act, you said?"

"Yes, but I'm sure the show's been canceled, out of respect for Polly."

"Call Mrs. Kramden," Miss Woodhouse said. "Tell her to demand that the show go on. Nobody will dare deny her. And the show *must* go on, Harriet. That's how we'll catch our killer."

The timer buzzed. "Nicely browned," she said, taking her pie from the oven. "Harriet, we must go see a friend of mine, to get help with that tape and work on a script. Then we'll go to Aden Harbor, to confer with Mother and Mrs. Kramden."

"Your mother doesn't want you to go there. She's afraid you'll run into Lieutenant Glass."

Smiling, she gazed at her pie again, sighed, and set it down. "We can avoid that. But come. We have much to do."

The next hours were frantic: meeting with a very short man with very big glasses, who did remarkable things with the tape and made suggestions about lights; meeting with Professor Woodhouse and Thelma; rehearsing, revising the script, rehearsing again. Mid afternoon, I went to the kitchen

to fetch hot milk for the professor and was amazed to see Roth at the stove. He walked over, put his arms around me, and kissed me, right in front of everyone.

"Lieutenant Glass released me," he said. "I have to stay available, but he never formally booked me. He said you'd told him things that gave him doubts. What the hell did you say?"

"Just that Polly was wearing the wrong smock," I said, stunned, "and—oh, it doesn't matter. I'm just so glad you're free!"

"For the moment, anyhow," he said. "Long enough to make Thelma's pasta. Maybe that's the real reason Glass let me go. Are we still on for after the show?"

"Definitely." I hurried back to the Woodhouses, glowing.

Soon afterwards, Miss Woodhouse slipped away. At dinner, the professor was back in full Maria Teresa Fiorenza mode, calling me her adorable anchovy, urging everyone to *mangia! mangia!* Dinner was spectacular: In just one day, Roth had transformed a luau for two hundred into a magnificent pasta feast. He'd even woven the waitresses' grass skirts around grape juice jugs, making them look like Chianti bottles.

Once the espresso cups were cleared, people raced off to get into costume. The talent show began with a moment of silence for Polly. I glanced around. Luci, Grete, and Earl sat together, dressed as Alice, the Red Queen, and the White Rabbit. Luci and Grete looked somber; Earl looked at his watch. At the back of the room, Miss Woodhouse, the short man with big glasses, and a tall man I didn't recognize all stood against the wall, all with arms crossed, all wearing baseball caps and orange coveralls emblazoned with "Clyde's Plumbing." Trust Miss Woodhouse to find a way to get them into Aden Harbor. As the moment of silence ended, Roth came to sit beside me.

The show began. Irving stuck to scarves and card tricks—no Chamber of Mystery. The four ladies flexed their muscles to "Wind Beneath My Wings." Harry and Myrtle performed the balcony scene to wild applause. Then Professor Woodhouse, caped and turbaned, rolled out the privacy screen.

"I come here just yesterday," she said. "So far, I don't know you so well. But through my mystical powers, I see all your secrets. Who brave enough to let me read your mind?"

Gamely, Irving raised his hand and stood to the left of the screen, laughing and nodding as the professor pressed her hand against her forehead and revealed he'd kissed Bertha after casino night last week. Myrtle, volunteering next, blushed sheepishly when the professor declared she had a hamster hidden in a cage in her closet. Thelma's weeks of spying had paid off. She'd told us countless stories that afternoon, and the professor had memorized every detail. Her credibility as a psychic was established. I glanced back and noticed Miss Woodhouse's short friend was gone.

"Now, I not just a psychic," Professor Woodhouse said. "I also a medium. Who want to talk to someone on other side?"

Thelma jumped up. "I do!" Ascending the stage, she stood beside the screen. "I wanna talk to Hal Aden."

Earl stood up. "That's—well, insensitive. Luci's right here. We shouldn't joke about her uncle."

"Guido Sarducci!" the professor said. "This no joke. This for real. We see if Mr. Aden around. Maybe he wanna say *buonasera* to niece."

Earl didn't look happy, but he sat down. Luci's smile looked even fainter than usual; Grete set her scepter on the floor and patted Luci's hand.

Professor Woodhouse raised both arms. "Mr. Aden!" she called. "Thelma, she wanna talk to you. Yoo-hoo! You there?"

The light changed subtly, touching the professor's face with mistlike blue. Her eyes went wide, her head jerked back, her arms snapped down. She opened her mouth.

"Thelma."

All around me, people gasped. That voice—so clearly not Maria Teresa Fiorenza's voice, so clearly Hal Aden's drawl. I saw Luci pressing her hand against her mouth, saw Grete and Earl looking stunned.

Thelma's face filled with wonder. "Is that you, Hal?"

Professor Woodhouse's lips trembled. "Listen," Hal Aden's voice said.

"I'm listening," Thelma said. "What do you want to talk about, Hal?"

Again the professor's lips quivered; again Hal Aden's voice sounded. "Last night. Polly."

"Polly?" Thelma said. "You know what happened to her?"

"I—know," the voice said. The words sounded disjointed, but that seemed right for a ghost. Roth gripped my hand.

"We know some things too," Thelma said. "We know she was stabbed in the kitchen or the dining hall, and—"

"No," the voice said. "The Wellness Supplies room."

"That can't be," Thelma said. "She was found in the dining hall."

"No," the voice said. "It—happened—in—the Wellness Supplies room. Go. Look around. Don't—stop. Be careful. You can—find—proof. Trust—me. And—call the police."

"I will," Thelma said. "And Hal—do you know *who* killed her?"

"I—know," the voice said. "I'm—sure."

"Who was it, Hal?" Thelma said.

"Oh, God!" The pain in the voice seared us. "It's—someone—I—like."

"Then I won't ask you to tell us," Thelma said. "But I'll go to the Wellness Supplies room, right now, and find the proof. I'll call the police. I'll—"

"Stop!" Luci stood up. "The show's over. Somebody turn on the lights."

Raising an arm, the professor pointed at Luci. "Remember," the voice said.

"Oh, shut *up*, Uncle Hal!" Luci cried. Before I could react, she'd grabbed Grete's scepter, lifted it over her head, and leapt onstage, charging toward Professor Woodhouse. Damn, I thought, jumping up. A rolling pin—that could do real damage.

I shouldn't have worried. Reaching under her cape, the professor pulled

out the chain fashioned from earrings and belt buckles, key rings and sink weights. Twice, she swung it over her head. Then she snapped it out, connecting smartly with Luci's arm, just below the wrist. Luci gasped and dropped the scepter.

The tall man standing next to Miss Woodhouse made it to the stage in seconds and took out a badge. Luci sat on the floor, rubbing her arm, sobbing, insisting that Uncle Hal was lying, that there *couldn't* be proof in the Wellness Supplies room, because she'd cleaned the blood up real carefully. Uncle Hal was mad at her for poisoning him—that's why he'd said those mean things. The tall man read Luci her rights and got ready to take her away.

"What about Lieutenant Glass?" I asked him. "Is he coming here to question us?"

"He's got the night off," the tall man said. "He put me in charge—first time he's trusted me to handle a homicide alone." He smiled proudly. "Guess he thinks I'm learning fast. Can you come to the station, make a statement?"

"Sure. I'll get Miss Woodhouse, and—"

"We got her statement this afternoon." He looked around. "I think she's split already. And another officer's here to talk to Professor Woodhouse and Thelma. So all I need is you and the short guy."

I said goodbye to the professor, who'd decided to spend the night at Aden Harbor, in case Thelma needed comforting. After I made my statement, Roth and I went out for crab cakes and champagne. I told him everything. Once he got over the shock, he seemed pleased. In his opinion, he said, dating an apprentice private detective was cooler than dating a history teacher. A history teacher might not want to talk about anything but the War of 1812.

On Sunday, I drove to Aden Harbor. The professor and Thelma said a lingering goodbye, agreeing to get together at least once a week. At the house, Miss Woodhouse greeted us with chicken crepes studded with olives and onions, with chopped salad, with a still-warm blueberry pie.

"We sure earned our fee this time," I said as we ate lunch. "Have you talked to Rose and Glen? They must be happy their mother's not really senile."

"Presumably," Miss Woodhouse said. "I doubt they're ecstatic in all respects. Mrs. Crane had spoken to her mother. Thelma plans to negotiate with the board that manages Aden Harbor, to see if she can buy a controlling share and become the new director. Her children may not approve of that use of her assets."

"Well, I think it's great," I said. "And I'll admit, I never thought it was Luci. I thought maybe Grete, or Earl. They were both good at manipulating Luci; they both obviously wanted to be assistant director; they both must've wanted more money. I could see either one coming up with a scheme to steal and sell prescription drugs. But Luci? She seems so stupid, so timid."

"And so, no doubt, she is," the professor said. "Not all criminals, little Harriet, are bold geniuses. Stupid, timid people can also be greedy and evil. And this drug scheme was a stupid, timid crime. Luci stole just a few pills at a time, thinking her thefts would go undetected forever. Grete and Earl would know better."

"True," I agreed. "But I didn't think Luci could've killed Polly. The killer tried to frame Roth, and Luci has a crush on him. How could she frame someone she loves?"

"Listen to your words, Harriet," Miss Woodhouse said. "Luci had a crush on Roth, yes. Did she love him? Is she capable of loving anyone? She betrayed and killed the loving uncle who gave her a job for which she clearly wasn't qualified. Even if he'd found proof of her guilt, he wouldn't have had her arrested. He would have simply allowed her to resign. She probably knew that. Even so, she killed him—to keep her easy job, to keep her profitable drug sideline. And when she killed Polly—another stupid crime—and thought she could protect herself by framing Roth, she didn't hesitate. Clearly, she has no idea of what love is, of the selflessness and sacrifice it so often entails."

The professor shot her a glance. "Many people imagine they are in love," she said, "when they in fact merely have crushes."

"I guess," I said. "Anyhow, Luci might've done one smart thing. By letting Earl and Grete use her master key, she made it look like they could've committed her crimes. Do you think she did that on purpose? Or is she really that careless and clueless?"

"We'll never know," Miss Woodhouse said. "But I vote for careless and clueless." She stood up. "Mother, it's a beautiful day. Shall we have dessert on the porch? I'll brew tea, and Harriet can serve the pie."

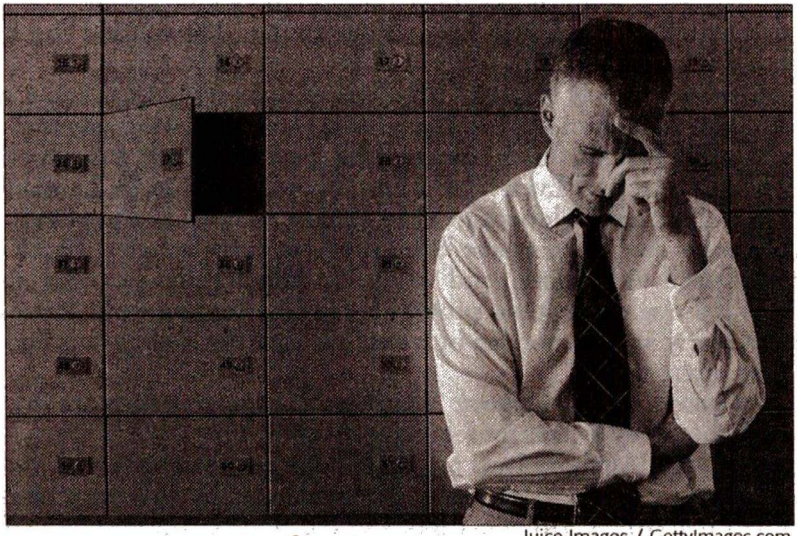
"A lovely idea." The professor stood, too, and patted her daughter's cheek. "You are a good girl, Iphigenia. In my absence, you obeyed me well. I rejoice to see that my carpets are unstained, my supply of sherry undiminished. And you had another officer come to Aden Harbor last night, so you could avoid contact with That Man. I am pleased."

Miss Woodhouse nodded; her mother smiled and walked out to the porch. In the kitchen, Miss Woodhouse put the kettle on while I cut generous wedges of pie.

"Miss Woodhouse," I said, "I can't wait for you to meet Roth. He's such a great guy. I bet you'll—"

She took my hand. "Harriet," she said, "I'm married."

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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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, 267 Broadway, New York, New York 10007-2352. Please label your entry "July/August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If you would like your story returned, please include an SASE.

The winning entry for the January/February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 189.

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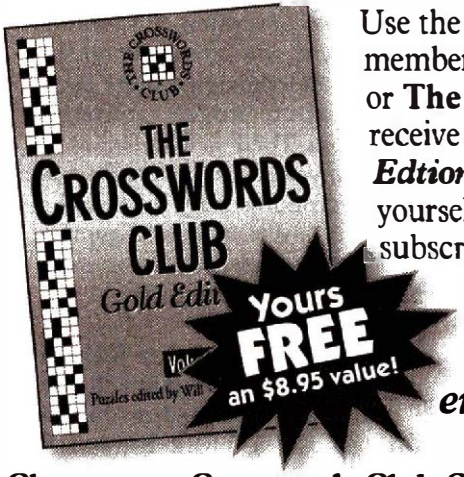

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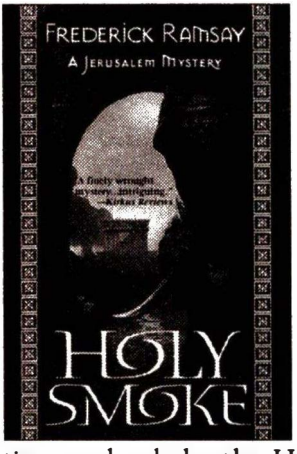
ROBERT C. HAHN

The private investigator may be a relatively new invention, but murder is not. In ancient times the need to solve the crime was often beyond the capabilities or incentives of officials. The three authors reviewed here combine vivid historical settings and fecund imaginations to provide captivating interpretations of often shadowy historical persons. Their sleuths include a rabbi in Jerusalem when it was under the Roman yoke, a provincial Roman governor in Bithynia in the early years of the second century A.D., and a very young scribe unexpectedly raised to a lofty position by an Egyptian pharaoh. All three authors share another pair of characteristics—expertise and a willingness to do research to bring their ancient setting to life.



In *The Eighth Veil* (2012), Frederick Ramsay introduced Rabban Gamaliel, chief rabbi (Rabbi of Rabbis) and head of the Sanhedrin. In the newest outing of this series, **Holy Smoke: A Jerusalem Mystery** (Poisoned Pen Press, $24.95 hard cover; $14.95 trade paper), the philosophical rabbi investigates a murder that brings him into conflict with both the High Priest Caiaphas and Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate.

Harsh Roman rule controls much of the life in Jerusalem in 29 C.E., but Jews are still permitted their temple and worship. Nothing is as sacred as the Temple's Holy of Holies, which is entered only rarely and under specific conditions and only by the High Priest. Thus the discovery of a body there is, to say the least, a defilement of the sacred space—upsetting, insulting, and truly catastrophic.

Gamaliel is quick to send for his friend Loukas, a Greek and a renowned healer who had aided him before, and together they manage to extricate the body and remove it from the Temple. For Caiaphas the simplest explanation is that someone was foolish enough to enter the Holy of Holies and was struck down for his foolishness. But Loukas convinces Gamaliel that a murder has occurred and that if Gamaliel accepts Caiaphas's explanation he will allow a murderer to go free.

Proceeding from the assumption that the body was placed in the Holy

of Holies, it follows that the killer must have had familiarity with Temple routines, and that one or more Temple guards must have been involved or suborned. The latter assumption appears to be supported when two of the guards fail to report for work the following day.

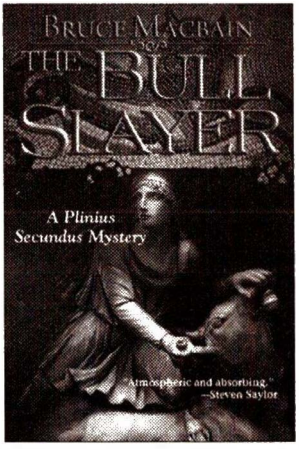
Gamaliel manages to locate the missing guards and to learn the identity of the victim, a task made easier by the clever deductions made by Loukas when he examines the body.

Meanwhile a mysterious Assyrian physician, Ali bin Selah, who trades with Loukas, possesses a powerful pain reliever made from poppy sap from the plant called hul gil—the joy plant. Selah lurks in the background, both as a watcher and someone who is being watched by others.

However, Caiaphas wants Gamaliel to focus his investigation on an entirely different matter, that of a "rabble rouser" named Yeshua who is spouting nonsense like "the kingdom of the Lord is like a mustard seed," and breaking Shabbat law by healing a cripple on Shabbat. Caiaphas is unable to get this rabble rouser to desist.

Even when summoned by Pontius Pilate who chides him for ignoring the dangerous "renegade rabbi" and instead interfering in an affair the authorities wish him to avoid, Gamaliel persists and even convinces Pilate to grant him some leeway.

Ramsay's delightful sleuthing duo trade ideas and insights as they unravel a killing that is complex in both method and motivation. The vivid historical setting promises to get even more intriguing in future novels. Ramsay is also the author of "Judas: The Gospel of Betrayal," as well as the fine contemporary series featuring small-town Virginia sheriff, Ike Schwartz.



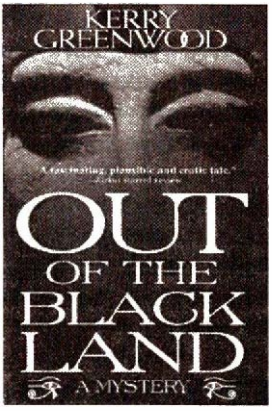
Bruce Macbain made his debut with 2010's *Roman Games* and continues a planned trilogy with THE BULL SLAYER: A PLINIUS SECUNDUS MYSTERY (Poisoned Pen Press, $24.95 hardcover, $14.95 trade paper), which finds Pliny taking up his new post as Governor of the troublesome province of Bithynia-Pontus (a part of modern Turkey) in approximately A.D. 109 or 110. Among his entourage are his much younger wife Calpurnia and the historian Suetonius, a witty and learned goad and foil for Pliny.

Bithynia-Pontus is described as "the most corrupt, mismanaged, seditious, and turbulent province in the Empire," and Pliny is given overriding authority to clean it up. It doesn't help that he and Calpurnia are considered outsiders not only by the "Greeklings" who make up the majority of the population but also by the established merchants and officials who form the city's hierarchy—people such as Marcus Balbus, the

Fiscal Procurator, and his wife Fabia, or the wealthy provincial Diocles, known as the Golden Mouth for his oratory skills.

After dealing with the effects of an earthquake, Pliny sets off on a tour of the province only to be recalled when Balbus disappears. He returns to conduct interviews with Fabia and with Balbus's chief accountant, Silvanus. As Pliny attempts to sort out the tangle of relationships and alliances that have made Bithynia the "graveyard of governors," he encounters a secretive religious cult worshiping Mithras, a charismatic fortune-teller named Pancrates, a wealthy brothel owner named Sophronia, and a handsome young Greek called Agathon, who charms Calpurnia.

Macbain, with degrees in Classics and Ancient History, offers both an intriguing murder mystery and a vivid portrait of daily life in a polyglot city where the ruling authority must impose the will of a distant Emperor as much by diplomacy as by force.



Australian author Kerry Greenwood, best known for her series featuring Phryne Fisher in 1920's Melbourne, jumps way back in time to Ancient Egypt (roughly 1450 B.C.) in her new novel OUT OF THE BLACK LAND (Poisoned Pen Press, $24.95 hardcover; $14.95 trade paper). The novel is perhaps closer to historical fiction than mystery, with lots of intrigue but little sleuthing, as her story ranges from the last years of Pharaoh Amenhotep III to the ascension of his son Akhnamen (later known as Akhenaten) and his abrupt attempt to deny worship of any deity other than Aten—the one God.

This tumultuous period in Egyptian history is recounted through the eyes of three characters whose fortunes ebb and flow in unpredictable fashion. Ptah-Hotep is a young scribe plucked from his studies by Akhenaten and elevated to the lofty position of Great Royal Scribe. Ptah-Hotep's lover Kheperren, another young scribe, is assigned to accompany General Horemheb and against the odds becomes an outstanding soldier as well as scribe. Princess Mutnodjme, a younger sister of Nefertiti, has a great desire for learning and becomes a priestess of Isis.

Amenhotep's palace is filled with powerful figures and enough intrigue that fortunes and lives can be won or lost very quickly; only the very skillful or the very lucky survive. But his reign is merely prelude to an endless series of crises that befall Egypt when his strange son Akhenaten succeeds the aging Pharaoh and embarks on a disastrous course that includes lavish festivals, the banning of all gods except the sun god Aten, the creation of Amarna, an entirely new and elaborate city, and the weakening of Egypt's military readiness.

As attested by the lengthy Afterword subtitled "On the State of

Egyptology" and by a lengthy bibliography of sources, Greenwood did extensive research for this novel. Still, there are more unknowns than knowns about this period of history, and Greenwood infuses her novel with her own interpretations of many customs and events. It marks an interesting departure for the Aussie author and an enjoyable read for fans of historical fiction.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* has released a second digital anthology. THE CROOKED ROAD VOLUME 2: ELLERY QUEEN PRESENTS STORIES OF GRIFTERS, GANGSTERS, HIT MEN, AND OTHER CAREER CROOKS, featuring stories by Doug Allyn, Dana Cameron, S. J. Rozan, Janice Law, and more, is now available for e-readers. • Launching in March 2013, *Plan B Magazine* is a new electronic periodical, publishing a new short crime or mystery story on a biweekly basis (see www.plan-b-magazine.com). • Representatives from AHMM will be appearing for the second annual time at this year's Brooklyn Book Festival (see www.brooklynbookfestival.org).

THE FREEZER

JAMES L. ROSS

In the narrow hall between the police department and the town offices, Roy Bigelow chafed his winter-raw hands.

"Well, Roy, are you going to go look for my husband?" Patsy Crile demanded. Her voice was high, and it blended with the wind's shrilling just outside the door. Patsy prompted: "Elijah could be dead under a snowbank for all you care!"

She stomped a few feet farther into the police office, tracking snow, peeking at desks, hoping that somebody might be on duty besides Roy.

"Three hours Elijah's been gone," she said. Her chin came up, round like a pink boxing glove. Back where the cells were, somebody bellowed, but she paid no attention. The town had three full-time drunks, at least one of whom was always sleeping or making noise in a cell. Patsy's husband Elijah wouldn't be back there; he was a seasonal drinker, from mid-November until the last frost, which might be in April. Fifteen years ago, he had been a two-term mayor, which bought him some slack from Roy and the other cops.

Patsy wasn't worried. She knew that Elijah was down at the Yard Arm, pacing himself. But going to fetch him would mean marching four blocks into snow driving straight into her eyes. Coming over to bother Roy meant walking a hundred feet across the road from the motel the Criles ran.

"Be embarrassing for you," Patsy said, arching a penciled eyebrow, "if Elijah freezes to death because you're too lazy to get your boots wet."

"I'll check on him," Roy promised.

"Probably only so's you can get yourself a drink," she sniffed, and headed for the door.

Roy didn't bother to see whether she made it over the mounded snow that separated the sidewalk from the road. He walked into the rear of the station, back to the cells, to look at his prisoner. The man wasn't one of the village drunks. Even in a cell, this man scared Roy.

Tiny Toomey, big and bald, was mean even when someone bigger was around. One handcuff held him to a horizontal bar that ran beside the toilet, so he could relieve himself if he stretched. The other cuff held his left wrist to his ankle. That raised the question of how he was going to get his pants down. Roy thought about it and decided he didn't care.

Robyn Hyzy

He tested the cell door. It was locked.

"You're a dead man," the prisoner said.

Even money he's right, Roy thought.

He went out into the hall and locked the heavy wooden door that connected the cell area to the police office. He put the keys in his pocket.

Nine-oh-five P.M.

Roy tapped his home number, and Brenda answered on the first ring. She didn't sound aggrieved, and she didn't—just tonight—remind him that he was weak, impotent, and never made a big score. But she was jumpy. Roy wondered with a moment's pleasure if she was worried about him. Then his wife told him, "Nellie hasn't come in." Nellie was her black Scottie, a child substitute that if need be, Brenda had hinted, could become a husband substitute.

"She likes the snow," he reminded her. "You got the doors locked?"

"Yes, and the outside light's on. I'm on the computer." Brenda was good on the computer, especially spreadsheet apps. She knew where every dime he earned went.

She was also good at hacking. "I don't think Toomey's money is in a bank," she said. "I can't find it."

Two hundred fifty thousand, in round numbers, was Brenda's guess. She'd looked at the Boston deal, which was too complicated for Roy, guessed at the commission the locals would get. A town sells bonds, adds an interest-rate swap, the swap generates fees for the investment bankers, the bankers reward a couple of good local citizens. Mad money, Brenda called it, like extra bills folded in the back of your wallet. Money without a tax bill was the way Roy thought of it, like the occasional hundred he'd collected in Boston from bars that had a poker machine in back. No different, except bigger.

"If it isn't in a bank," Brenda said, "it's squirreled away somewhere else. Maybe in cash. If you find me that, puddin', I'll love you forever."

"Forever?"

"Long as the money lasts." She laughed like a kid instead of a fat, middle-aged woman and hung up.

That could be a while, Roy thought.

The coastal line bus came five minutes later, and by then Roy had his parka on over his down vest, had his thick wool scarf doubled over his Adam's apple, had his quilted gloves on as he stepped outside into new snow that was already six or seven inches deep, high and fluffy on top of the frozen chest-high reefs along the curbs that had been there since November. More of it coming sideways, whipping against the windshield of the bus. As the bus door swung open, Roy looked in at the driver, who stared dead ahead, hypnotized by the *whak-whak* of the wipers. Then two passengers blocked his view coming down the steps, moving gingerly on ice imbedded in the rubber treads.

A woman he didn't recognize was first off. She was round as a medicine ball, though that might have been layers of sweaters and coats. With not much more than her eyes and a wisp of hair visible beneath a knit hat, she stomped toward the residential neighborhoods across Haverhill Road.

Archie Windlass, the retired insurance guy, was slower coming down, cane probing ahead of him.

Then nobody.

The driver started to close the door.

"Hold it," Roy said. The door stopped halfway and stayed there. Roy pushed it aside, climbed two steps. "Turn on the lights," he said.

As the driver switched on the ceiling lights, Roy looked down the narrow interior. Three faces had lifted, all near the front, expressions empty, hiding things—you could never tell what, but it would be nothing worth caring about tonight.

"I count three," Roy said. "You got anyone else on board?"

"Tall guy, beard?"

Roy shifted his eyes to the back rows. The windows were iced. The heat didn't reach back there. It would be like riding in a coffin. You wouldn't be able to see anything except your breath.

"He got off a quarter mile back," the driver said. "Told me he'd freeze if I made him walk back all that way."

"You recognize him?"

"He's not a regular. Said he lived back there."

"Thanks," Roy said. He got off the bus, putting his feet into the holes his boots had made along the roadside, as the driver closed the door. The bus crept away on a carpet of exhaust. A half block away, Archie Windlass was a shadow hobbling toward his rooming house.

Roy looked back the other way.

Quarter mile, the driver had said. That was where the guy had gotten off. It would take time to hike this far. And a stranger wouldn't just come into town, knock on a door, and shoot a policeman. He would want to scope things out first, get into position.

Roy went back into the town building, called for Henry, the janitor, who was carrying rolls of toilet paper toward the selectmen's office. Bundles of toilet paper about summed up Roy's view of the six selectmen who ran the village. Needed help to . . . Henry couldn't be more than twenty-five, but he had the shrunken face of a middle-aged man. Every night his routine was the same: clean the town offices till eleven, then come over to the police side of the building, spend an hour emptying wastebaskets and wiping desks, ignoring the bathroom until the chief got on his case. Roy didn't want the young man here tonight. Clapping Henry on the shoulder, Roy said, "Snow's coming bad, Henry. You go home to your mom while you still can."

"Yes, sir, Sergeant."

"You can shovel tomorrow."

Henry nodded in short, small jabs. "Yes, sir."

Henry got his jacket, and Roy let him out, watched him struggle across the road. Fifty feet and Roy couldn't see him, couldn't hear him. Roy listened anyway. No distant tires whirring. No neon buzzing. The town was shut down. The wind had let up a little, and Roy could hear the mutter of snow piling up.

He closed the door.

Now both sides of the town building were empty, except for him.

And the man in the cell.

Roy wondered how the tall bearded man had known to get off the bus early. The only one who could have warned him was Toomey, and Toomey had been locked up since four P.M. So the bearded man was cautious, a professional.

Starting at the bottom of his parka, Roy opened the zipper so he could push the coat aside and get to his service weapon without much trouble. For the time being he kept the quilted gloves on as he left the station and headed east. The Criles' motel was across the road, sitting dark until spring next to a glass-fronted restaurant that had gone bust for a second time around Thanksgiving. On this side of the road, he felt the bulk of a building ahead that included a hardware store and Janie Q's Consignment Shop. Past Janie's was a no-man's-land of two railroad tracks, then several rooming houses. Then an amusement arcade that wouldn't reopen until Memorial Day, then the T-intersection of the Beach Highway.

He walked in the track the bus had made. On the Beach Highway, wind off the ocean had scoured the crown of the road almost clear, piling everything against the coin laundry and bike rental across the street. Both were dark. The Yard Arm was the only business with lights on, and there weren't many customers. As he came in, Roy looked for strangers. Besides Elijah Crile, there were two locals nursing drinks at the bar, everyone separated as far as they could get. By Christmas people were tired of each other, and by February they had nothing to say. People who didn't know it was February occupied two booths. Sally Hawk, from the Indian tribe, was dealing quarter-ante poker to a couple of loggers. In a corner Buzz Walker and his father were eating chili cheese dogs with sides of fried clams. From their expressions, Roy figured in a week he might have to clean up a murder-suicide.

He went to the bar and clapped Elijah Crile on the shoulder. "Your wife was looking for you."

Like half the men in town, Crile had stopped shaving when the World Series ended. Maybe the same with washing. The old man turned, eyes wary, hands protecting a shot glass. "Did she send you to arrest me, Roy?"

"Patsy just said she needed you at home. I'll walk with you."

"Ah . . ." Crile looked around, hoping to be rescued.

Both Eddie and Sheila were behind the bar, drawing beer, flipping TV stations, pushing up the sound. The wind in the shack's eaves hooted at the

drinkers, telling them in language they knew too well that they were losers. "I could use another drink," Elijah Crile protested.

"Eddie won't serve you," Roy said. "He's afraid of your wife."

Without turning more than half around from the TV, Eddie the bar-owner nodded.

Crile heaved himself off the stool. "I don't need help walking home, Roy. Stay and have yourself a beer."

As the old man buttoned up a topcoat that reached to his ankles, Roy followed him to the door, then outside. The sidewalk was impassable. They stepped into the road, and Roy said, "When you were mayor, who was the biggest crook in town?"

Crile shivered as the wind got him. "I was. Every winter I had the town trucks plow my motel driveway. Never reimbursed a dime. That was long before you got here."

"You were a bad-ass," Roy said. "Have you seen any strangers in town?"

"Today? Course not."

They started walking, and the wind batted them from behind, not playfully but like it might mean something.

After a minute, Roy asked, "Are you still crooked?"

Something in his tone made Crile look around. "You starting a reform movement, Sergeant?"

"I'm just asking a question."

"Wouldn't mind having my driveway plowed."

"What else?"

"Well, I guess it'd depend what I was being offered. And what I was risking." He wasn't walking fast. Steady—no sign the whiskey had soaked him—but not fast. What he had said was just about Roy's view of things. It depended on what you were offered. And the odds—Crile hadn't mentioned them—but Roy was sticking with even money.

"What do you think of the present town fathers?"

Crile snorted. "Don't ask me about them. It's too cold to spit."

"If there was a big-time rip-off, would they let you have a piece of it?"

Crile slowed. "Well, you know 'em. They hired you. If I'd been on the selectmen, we wouldna done that, no offense. If anyone was going to pull something dirty, I'd figure it was you, once we checked you out in Boston. Again, no offense, but as you're asking."

"Who else?"

Crile had stopped walking. "Among the selectmen? Curtis Humphrey, the mayor, tried to get me once to run whores out of the motel. Course he's stupid. Someone'd have to lead him."

"Who else?"

The old man folded his arms. They stared at each other. "Maybe your boss, the chief. He's mean and he's got a brain."

"If he had a deal, would he cut you in?"

"Never has."

Roy said, "I would, maybe."

"Well, then, maybe I was wrong about not wanting to hire you, Roy."

"Come with me. Your wife will wait."

Roy Bigelow unlocked the door to the cell area, let Elijah Crile go through first. The ex-mayor had been joking about whether he was under arrest for the driveway plowing, but when he saw the prisoner he stopped joking and faced Roy. "Why've you got our police chief all locked up?"

"Ask him."

Elijah Crile rubbed his bearded face. He stepped closer to the cell. "What's this about, Tiny?"

Tiny Toomey, the large, bald man in the cell, wearing the uniform of the chief of police, said, "Roy Bigelow's a fool, Elijah. Curtis and me never should've hired him. I want you to call a couple of my officers to come over here and relieve the sergeant of his badge and gun. Can you do that?"

Crile gave Roy a questioning look.

Roy said, "You know my wife Brenda's an accountant?"

Crile nodded.

"An investment bank down in Boston tied some interest-rate swaps to the town's last bond sale. Brenda figures there's room for about two hundred, two-fifty to have made it into someone's pocket up here. I tapped the chief's phone, so I know he got some of it."

"He's lying," the chief said. "He ain't one of us, Elijah—"

Crile whistled dry lipped. "In my day, a hundred bucks bought most of us. You sure about this, Roy?"

"Sure enough."

Toomey raised his voice. "Elijah, you don't want to be on my bad side! You know that. This boy's bit off more than he can chew. Curtis and me will do what's right by you."

Crile sniffed. "Not from a cell you won't."

Toomey started cursing.

Roy led Elijah Crile out, locked the big door to the cell block, sat the older man down in a chair in the office. "I got one thing for you to do," Roy said. He handed the old man the telephone. "Call Mayor Humphrey, tell him you want to meet him here."

"You plan to arrest the mayor?"

"I plan to try."

Crile tapped out the mayor's home number. It rang a few times, and a recorded voice answered.

"Hang up," Roy said.

He took a flashlight and went out. Damn snow was still coming down. There was no sign in the road that a bus had ever passed. By now the man from out of town had to be holed up somewhere, waiting for his chance. He could be in any of the stores, the hardware place or Janie Q's Consignment Shop, none of which had alarm systems, or the motel, but probably not the bankrupt restaurant because it wouldn't have heat. The

guy could hit the police station, or he could wait for his target to emerge. So Roy emerged. He struggled to the middle of the road. He started walking toward the ocean. If the police station was being watched, the bearded guy couldn't miss him.

Roy crossed the rail line, passed the handful of rooming houses. There were lights in a few windows, people like Archie Windlass microwaving pot pies and listening to the wind thump the walls. If you wanted to imagine things going really bad, Roy thought, it would be the power off and a beach town full of retired people frozen like logs before anyone thought to check.

He stopped before the road intersected the beach highway. Hard to tell if there was anyone coming after him. Nothing he could see had any more substance than a snow devil. Instead of turning left and heading for the taproom, Roy climbed a plowed-up wall and slid down the other side, crossed an open space, and felt his way past the gate of the amusement arcade. The rides were shapeless masses, fun house on the left, bumper cars somewhere along here, mole-hammering, but he couldn't remember whether it came before or after the bumper cars. Couple of stands sold hotdogs and pizza and saltwater taffy and generous blocks of fudge till well after the weather had started getting cold.

His feet crunched on ice.

The rides were along the center of the property, a merry-go-round that had its horses taken in for the winter, a thing that in the daylight looked like a hangman's gibbet because its gondola cars had been taken down. The biggest item was the wood-framed roller coaster, not tall or impressive but the only one in town, the tracks twisting and looping and diving ahead. Though he knew this from memory, he couldn't see them, didn't even know how close he was to it until he banged into the steel sectional fence that surrounded the ride. Now he knew where he was, approximately. Without seeing, he knew that a couple of midwinter thaws had left a long line of icicles like ten-foot-long knives hanging from the upper track.

He stopped, stood still, tried to swallow the ragged noise of his breathing. His face was sweaty. He waited, and a full minute before he could hear footsteps he saw the lance of a flashlight beam, bouncing over snow mounds, picking out the painted grotesque faces on the fun house. It didn't matter, but he wondered what kind of man had come up from Boston, what he thought about when he wasn't on a job—did he think about anything?—whether he was part of a biker gang that hired out for hits, or a cop, or a regular guy for a bar or whorehouse that had an enforcer, or just a friend of the man the chief had phoned down in Boston this afternoon when he got suspicious. It was Brenda had told him they were in so deep he should put a tap on the department phone. She had listened to a lot over the last two days without hearing the main thing they wanted. But knowing Toomey had asked for help, that might keep him alive tonight. Investment bankers wouldn't have sent the tall guy. Bankers would send lawyers to swear the deal was on the up-and-up.

Old snow crackled, the flash beam jumped. The guy must be shivering.

Light flicked across Roy's face, and the man's gun made three small pops on the frozen air. Roy didn't know where the slugs went, but he heard a *whoopf* as a spear of ice from the upper track hit the snow a foot behind him. He wanted to move as the man kept firing, but he had to hold steady as he aimed just to the left of the glaring flashlight orb. This sure wasn't a cop, or it was an awful dumb one. Roy's first shot took the shooter down.

Roy collected the gun and the flashlight and left the body where it lay. The dead man's beard was turning white. There was no hurry about cleaning this up. He started walking, back the way the shooter must have come, then across Haverhill Road and up a couple of blocks, struggling till he got to the part that was always plowed because Mayor Curtis Humphrey lived in a nice two-story saltbox house that had a library and a piano room.

Roy came up the side path, through a wooden gate, not liking all the blaze of lights—the house front was as bright as a shopping mall window—but figuring the mayor would be easier to take than Toomey. He got to the front stoop and found the door open a crack and understood in an instant what had taken the bearded man so long. Chief Toomey had hired the man for *two* jobs. Roy went inside and checked the situation, amended the count to three jobs, because the mayor's wife was on the floor not ten steps from her husband's body.

Roy walked back to the city building, banged on the door until Elijah Crile let him in.

"Anything?" Crile said.

"Nope," Roy said.

"You gonna arrest the mayor?"

"Not tonight."

"What about calling the state police?"

"You go on home, Elijah. I'll take care of things from here. I want to listen to what Chief Toomey has to say one more time. Try to make sense of it."

"If my lady calls, you don't have to say you seen me," the old man said. He was going back to the Yard Arm.

"No, I don't," Roy agreed.

"And I don't have to ask what you're going to talk to the chief about." Elijah Crile winked, and Roy waited for the rest of it. "I figure there's something in it for me if he tells you."

"I figure that too," Roy said.

After letting Crile out, he locked the front door, just in case. Roy didn't think the chief had brought more than one hitter to town, but he didn't want to be careless at this stage. Didn't want to turn his back on Elijah Crile, when it came to that. He lifted the receiver from the phone on his desk and rang his home, and Brenda answered.

"I'm going to be a little longer," Roy said. "Has Nellie come back?"

"Yes, she got cold."

"I'm glad to hear it," Roy said. And he was glad. He didn't care about the dog, but there'd been an uneasy thought in the back of his mind. *Maybe two shooters, maybe one going to his house.* He could live with that. But if something was going to happen to Brenda, he wanted it to be when he decided.

He told her about the mayor, and asked, "You didn't find anything in his account?"

"No. Maybe Toomey never shared. But we know it's all for real now. You understand? We're sure."

"I understand."

"The money's *somewhere.*"

"Okay," Roy said.

"You gonna find it, sweetie?"

Now he was sweetie. "We'll see," Roy said.

He unlocked the door to the cell block, went in, found the thermostat on the wall, and turned it all the way down. He glanced at Toomey, and neither of them said anything. Roy wandered back out, picked up a police magazine, and sat reading for twenty minutes.

Long enough.

Toomey was sitting on the cell floor, right hand hanging against the horizontal bar. Roy touched a radiator. It wasn't like ice, but it wasn't warm. The air was—he groped for a word—crisp.

"Where'd you stash the money?" Roy asked.

"You're a dead man. You and Crile both."

"Not tonight. Crile, maybe, before the night's over. But I'm in pretty good shape. Your shooter got the mayor and his wife, and I got the shooter. The story's just as easy to tell if you're dead too."

"Go ahead. It won't get you anything."

"There's no hurry," Roy said. He walked over to a big galvanized tub the janitor used, pulled a plastic bucket from under the drain pipe, and filled it from the cold water tap. He carried the bucket over to the cell, sluiced the water across the floor at the seated man. Toomey scrambled off the floor, trousers dripping. Roy took the bucket back to the tub, looking over his shoulder as he filled it. When he emptied it, he caught Toomey full in the chest. Half an hour, he guessed, till they had ice.

STIMULUS MONEY

DAN WARTHMAN

Saturday Morning

Jones is sitting outside at Aroma Caffe on the corner of Bidwell Parkway and Elmwood Avenue. The area is buzzing with activity. It's Saturday, and the Farmers Market in the boulevard is in full swing with late summer produce, autumn-blooming flowers, fresh-baked breads and pastries, the White Cow Dairy guys selling their amazing yogurt. In the middle of everything, a young guy named David is playing the violin (Jones doesn't know much about classical music, but he appreciates the kid's concentration and tosses a twenty into the open violin case when he passes). The anti-war / pro-choice / gay rights / Occupy Wall Street / PETA / global warming activists are teamed up on the sidewalk facing Elmwood, about twenty people total, standing, vigillike, holding placards and banners. A few drivers respond to one of the signs, *Honk If . . .*

Jones can't see what comes after *If*. But he's pretty sure he wouldn't honk because he's opposed to adding unnecessary noise to the world. In fact, at the moment, he's giving the eye to some loudmouth who's made and received about twenty cell phone calls—a particular peeve of Jones's—in the last half hour. It's useless, though, because assholes like this guy are totally unaware.

"I thought I'd find you here," someone says.

Jones recognizes the voice and when he unlocks his eyes from megaphone-mouth, turning his face toward the speaker, he's already smiling, looking up at Akin Stringfield, this young black guy he recently met, has done a couple small jobs with, has taken a strong liking to.

"You old guys, man," Akin says. "Always the same predictable patterns.

"Old and predictable. You could say durable and steady."

Akin says, "Mind if I join you?"

Jones nods at the chair across the table, but Akin says, "Let me get a drink." He glances at Jones's cup, and goes inside the coffee shop.

Akin is known as P. Started out as Peanut, turned to P when he got older. His real name, he told Jones the first time they met, is pronounced *Ah-keen*, from somewhere in Africa, but the kid says it with a long A. Jones calls him Akin, the way the kid says it.

Tim Foley

⁂

Jones is still figuring out life in Buffalo. His life anyhow, his retirement.

Got himself a condo on Bidwell Parkway, in the heart of Elmwood Village, voted a few years ago one of the country's ten best neighborhoods.

He calls himself a freelance retiree. The way, when he was working, he called himself a freelance contractor.

In those days—not all that long ago, really, since he's only been retired for, what, four months—he was sometimes referred to as *the Guy* or *the Guy from*. . . . As in someone saying, Get me Jones. And the reply, just to make sure they were on the same page, You mean the Guy from . . . ? Fingers doing a butterfly flutter, like, yeah, where is that guy from? But no one knew for sure where he was from.

Someone once—in some meeting, in some town, planning some job—dubbed him The Big Hit. . . . *Let's get that guy, you know who I mean, the baseball guy, wass is name, The Big Hit or something . . . ?*

The baseball guy. That was funny. Because, one, Jones loved baseball and was always talking about this or that player or team or game or series, always coming up with tickets if he happened to be working in a city with a ball team, Major or Minor Leagues, didn't matter to him. And, two, as a matter of fact, though no one knew this, he'd gotten his start from a guy he'd met at an Indians game back in the late sixties. An old guy he happened to be sitting next to, Jones just back from Vietnam, the guy with a grandson who got himself killed over there, they got talking, some politics, some baseball, laughing (the Tribe gave up sixteen runs that day, Jones still remembers it, slim pickings in those days), they walked out together in the eighth inning, the guy said, *Listen, kid, I got something you can do for me*. . . .

The Big Hit, that came from a combined play on the kind of work Jones did and on the Big Hurt, based on an erroneous notion from the early nineties—when he was spending a lot of time in Chicago—that he was a White Sox and, in particular, a Frank Thomas fan. Which got people thinking he was originally from Chicago.

But, no, in fact, Jones grew up in Erie—Erie P A—and he's an Indians fan through and through.

As a kid, lying in bed late at night, radio turned low, sky on fire with static electricity, silent lightning, scratchy 1950s transistor signal, he'd listen to Jimmy Dudley, his Southern charm, "Hello, baseball fans everywhere."

The '59 season, that's his favorite.

High hopes. Herb Score coming all the way back—didn't happen. Mudcat Grant maybe winning twenty—didn't happen. Jimmy Piersall and Vic Power batting three hundred—nope. Finishing five games behind the go-go White Sox. Even with Minnie Minoso batting three-o-two. Even with the Rock hitting forty-two homers.

Damn!

The Rock. That would be a more appropriate nickname for Jones. After Rocky Colavito, except these days it would get confused with that dopey wrestler, the one who thinks he's an actor.

Or The Bear. After big Mike Garcia, the best reliever the Indians ever had—well, maybe not the best, but Jones's favorite. He can still see him lumbering in from the bullpen.

No. Not lumbering. Because in those days the relief pitchers got a ride in from the bullpen . . . in a car . . . a convertible.

That would have been a fun job, Jones used to think, driving the bullpen car.

Yeah, cars.

It's still one of his retirement dreams—buying a '59 Impala convertible. Black, white top, that long arrow slicing forward, like an assertion, those broad wings on the back, ready to fly. He saw one on eBay for a hundred fifty thousand, mint condition, but it was white, and Jones really wants a black one, though he'd settle for red.

Leisurely Sunday drives up to the Falls, into the wine country. He'll wear a cap, driving gloves. . . .

Maybe get season tickets to the Bisons . . .

Yeah, this retirement thing could be very agreeable.

Getting to it slowly.

These days, doing a few pro bono jobs, solving problems for people, civilians. Aggravations and frustrations. Jones cuts through the formalities, the rules, the mores, the laws, and gets matters settled. Helps people out.

And also, occasionally doing a few jobs for Konnie Kondrasin, a guy for whom Jones over the years has done a lot of work, often messy work, jobs Kondrasin wanted done flawlessly, no worries, no questions, no blowback.

Kondrasin laughs when the subject of Jones's retirement comes up, calling Jones a philanthropical do-gooder. Saying, what, you trying to pay something back?

But, no, Jones isn't paying anything back because he hasn't made any withdrawals, though he isn't sure the metaphor applies. The way Jones sees it is, yeah, sure, he's a *certain* kind of person, but he's never let his work—his deeds—cross into the normal circles of social responsibility. He's been careful not to involve people who are ... who are uninvolved.

Anyways, Kondrasin reminds him, *you can't just walk away*.

Jones was—still is—an expert.

And there's no sense arguing with these guys, guys like Kondrasin. Easier just to go along with the program.

Help me out on this one, Kondrasin will say when he needs Jones. *Give the kid a few pointers*.

And that's what he's been doing, consulting, advising, mentoring this young guy, Akin Stringfield, who's just getting started with Konnie Kondrasin.

Akin returns with a new espresso for Jones, a black coffee for himself, and the two of them sit for a while, smiling, sipping their drinks, looking around, catching each other with quick glances. Still getting to know each other.

Jones is not unhappy to see the kid, but he's wondering what's up? Wondering if Konnie Kondrasin sent him? Wondering if Kondrasin is going to show up, give him an assignment?

"You oughta get yourself a computer," Akin says, nodding his head toward a woman working on a computer a couple tables over.

Jones looks at the woman, looks back at Akin, smiles, pulls some eyeshift, a question mark.

"Yeah," Akin says. "Why I'm here." He touches his coffee cup but doesn't drink. "My mother's boyfriend, maybe you've seen him caning around town on this big-ass peach and black '89 Harley Softail. An old-style helmet. Wears this dungaree jacket, one of those red bandannas around his neck, tied off to the side." Akin uses his hands when he talks, shaping the helmet with his palm, demonstrating where the bandanna is knotted with his fist. "Blue jeans, boots with spurs, like he's some kind of a Wild West cowboy. In fact, when he's not on his bike, he wears this floppy cowboy hat with these big silver conchos on the band."

Jones hasn't seen the guy.

"He's an ironworker by trade," Akin says, "climbs up and walks those girders about a mile off the ground." He looks at the sky. "When there's work. When there's not, he smokes some weed, chills. But he's good to my ma, keeps her head on straight, makes sure she gets to bed at night, gets to work in the mornings."

Akin stops, blows on his coffee, then starts again.

"Right now my ma's out of work because the place where she was giving manicures closed down. She went in one morning, there was a sign, CLOSED." He holds up his hands to show the sign. "The owner took off, owing my ma two hundred nineteen dollars." He gives a small headshake.

"But this guy, man, the cowboy, he keeps her going, keeps her from drinking, which is her favorite way of ruining her life."

Akin takes a sip of coffee, makes a face, looks like he might spit it out.

"There's places to get better coffee," he says to Jones, like it's Jones's fault the coffee's bad.

"I like this place," Jones answers, casting his eyes over the neighborhood. "I'm an ambiance guy."

"Maybe some sugar," Akin says, gets up, goes inside.

Jones wonders where Akin's story is going. Why he's telling it. Is he going to ask for money? Or—and this is what Jones really thinks—Akin just wants to talk. Because, Jones knows, in their business the chances to talk to people are rare. Okay, let the kid talk.

Akin returns and dumps seven packets of sugar into his coffee, stirs for a long time.

"Are you making syrup?" Jones asks.

"Making it almost tolerable."

Jones gets him back on track with a real question. "Does this guy, your mom's cowpoke, have a name?"

"Calvin Wallace," Akin answers. "But he goes by Bootsie. Maybe because he wears those boots with the spurs. My ma calls him Calvin."

Akin tries his coffee again, lets Jones know he's still unhappy, resumes his discourse.

"Hard times right now," he says. "There's work, but about ten weeks ago somebody ran a light, and Calvin had to lay his bike down to avoid a collision. The bike got some minimal damage, scrapes and scratches, but Calvin busted his arm." Akin gives his own arm a chop to illustrate. "Meaning he can't work. Meaning they're both out of work, him and my ma. So what Calvin does is he takes out a loan."

Akin sips his coffee.

"Not a real loan. Not from a bank. From one of those places that cashes checks. You've seen them. People lined up on the sidewalk every payday, going in to get their checks cashed, going to wire money home to Puerto Rico or Somalia or Arabia or where ever they're from. Or they're headed for the bar up the street or the casino or their dope hookup." Akin waves all this away. "Or the grocery store or the pharmacy or the doctor's office, I suppose," he says, again waving his hand vaguely. "It's just the fees are ridiculous."

He shrugs, touches his coffee cup, passes on another sip, continues.

"Calvin finds out he can go in the back room of this place over on Jefferson and borrow enough to see him over. Guarantees it with his bike. He takes enough to cover living expenses and also to make the weekly loan payments until he gets something from the insurance company or gets back to work. He goes in every Friday, gives them a payment, using the loan to pay back the loan. It's crazy."

Akin shakes his head. Jones remains quiet.

"But, okay, they're hanging on. My ma's looking for another job, Calvin's about a week from getting his cast off. And then they catch a huge break. The insurance comes through with a payment, big enough to get them out from under the loan and hold them over until the work starts up again."

He pauses before getting to the main part of the story, tries another sip of coffee.

"Calvin goes in to pay off the loan, all happy and full of gratitude, thinking, yeah, this loan worked out just fine. Thinking the man who gave him the loan is Mister Nice Guy. Saved his life." Akin holds up both hands, palms out. "Nope." And slaps his hands flat on the table. "The guy tells Calvin he's been a day late on every payment. Says the money was due on Thursdays, not Fridays. So the only thing Calvin's been doing this whole time, the guy explains, is keeping up with the interest and the late payments."

Akin is angry. He shifts in his chair, touches his coffee cup, and for a moment Jones thinks he's going to throw the cup on the ground, but then he keeps talking.

"The guy tells him, okay, he can refinance the whole loan, but the interest has gone up since he's shown he's a bad risk."

Now Akin does stand, snatches his and Jones's cups, walks away from the table.

Akin brings Jones a fresh espresso, but has some kind of a bright red slushy for himself. He takes a long sip through the straw, looks at Jones, smiles. Makes a long throaty *aaahhh* sound. And picks up where he left off.

"I didn't know about any of this, you see. They never mentioned it. All the times I'd been with them, they said nothing. I mean, I knew my ma wasn't working, and I knew Calvin broke his arm. I asked about money, but no, no, they said, everything's bang, all set." He pauses, looks at Jones. "I didn't know nothing about the loan. Which if they'd told me beforehand I could've given them the money, and I sure as hell could have told Calvin not to borrow from some . . . some con artist swindler shark. But they're too damned proud to reach out. Oh, no, my ma said—" Akin impersonates her voice. "—I didn't want to bother you, you already give me too much, you take care of your sister. This and that, one thing and another."

Akin puts the straw in his mouth, takes a drink.

"This morning I go in, and my ma's all crying and worried, and I can't even understand what she's saying. And Calvin is laid up on the couch. His cast is cracked in a few places, his face is bruised. I figure he'd been in another motorcycle wreck. He's having trouble breathing because his ribs are probably broken, and, mostly, he's feeling very stupid."

Akin's anger is glaring through. He takes a few slurps from his drink.

Jones has some of it figured out. "Calvin stopped paying, and they had a little reasoning session with him."

"That's it." Akin is nodding. "Calvin walked out when the guy tried to get him to refinance, said he had to think, had to figure out what to do. Probably showed the dude some attitude. But the loan guy wasn't interested in waiting, and last night he sent a couple a lumps around to speed up Calvin's thinking and figuring. Plus, they took his bike. Said he could either bring them the title or fifteen thousand to buy the bike back."

Jones puckers his lips.

"You know how much he borrowed?" Akin asks but doesn't wait for an answer. "Twenty-five hundred."

Jones says, "Now you want to step in?" Akin nods. "And . . . what?"

"Yeah," Akin says, shakes his head, then looks straight at Jones. "What would you do?"

It's a real question, Jones sees in the kid's eyes. Not asking Jones to do anything. Merely not sure how to handle it himself. Asking Jones for advice.

The first thing Jones does is phone Konnie Kondrasin, who laughs and asks Jones if he's feeling lonely, needing company, wonders if retirement is driving him batty. But he says, sure, as a matter of fact, he's in the neighborhood and will stop by the coffee shop.

It's a good thing about their relationship—all business with a heavy dose

of respect. They've always listened to each other. Anytime Kondrasin asked Jones to do a job, no matter how inconvenient—because Kondrasin wasn't Jones's only client—Jones tried, and usually found a way, to accommodate. Like the time in 1977 that Jones, in the middle of an extended assignment in L.A., flew to Buffalo to do a fifteen minute job for Kondrasin, and returned to L.A. on the red-eye that same night. Or the time he interrupted a Costa Rica vacation because Kondrasin needed Jones's touch on a sticky matter involving one of his lieutenants. Conversely, if a job didn't make sense or had loose ends that gave Jones pause or seemed poorly thought out, Kondrasin trusted Jones's assessment, postponed the job, made the necessary adjustments.

Jones knows that Kondrasin is only nominally accepting his retirement. If something came up, Kondrasin wouldn't hesitate to call on Jones to do more than mentoring, and Jones, though he might express reluctance, would not insist that he was retired. He'd do the job.

It is—has always been—a good relationship. With a healthy measure of back-scratching.

The second thing Jones does, as soon as he gets off the phone with Kondrasin, is he gives Akin forty dollars and sends him over to the Farmers Market to buy four jars of yogurt, two plain and two lime, or four plain if they don't have lime this week.

"And get yourself a couple jars. I'll tell you how to mix it with juice to make yourself a tasty breakfast cocktail."

"You the Iron Chef of yogurt?"

Jones smiles. "Whatever money is left over, drop it into the fiddler's hat. Then, stay there and listen to the music until I signal for you to return. Let me speak to Konnie alone for a bit."

Akin is worried that Kondrasin is going to be upset with him for talking to Jones about this problem. But he didn't want to bother Kondrasin with a personal matter.

"He'll appreciate that," Jones says. "Besides, you and I, we're buddies now. That'll cover any questions the man has about loyalties."

"Thanks," Akin says.

Kondrasin's BMW stops along Bidwell, and the big man slides out the back passenger side door. His little dog—a gift from Jones—is tucked under his arm. The car pulls away, as Kondrasin steps up the curb and crosses the sidewalk.

"Are you limping?" Jones asks.

Kondrasin chuckles, stamps his foot. "I had a meeting in the car, and my leg went to sleep."

Kondrasin is more big than fat, but he is fat, and Jones worries about his health.

"Let's stroll on the boulevard," Jones says. "Let Rover get himself a little exercise."

The dog is a wire-haired fox terrier, fluffy white, a small black spot on its

back, and a curly dark lock dripping down between the eyes. Jones, helping out a friend, took it away from a guy who was making it wear a no-bark shock collar and letting it do its business anywhere it wanted, including the friend's flower bed.

Kondrasin looks at the dog, says, "Hear that, he still don't know you're a girl." The dog wiggles in the big man's arms, stretches its neck to lick his chin. Kondrasin chortles, pulls his face back, says to Jones, "I told you, her name's Mimi."

Jones is on his feet, but Kondrasin waves off the idea of a walk, plops himself on the chair across from Jones's, sets the dog on the ground. Points at Jones's cup to indicate he wants a cup of coffee.

Jones comes back with a double espresso for Kondrasin and one of those red slushies for himself.

"What?" Kondrasin chuckles. "You regressing back to childhood? Drinking Kool-Aid?"

Jones sucks on the straw, mimics Akin, *aaahhh*, dabs his lips on a napkin. Says, "What? Are you practicing redundancy? Regressing back?"

They laugh like old friends.

Mimi, the dog, looks back and forth between them, then jumps down from Kondrasin's lap and sniffs around under the table.

Kondrasin sips his coffee, checks out the surroundings, keeps an eye on his pooch, while Jones tells Akin's story. Repeating it almost verbatim, extra emphasis on Akin's concern for his mother, scowling when he tells the part about the loan shark.

Kondrasin says nothing for a long moment, continuing to stare at the boulevard, then he nods his head a couple times.

"That why you got P over there in the boulevard jumping around, looking scared?" Calling Akin by his street name, pointing with his chin.

Jones glances around. Akin is shuffling foot-to-foot, pretending to watch the violinist but keeping an eye on the two men talking.

"He's nervous," Jones says, "doesn't want to involve you in his personal business."

"So," Kondrasin says, "you're gonna intercede? Make it one a your free of charge retirement jobs?"

Jones smiles, picks up his drink. "I like the kid," he says and takes a sip of the slushy.

"Yeah," Kondrasin agrees, letting Jones know he likes Akin too.

"Figured I could give him a hand."

"It's not completely outside a my—" Kondrasin flutters his hand. "—dominion."

"Which is why I called you first."

"Not exactly this place you're askin' about," Kondrasin says. "But I gotta think about repercussions."

Jones says, "I'll make sure you're not implicated." Like saying he's already decided to do something. Adding, "If you're worried, I'll go alone, leave the

kid out. If you think he can be traced back to you."

Again, Kondrasin thinks, then nods, then says, "Let me make a call." Taking out his phone and flipping it open.

Jones says, "I'll get you another cup."

"Get me one a them." Pointing his chin at Jones's slushy.

Jones comes back out, sets the drink and a few napkins on the table.

Kondrasin snaps his phone closed. Tries the icy drink. Smacks his lips.

"Mmm. Refreshing."

Mimi jumps onto the big man's knee to see what's going on.

Kondrasin takes another long swallow. Sets the drink down on the napkins. Rubs the dog's head.

"These check cashing places," Kondrasin says to Jones, "what they do, they cash the checks and they take a percentage. A hefty percentage, but it's what it is. Some people can't go to a bank 'cause they don't have an account, or to the grocery store 'cause they don't have the right ID to get a check cashed. They need the money. Lot a times, they got the money already spent."

He looks at Jones, as if deciding how much he wants to say. Jones waits.

"How it works," Kondrasin continues, "is these places need cash on hand. So a couple times a month, a couple times a week, whatever, depending on how much they need, the volume of the business, they get a delivery, a cash advance. They use the advance to cover the check-cashing. Deposit the customer checks in a bank account. Now they gotta pay back the advance, so they write some checks on the bank account, looks like they're paying for goods and services, various things. Write a few checks to a delivery company, write a couple for computer repairs, maybe a to a supply company for envelopes, pencils, plastic bags, what have you. They write a check for rent on the building, for a snow-plow service, buy some new furniture, pay a security company."

"And the cash advance comes back clean," Jones says.

Kondrasin shrugs. "Everybody's careful, supposed to be careful. Keep it legit. No payday loans. Payday loans are illegal. But no loans of any kind. 'Cause loans are trouble. You gotta do too much to make sure people pay. You do loans, you get a headache from all directions—cops, lawyers, banks, customers, your associates—faster than the interest accrues."

He laughs at his own description, drinks a little of the slushy, then continues.

"The main thing is dealing with the cash advance. Loans interfere. Just do the check cashing, take the percentage from the customer. That alone, they make out. But also they pay off the advance with clean money, they get a little kickback there. They can maybe double their take. Maybe more than double." He puffs the air with his big hand.

"The circle of life," Jones says.

"Guys running these places—" Kondrasin dusts the air with his hand.

"—they're not exactly civilians, but they're nothing, not really. What you call a sole proprietor. They perform a service, get paid a fee."

Jones knows what he means, that the loan sharks aren't connected to any organization.

Kondrasin says, "They're affiliated only where the cash advance comes in, and they get advice."

"No loans."

"No loans of any kind." Kondrasin says. "That's the advice. Trouble is, these guys, they're around all that money. Gives 'em vertigo. They hire a couple tough guys to keep things in order. Get themselves a piece, feel it under their arm or pokin' their belly. Pretty soon, they develop an attitude. Their minds start coming up with bright ideas." He taps a finger against the side of his head.

"Ways to supplement their income," Jones says.

"Supplements, exactly." Kondrasin nods. "A little skim, yeah, sure, it's built in." He humps his shoulders. "But then one of their tough guys starts directing some of the people cashin' the checks to a weekly card game down the street. Another one of the employees says he needs to store a few items in an empty back room, says he'll pay the proprietor rent for the space. Who knows, stolen goods. Someone starts moving dope out of the storefront. All this kicks a little up to the proprietor who likes the money. The place starts fillin' up with activity, cash flowing like water pourin' out of a tap. Enough people inquire about a loan, and the sole proprietor finally can't resist. Figures he's a player, can take care a business." He looks at Jones. "That's what happened to P's guy, right?"

Kondrasin pops the plastic lid off his glass, pours a little of the slushy into it, sets it near the table's edge.

Mimi extends her neck to investigate, touches her nose to the cold liquid, shakes, licks, and goes back for more.

"Look at that," Kondrasin says. "She loves it."

"This place you're asking about," Kondrasin continues, pointing, as if the place is just up the street, though it's across town. "You and P want to go over there?"

"Clear up the loan," Jones says. "And get the motorcycle back."

"I see no problem with that. It's what it is. Between you and the owner of the place, guy who made the loan. He's maybe a little greedy, right? Headed for Wall Street."

Kondrasin chuckles, then nudges the dog off his knee onto the ground.

"What if," Kondrasin says, "on top of P's concerns, you was to push things a little farther, create a little bigger mess."

Jones wrinkles his brow.

"Like maybe you stir up a some confusion in the check-cashing end. Maybe walk off with the advance money. That would draw some attention. Produce some consternation for the owner of the place. Make the guy who puts up the advance have second thoughts."

Jones sees what's coming, is already shaking his head.

Kondrasin says, "Say I was to make this a job."

"I'm retired," Jones says.

"Not a real job," Kondrasin says. "Just enough so I could send someone in to settle things down. Help the owner out, you might say. Get a foot in the door at this particular establishment." He takes another sip of his drink, watching Jones's reaction. "I could use a place like this right now in that location."

"Not what I had in mind," Jones says.

"I know, you're seeing this as one of your good deed retirement missions. Help out Akin's mother, smooth the whole thing over, get the motorcycle back."

Jones nods once.

"What I'm talking about," Kondrasin says, "is two separate parts. Like killing one bird with two stones." Making himself shake with silent laughter, taking a sip of his drink. "You do your business and walk out. You're done, right?" He shrugs, tips his head to the side. "But maybe what you do is create a bigger mess. Don't exactly smooth it out. That way, I can send someone in to tidy up, give the owner a hand after you leave, help him cover his loss, maybe put him a little in my pocket, get myself a little bite of his business. Wouldn't be nothing to do with you. But—" He flutters his hand between them. "—we both get what we want."

Kondrasin slides his huge frame forward. Mimi hops onto his leg.

"What I found out," he says, referring to his phone call earlier, "is the money gets delivered twice a week. A little on Monday to cover people tryin' to get through the week. But Thursday is the big day, upwards of seventy-five, eighty k, getting ready to cash some weekly paychecks. Or, as with P's guy, front people for the weekend."

He lifts himself off the chair, the dog tucked under his arm. "Go ahead over there next Friday, you and P, do what you gotta do. Regarding the money, I'm sayin' it's yours, take what you want, give some to Akin, give him some extra for his mom, for the boyfriend who got hurt."

As if by magic, the BMW pulls up at the curb. Kondrasin looks down at Jones, nods his head.

"'Course, it's up to you," he says. "I don't wanna encroach on your retirement."

The Next Thursday

At eight o'clock in the morning, Jones and Akin are sitting in a 1992 Ford Econoline that Akin picked off a used car lot south of the city, stripped out the back seats, and stuck on a set of unregistered plates.

Parked on Jefferson Avenue, in a part of town where almost forty years ago Jones did a job for Konnie Kondrasin. Two guys, lowlife barkeeps, major and continuous pains in the ass, trying to weasel into something Kondrasin had going. Jones had a driver, took them ten minutes to get across town to the bar on Jefferson, a dive called The Piquant, not far from

where he is now. One hundred fifty seconds to do the job, in and out, the driver double-parked and waited, kept the engine running. Ten minutes to get back to the place Jones was staying, a tiny, third-floor apartment on Lexington Avenue Buffalo, the fifteen-minute city, anywhere to anywhere in fifteen or less. Jones got back in time to catch *The Odd Couple*. He wishes that show was still on TV. Felix cracked him up.

The neighborhood looks different now, like a war zone struggling to come back. Long stretches of missing buildings, rock and weed and trash-packed lots. Sidewalks cratered and cleft from frost heaves and disregard. Detritus clumped in corners, along edges—paper scraps, plastic bags, tufts of last autumn's leaves, a pair of sneakers caught on an electric wire over the street, flattened cardboard boxes where bums sleep in doorways of abandoned buildings.

They're watching a place called El Al Habiba Bodega. Makes Jones laugh. Cross-cultural.

The grimy windows are festooned with big posters advertising cheap cigarettes—Marlboro, Parliament, Newport, Camel. Three small signs in one corner say, CASH TRANSFERS and CHECKS CASHED and MONEY ORDERS. A red neon sign, faint in the bright morning light, reports that the place is OPEN.

A few people go inside, then come out, counting their change, stamping a pack of smokes against the heel of their hand. Ripping open a bag of chips, a pack of cupcakes.

Shortly before nine, a line begins to form along the front of the building. Right now, three people—two men and one women, all of them smoking cigarettes, the woman rocking side-to-side and intermittently squinting at her cell phone.

"Early birds," Jones says, just to be saying something. "Got their paychecks last night."

"Or," Akin says, "making payments on last week's loan, or last month's. Some going to take a fresh dive into debt." He shakes his head, thinking about his mom's boyfriend, Calvin, borrowing money from a place like this. "Why you think they're standing outside?"

"Partly crowd control," Jones says. "Partly because they're waiting on the money to arrive and don't want a lot of people inside when it does."

Akin is both worried and agitated. Worried that he's a nuisance, dragging his boss, Konnie Kondrasin, and his mentor, Jones, into his personal affairs. Agitated because he's eager to get going. He'd wanted to take care of this earlier, wanted to go see the loan shark immediately, didn't want to wait until Thursday. He didn't care about the extra money, and, in fact, he was prepared to pay back the original loan, maybe even some of the interest, wipe the slate clean, and then speak to his mother and Calvin, tell them something about if they ever do that again.

Jones has explained everything more than once, reassured Akin that he's not a nuisance, and laid out Kondrasin's objectives.

He reviews everything now. "Two stones," he says, using Kondrasin's metaphor, "for one bird."

"So, Mr. K's going to take over this dump after we mess it up?" Akin asks for about the twenty-fifth time.

"That's the plan."

Jones watches Akin's face as it becomes sullen.

"I don't know," Akin says after a few minutes.

In some ways, Akin reminds Jones of himself when he was young. Wanting to keep his *business* separate from ordinary people, conventional people.

"A place like this," Jones says, "provides a service that some people need."

"Who needs it?" Akin says venomously. "People like us? Got a need to launder our dirty money?"

"I was thinking about the people who don't have all the right papers and real bank accounts but need. . . ."

Akin cuts him off. "Maybe, but, man, cleaning up a little cash and and robbing regular folks when they're down are two very different things." Making a distinction now between the check-cashing and the loan-sharking.

"Criminals," Jones says, "you just can't trust some of them."

Akin snaps his head around, glares at Jones.

Jones holds his gaze steady on Akin.

Until Akin's anger thaws, leaks out, and he chuckles, shakes his head.

Then, Akin says, "I guess I'll just wait and see what Mr. K does when he takes this place over."

Jones watches him for another minute, then asks, "Do you like baseball?"

Akin nods and shrugs, looks across at the bodega, at the line of people out front, now up to four.

"The most famous double-play combination in baseball history," Jones says. "Tinker to Evers to Chance. You ever hear of them?"

Akin glances sideways at Jones.

Jones says, "Magicians on the field, but they didn't speak to each other off the field."

Akin stares at Jones. "What's your point?" he finally says.

"I'm just saying, you don't necessarily have to approve."

Another long wait, and then Akin laughs and says, "You know what, old man? That little illustration from your childhood or whenever it was has absolutely no application here."

Jones looks back at the front of El Al Habiba Bodega. "I thought it did."

They're silent, and Jones thinks for a while about baseball, deciding that he's going to get tickets—maybe even tonight—and take Akin to a Bisons game. One of these days, they'll drive over to Cleveland, catch an Indians game—maybe after he picks up his '59 Impala.

The cash delivery arrives at nine sharp.

A bright silver Escalade pulls up in front of El Al Habiba Bodega, and two huge black guys get out, both wearing loafers, dress pants, open-collared shirts, and loose-fitting sport jackets, one of them carrying a soft zippered bag, the other patting his right hip, the back of his waist, under his

left arm, wanting everyone in the universe to know that he's heavily armed.

"Do you recognize those guys?" Jones asks.

"Because they're black?"

"Do you?"

"No, but I'm gonna be a little unhappy if on top of everything else we put some brothers out of business. You know what the jobless rate is for black males in Buffalo?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Right around fifty percent."

"These guys will have work trying to find us," Jones says. "And if they shoot us, maybe they'll get a bonus."

"Oh, well, then," Akin says. "That's a load off."

The two men go inside and come back out empty-handed in less than three minutes, get in the Escalade, and drive off.

It takes another ten minutes before the first person in the line out front is permitted entry to the bodega.

Akin is squirming to go, but Jones says they'll wait a bit, let a few customers go through, get their checks cashed, make sure things are running smoothly, and then they'll go in.

By nine thirty, five people have gone in and come out. The line is down to three for the moment.

Jones gives the okay, and Akin starts the van, pulls up the street, makes a u-turn, and comes back down. Stops just beyond the driveway next to El Al Habiba Bodega, douses the engine, drops the key on the floor, and hops out.

Jones watches in the side mirror as Akin takes his place at the rear of the line, head down, shoulders hunched, hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, his baggy shirt fluffed over his belt.

Ten minutes later, three more people are in line behind Akin, and he's moved up to the front. Jones slides out of the van, heads straight for the bodega door. Akin gives the door a push and steps back to let Jones enter ahead of him.

Inside, Jones is met by a stocky, dark-complexioned guy with a garish tattoo on his arm—some kind of a monster with ragged black wings, crooked claws, a dopey cartoon face, fangs dripping blood, the whole thing encircled by the words "I'm Already in Hell."

The guy is sitting on a stool staring at the screen of his cell phone, not paying full attention, but aware. He holds up one hand, touching Jones's chest, shaking his head without looking at Jones.

"Wait your turn, man."

The walls of the place are lined with mostly bare shelves. A few hold bottled water and soda, various kinds of snacks, chips, corn curls, cupcakes. Along the far side stands a counter with an ornate, old-fashioned cash register, and behind it a full display of cigarettes. A portion of the counter is

separated, surrounded by bulletproof glass that reaches above eye level, a thin slot at the base. Behind the glass, a man counts out money and slides it through the slot. The customer picks it up and turns to leave.

"I'm here to see Ed," Jones says to the doorman. It's the name Akin got from Calvin.

"Who're you?" the doorman wants to know, glancing at Jones but still not really seeing him.

"He's expecting me," Jones says, putting a finger on the guy's arm and pushing it away.

The guy takes his time sliding off the stool, mumbles, "Wait here," and turns toward the back.

Jones ignores the order, and follows the guy through the door at the back of the room, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Akin has stepped inside.

They enter a dimly lit hallway, about fifteen feet long with three doors, one on the left, two on the right. One is probably the can, Jones figures, one a storeroom. The guy taps on the left side door and then enters immediately, leaving the door open.

Calvin's Harley is parked at the back end of the hallway, facing forward, helmet balanced on the seat.

Jones thinks about hopping on the bike and driving down the hallway, across the front room, crashing out the front door, skidding onto the sidewalk, kicking forward, off the curb, surging down the street with a loud *va-voom*. Amusing himself with the image, because it's absurd, he's never even straddled a motorcycle let alone driven one. Plus, he can see, the key is not in the ignition.

Of course, that's sort of the plan, except with Akin driving the bike, Jones following in the van. And not exactly having to crash through doors or even hurry all that much. Because they're going to *convince* Ed to give up the bike without any fuss.

Jones hears someone saying, "Who is it? I'm not expecting anyone." The voice moving closer to the office door, it's owner coming into view, looking at Jones.

"What can I do for you?" Not too abrupt, because seeing Jones he's not sure. "I'm Ed Mackey."

Jones is in his work costume. Zippered charcoal windbreaker, even though it's about eighty-five degrees, partly zipped, over a blue Oxford cloth shirt, black cotton pants, black slip-on Merrell shoes. Indians baseball cap. He's a cross between a chump and something else, something—someone—that Ed Mackey maybe should listen to. Jones has his hands in the jacket pockets.

"I'm here to discuss a loan," Jones says.

Mackey still isn't sure, but he feels better thinking Jones is a potential customer. "A loan?" he repeats. "This isn't a loan company."

"It's a private matter," Jones says ambiguously, shifting his eyes from Mackey to the other guy.

"A private matter?" Again, Mackey gives Jones a long look, then says something in a low voice to the doorman, who heads back out front. To Jones, he says, "Come on in." Closing the office door.

Mackey goes behind the desk, waves to the two visitor chairs. Jones chooses the one closest to the window and scoots it to the right, getting as much of the window as possible behind him, the light coming over his shoulder into Mackey's eyes.

"How can I help you, Mr . . . ?"

"Jones," Jones says. See if it means anything to him.

"Jones?" Mackey repeats. Like he doubts it, like, no, that's not your name. Behind his own desk, he's more confident. He picks up a pen and prints the name on the top line of a yellow legal pad, pronouncing each letter aloud as he writes.

Jones is feeling his way. Not sure how he's going to handle this. He doesn't usually meet with people, sit at a desk, give them his name, discuss matters.

No. He's spent his entire adult life in a job that necessarily minimized social intercourse. A job that required a certain protective disdain toward others. Disinterest. Dispassion. Detachment. The Three D's. You have to have it, he told himself for forty-plus years. Forty-four and a half to be exact. Since he was twenty, just a kid, just out of the Army. Wouldn't have made it, he knows, if he hadn't been able to separate himself.

But this is Akin's idea—he wants Mackey to know what's going on, that it was the way he treated Calvin, overcharging him, roughing him up, confiscating the bike, that has brought this devastation—Akin's word, devastation—down on him.

Let him know, Akin said to Jones, that he could've gotten his money and even some ridiculous interest payment if he hadn't cheated and lied and been so damned greedy.

Mackey is looking at Jones, tapping his pencil against the legal pad, expecting something further.

"Researcher," Jones says, trying to anticipate the next question.

Mackey holds his look, then repeats, "Researcher?" Again, like it's a challenge. He writes it beneath the name. Says, "How about a first name?"

Jones chuckles again, because, no, as a matter of fact, when he's using Jones, he doesn't have a first name, doesn't need one.

But he says, "Guy." Because of that thing people do, *the Guy from*.

"Guy?"

Jones spells it. Says, "It's French." And says it again, giving it the French pronunciation, something like *Gee*. "Same as the writer. Guy de Maupassant."

Mackey appears stymied.

Jones says, "Or Guy Lafleur, the hockey player." And laughs.

Mackey snags on Jones's laughing, speeds up the pencil tapping. Turns his gaze to a glare, letting Jones know he's a tough guy. And he probably is

some kind of tough guy. Sitting here in this crappy office handing out cash to desperate people, people living day-to-day, spending faster than they get, people who can't get bank loans, who have no other recourse than come in here and deal with this usurer. People who require a wedge of hard eye contact to remind them not to fall behind in their payments.

Mackey says, "Am I funny?" Pushing it. "You're here to talk about a loan and you're laughing at every damned thing I say. So, tell me—" Aiming his pencil at Jones. "—what am I saying that's so damned funny?"

Jones holds his eyes squarely on Mackey, letting a little of his own hardness shine for the first time. "Funny is perhaps too strong a word."

"Too strong?"

Jones tips his head minutely sideways.

"Fine. What's a better word?"

"Droll."

"Droll?"

Jones has just about had it with Mackey repeating everything he says. Wishing at this moment that he hadn't agreed to Konnie Kondrasin's scheme, merely to shake up this guy's business, prepare an opening for Kondrasin to step in and take over. What he'd like to do is put this weasel squarely in his place. Crush him.

Jones says, "I don't often talk to people like you."

"People like me." Mackey rocks back, rolls his eyes, mugging for an imaginary audience. Reminding Jones of Johnny Carson when he overdid it on something Ed or Doc said. "And just what kind of person am I?"

"Well," Jones says, "I guess you're a revolting and repellent scumbag loan shark."

This catches Mackey completely off guard. Its boldness sets him back.

Jones says, "Actually, I came to recover that motorcycle out there in the hall." Rhyming it with popsicle. Smiling at Mackey. "The only reason I'm talking to you is to ask for the key."

Mackey is speechless. But pretty sure he's still in charge.

Jones holds out his hand.

Mackey, not even trying to conceal it, hits a button on the edge of his desk—Jones hears a buzzer go off in the front of the building—summonsing the doorman and probably the counterman and anyone else who might be around.

As the door opens, Mackey starts to speak, but stops short and looks puzzled when it's Akin who enters the room, carrying a fat roll of clear tape and a hot glue gun.

"Who the hell are you?"

Jones and Akin are sitting along the first-base line watching the Bisons' pitcher as he completes his pre-game bullpen session. It's a hot night, and the pitcher has already worked up a good sweat. He pulls on his warm-up jacket, picks up a towel, and heads for the dugout, mopping his brow with the towel.

The field is clear, and the grounds crew is raking the base paths in preparation for the start of the game. The two managers are meeting at home plate with the umpires, turning in their line-up cards, reviewing the Coca Cola Field ground rules.

Jones is shelling ballpark peanuts and tossing them into his mouth. Akin is eating a hot dog. Jones has a plastic glass of beer. Akin has a Coke.

"I don't much like beer," Akin says. "Especially with food."

"Coke will rot your teeth," Jones tells him. "And your stomach."

"I love the things you teach me," Akin says.

"I'm going to give you some pointers on how to watch a ball game."

"Great. How about, you gonna fill me in on Tinker Bell and Medgar Evers?"

"No chance."

A local cop sings the National Anthem, and the game starts. The first pitch is a called strike.

"Okay," Jones says, "I'm ready. Tell me the whole story."

When they left El Al Habiba Bodega, Akin drove the motorcycle to his mother's house, and Jones drove the Econoline to the Galleria Mall where he'd parked his car earlier. Wiped down the van's steering wheel and door handles (inside and out), popped off the unregistered plates, and abandoned the van.

He drove is own car back into town, stopped to buy two tickets for tonight's game, then went home and took a nap. He picked Akin up at his mother's, and they came to the ballpark.

Jones hasn't heard Akin's version of what happened at the bodega. They've been waiting for the pre-game hoopla to settle down. But now, he's eager for Akin to tell him.

"You took care of your mother and her boyfriend?" Jones asks to get him started.

"I did," Akin says. "Gave Calvin the bike, gave him back the money he'd paid out to the loan guy. And I gave my ma another ten k." He looks at Jones. "That leaves your share, total of about . . ."

Jones cuts him off. "No, no, no." They went over this part early that morning, before they even went inside. "I already told you, I don't want a share."

Akin tries to say something.

"It'll screw up my tax bracket."

Akin nods solemnly, using his eyes to show Jones some respect, to thank him for helping.

Jones rolls his hand, and Akin tells the story.

"So, I follow you inside, right? Watch you put your finger on Mister Tattoo's hand, move it away." Miming the action with an extra flourish, pushing an invisible hand off his chest. "I tell the guy behind me in the line, uh-oh, I say, the place is gonna be closed for a few minutes. I tell him you

and me are the bank inspectors, and we're gonna do a quick check, won't take long. Wait here, I tell him. Soon as you go through that back door, I flip the lock on the front door, cross the room, leap up on the counter, go over the top of the glass and drop down inside the money booth."

Akin flashes his hands to show all the moves, how quickly he completed them. Jones can picture it, the kid moving like the wind.

"Man, I go so fast, the dude don't even realize I'm right there with him." Akin bugging his eyes to show the guy's surprise. "I subdue Money Boy." Akin forms his thumb and forefinger into a simulated pistol, sticks the barrel under his own chin, shoves his face upward.

Jones is chuckling softly.

"Now, the other one, Mister Tattoo, comes back out front, and I lay them both out on the floor, face down. I gotta take a piece away from each one of them. I figure they'll be still, but then I spot a role of packing tape and that glue gun. You ever see fingers glued together?"

Akin swirls his hands some more to show that he bound the two men with the tape, squirted a little hot glue between their fingers.

"Next thing, "I start putting all the money in a bag, that same black bag we saw the guy carrying in. But then—" Akin brightens his eyes, as if demonstrating a light going off in his head. "—I get a better idea."

Jones thinks, not for the first time, that he's never known anyone as animated as Akin. He could tell the whole story wordlessly, simply by acting it out, changing his facial expressions.

"I reopen the front door and let the people come in from outside one at a time. Figured I'd stay open until you summoned me, but there were only four of them. I looked at the face value of each of their checks. They were for like one hundred sixty-seven dollars. Two hundred twenty-three. Ninety-seven dollars and change. One guy had three-eighteen. I gave each of them five thousand, and I handed back their checks."

Jones laughs out loud. He's going to want to hear this part a few more times.

"I told them," and here Akin slips into his bank inspector voice, quoting himself, "This, my friend, is a special bonus day for you. We want you take this extra cash—it's part of the stimulus money—and open a real bank account. Try to keep away from places like this one."

Jones has to hold his hand up to stop Akin.

"Did you tell them you were Robin Hood?"

Akin smiles. "Nah, they figure that out for themselves. But I had to tell them you were Friar Tuck."

Jones loves this kid.

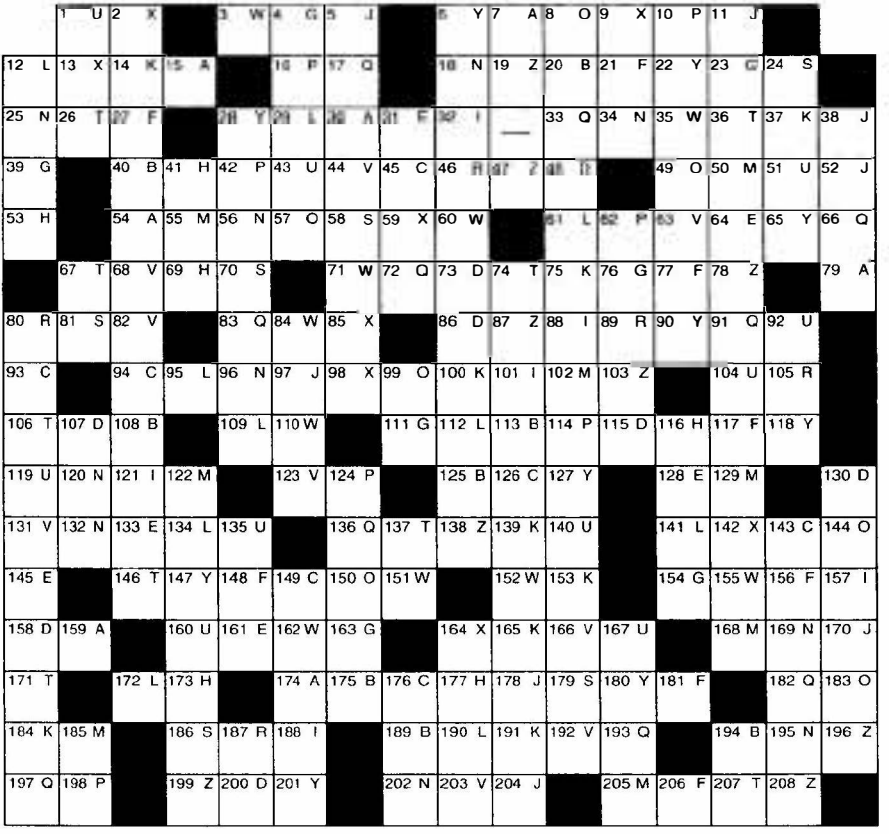
DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER

Using the definitions below, fill in as many words as you can in the WORDS column. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram denotes the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the WORDS column, reading down, will spell out the author and the work quoted.

The solution to the puzzle will appear in the September issue.

	DEFINITIONS	WORDS
A.	Transgress, in a peripatetic way	54 30 159 174 7 79 15
B.	Hardly lithe	125 108 113 194 20 175 40
C.	Tablet option	149 143 45 176 126 93 94
D.	Large-game hunter	48 158 73 200 107 130 115 86
E.	Buffeted	128 133 31 145 161 64
F.	Gave a high sign, perhaps	156 77 21 206 117 148 27 181
G.	Handle	111 39 163 23 4 76 154
H.	Derby entrants	116 69 41 173 53 177
I.	Resembling triglyceride	88 32 157 121 101 188
J.	Consequence	97 204 11 38 5 52 170 178
K.	Vermont's site	75 14 37 100 165 153 191 139 184
L.	Luxe ablution: 2 wds.	172 29 12 61 134 95 141 109 112 190
M.	"All Er Nuthin'" musical	129 122 205 55 185 102 168 50
N.	Far from practiced: 3 wds.	120 18 132 25 195 34 56 169 96 202
O.	1947 craft: hyph. wd.	144 150 49 8 99 57 183
P.	Brooding fowl	124 114 42 16 198 62 10
Q.	Potamogale: 2 wds.	17 136 72 91 33 193 83 197 66 182



R. Bound

105 46 187 89 189 80

S. Bristly plant

81 24 186 58 70 179

T. Employ a thumb

106 36 171 146 137 26 74 67 207

U. Prynne's scarlet letter, e.g.

140 51 119 92 104 1 135 43 160 167

V. Stubborn

192 166 131 68 44 123 63 203 82

W. Regional figure

84 60 3 71 152 155 35 162 110 151

X. Unvarying, in a way

85 39 98 13 164 142 2 9

Y. Same

180 28 22 65 90 147 6 201 118 127

Z. Tarkington novel

208 19 47 138 78 199 87 196 103

IN THE LAND OF MAKE-BELIEVE

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

Two or three weeks before Jordan Dunne was scheduled to breathe his last in the lime-green gas chamber at San Quentin State Prison, Howard Strickling popped into my office on the third floor of the Thalberg Building at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, wondering aloud, "Got a minute, Chris?" like I had any choice. His business card called him the studio's head of publicity, but he was more than that. Strickling was MGM's "fixer." He made problems disappear as easy as Blackstone the Magician worked his stage illusions. Easier. He knew where all the bodies were buried, having buried many of them himself, or so the industry whispers went.

I invited him with a gesture to a visitor's chair and said, "All the minutes you need, Strick," adding the piano-keyboard smile I often used with him, to disguise the discomfort his unexpected visits always generated. His own smile appeared more sincere, but it never was good to presume anything about Strickling, possibly the best actor on a movie lot that included the likes of Gable, Tracy, Bill Powell, and both Barrymore brothers.

He pushed the inner office door closed, planted himself against the wall, and said, "Mr. Mayer has once again cast me as his messenger boy, not five minutes ago, from the clubhouse at Santa Anita. He has horses running in the fourth and the seventh today, high hopes for both nags, Longden on one, Arcaro on the other."

Louis B. Mayer was the highest paid executive in the U. S. of A., and he ran MGM like slavery was still in style. He'd become my nominal boss man four years ago, in '34, after I quit the L.A. police force following an ugly showdown involving one of his starlets and a pair of badge-toting boys in blue who'd viciously manhandled her.

"Top jocks in America," I said. "Longden leading the pack in races won this year, Arcaro coming off his Kentucky Derby win aboard Lawrin."

"Nothing too good or too expensive for the chief. You want to be a winner, what you do is associate with winners. . . . You a rail jock, Chris? Never would have suspected."

"The two-dollar window gets all my action, so I doubt Mr. Mayer sent

Hank Blaustein

you over with a tip. What's up, besides my curiosity?"

Strickling eased a filter-tip from the gold cigarette case he pulled from an inside jacket pocket of his hand-tailored suit, fired it with a matching lighter—Christmas gifts from Joan Crawford—and let the smoke drift from the corners of his mouth. "He wants you to visit one of our former contract players on his behalf."

On his behalf. That caught my curiosity. In Mayer's world, *on his behalf* rhymed with *bad news*, something he normally delegated to his bulldog of a second-in-command, Eddie Mannix, or Strickling, sometimes both, the same way they often worked as a team protecting MGM's stable of stars from career-threatening incidents of sex, sin, and worse. Last year it was throwing a shroud over the truth about Jean Harlow's death, followed by hustling Wally Beery off to London on an extended vacation before the hard-drinking ex-circus roustabout could be implicated in the street brawl outside the Trocadero nightclub that caused the death of Ted Healy.

I said, "Anyone I know?"

"Manner of speaking," Strickling said. He let a pause play out like a Garbo close-up. "Jordan Dunne."

Jordan Dunne.

I had been the lead detective who uncovered the evidence that linked Dunne to the deaths of a high-end Hollywood hooker and her dandified pimp boyfriend the night of the fifth Academy Awards fete at the Ambassador Hotel, what the dailies splashed across their front pages as "The Movie Murders."

Strickling recognized my puzzled look and registered amusement, answering my question before I asked it, in a quiet voice not entirely free of a modest stutter or his West Virginia origin. "The chief said seeing you was Dunne's idea, not his. He saw no harm in extending a courtesy to an actor who had once shown such promise and might have hit the heights of motion-picture stardom except for the sordid mess that cut his career short."

"How'd he get to Mr. Mayer in the first place?"

"The chief didn't say. I didn't ask. Ask Dunne when you see him."

I took off for San Quentin the following morning, dawn just breaking, in one of the elegant Chrysler Imperials the studio made available for visiting exhibitors and dignitaries, and for special situations, like this drive up the coast to the Marin County peninsula, across the Golden Gate bridge from San Francisco, covering the three hundred eighty-eight miles in less than twelve hours. My only stop was for a fast burger, fries, and a bottomless cup of java at a truckers' grease bowl about halfway there. The weather was all kindness, temperature in the light seventies punctuated by a soft breeze drifting inland from the Pacific. The traffic was light and unhurried as I drove past farmland, orchards, scattered empty acres, and roadside vendors selling fresh-picked fruits and vegetables at bargain prices off the backs of flatbed trucks.

I rolled into an auto court about a half mile from the prison and grabbed the last vacancy. Before making change and allowing me to sign the guest register, the manager held up to the light and snapped the twenty-dollar bill I'd paid with. Satisfied it was legit, she said in a bullfrog croak that fit her middle-age flab and features perfectly, "You'd be damn nigh surprised how often people try to pass me a phony Andy Jackson. Worse some a-them than the inmates they come to call on. That what brings you up these parts, Mr.— " She checked the register. "—Blanchard? You got someone you're keen on visiting?"

"Someone."

"Dollars to doughnuts he's got a name."

"Dunne. Jordan Dunne."

"Yeah, I heard-a him. His date with eternity coming up soon enough. You a relative or maybe one of them newspaper reporters tryin' to corner him for an interview while the cornering's possible?"

"That's me," I said, hoping my white lie would end the conversation.

No such luck.

"So you know he was an actor once upon a time," she said, holding prisoner the latchkey to my room. "Couldn't put a face to the name until I saw the pictures they run with the stories about him murdering that poor girl and her boyfriend in cold blood that night they give out the acting statues and all. And he wasn't even up for one, not him or that poor girl, either of them, so who knows what to make of it?"

"Who knows?" I said, my upturned palm reaching after the latchkey.

"Lovers' quarrel, you suppose? We even have had one or two here in the court over the years. Makes a bloody mess, I can guarantee you that. Cost us bedsheets and blankets, and lots of elbow grease washing away them bloodstains on the walls and on the floor. Not your room, you shouldn't worry about that, not for a single second," she said, surrendering the key after a few minutes more of pummeling me with her small talk.

Lovers' quarrel?

Why not?

It wouldn't be the first time a john found himself battling a pimp over some two-dollar prostie who had turned into more than a good time bounce between the sheets, but not always with the deadly results in this instance.

I thought back to how the eight men and four women on the jury listened intently while I described finding Dunne in the bedroom of the Ambassador cottage, where MGM had celebrated its collection of Academy Awards after the star-studded, black-tie dinner ceremonies in the Cocoanut Grove, when gold-plated statuettes were handed out to best actor Wally Beery for *The Champ*, Frances Marion, for her *The Champ* screenplay, and Louis B. Mayer accepting for the year's best picture, *Grand Hotel*.

"I'd drawn the case after uniformed officers were called in by the hotel general manager the next morning," I told them. "A housekeeping crew

had found the cottage in total disarray. Empty bottles of Dom Perignon decorating the floors and table surfaces. Enough wasted and abandoned food—lobster, caviar—to serve the Midnight Mission's clientele for a month.

"The nude body of Miss Kelly Rush was sprawled out on the king-size bed with Mr. Thaddeus Clancy beside her in a similar state of undress, dead, their faces in bloody ruin, their torsos painted red by the blood that poured from the additional gunshots each received at close range, two for Miss Rush, three for Mr. Clancy, seven bullets in all fired from the Colt .45 semi-automatic freely handed over to me by Mr. Jordan Dunne. I had found him hiding in the bedroom closet, sitting in a corner, his arms wrapped around his knees, shaking from fear and remorse, otherwise stoic, freely admitting, 'It was me killed them. I saw her with him—like I suspected all along—and snapped; that's all; the way it was.'"

That's what he'd said, word for word.

The more Dunne tried sounding sincere and remorseful, the more he sounded like he was pitching dialogue lifted from a crime melodrama, but he stuck to his story. In his version, the Rush woman didn't street-corner for a living. She was an actress looking for a break when he met her, trying to get out from under a boyfriend—Clancy—who wasn't above roughhousing her anytime he had one too many.

He even took the witness stand to repeat his story and, with a nod in my direction, confessed all over again in almost the same words he had used when I found him, not as good as Jimmy Cagney might have delivered them, but good enough.

The jury needed less than an hour to find him guilty on two counts of first-degree murder and sentence him to death by hanging, the state's official method for disposing of its convicted undesirables since 1893, when a killer named José Gabriel cracked his neck dropping through the splintered wooden trapdoor at San Quentin.

Dunne should have been long dead and gone by now, even allowing for an appeal that dragged on for months before it was denied and his death sentence reaffirmed. He was one among dozens of death row residents who'd survived the legislative debates and vote that outlawed hangings and made the gas chamber at San Quentin the only lawful method of execution in California.

Dunne was somewhere down on a list that hadn't been formalized yet, why there was the question of when he'd be dressed in blue jeans and a clean white shirt and taken barefoot to be strapped into the a chair in the sealed gas chamber; urged to breathe deeply once the executioner pulled the lever that dropped potassium cyanide pellets into a vat of sulfuric acid to flood the chamber with a lethal mix of hydrogen cyanide gas. Two weeks, maybe three, barring any legal hitches or an unlikely last-minute reprieve by the governor.

I slept fitfully through the night, wondering why and how Dunne got to Mayer or why Mayer agreed to his request to have me visit. Did he hope

to convince me to recant my sworn testimony in a way that bought him a reprieve and, maybe, a new trial and a different outcome?

Fat chance of that happening.

As unlikely as the USC Trojans beating the undefeated Duke Blue Devils in the upcoming Rose Bowl game.

Turns out, it wasn't what Jordan Dunne had in mind.

Quite the opposite.

Normal visiting hours at San Quentin ran two and a half hours, eight to ten-thirty and eleven to one-thirty during the week, more Saturday and Sunday, when the admissions area was crowded with visitors waiting out a close inspection before being allowed through the iron gates.

I'd called ahead, and a prison staff car was waiting for me, its motor running, when I stepped out from my auto-court room at eight-thirty the next morning, a half hour late for my scheduled sit-down with Dunne.

"Warden said for me to tell you not to worry," the uniformed driver said, sucking life out of his Chesterfield as I climbed into the front passenger seat. "Dunne, he ain't got anywhere else to be, anyway, not yet."

He flicked the butt out the window and sped off, getting us within minutes inside the four hundred thirty-two–acre compound on the shores of San Francisco Bay, past the eighty-seven homes occupied by prison staff members and their families, to an entrance outside the reach of inmates below the rank of trustee.

Two stern-faced guards armed with truncheons formed my welcoming committee and fired off a list of safety instructions. They were joined by two others decked in full riot gear for a cautious march along corridors that smelled of sweat, urine, and rodent infestation and led to an isolated three-story building designated THE ADJUSTMENT CENTER. That building housed a dangerous breed that included prisoners on death row.

Dunne was the sole occupant of a visitor's galley, seated at a metal table bolted to the floor at the far end of the room, his fingers tapping out a nervous melody he replaced with a musical *ta-dah!* as I approached and settled onto the solid metal chair across from him.

Prison had robbed him of his Golden State tan, and he'd dispensed with the sliver of mustache favored by Gable. Tightly cropped hair had replaced the tall wave of auburn that served him particularly well in costume epics, but intact were the soft good looks that had routinely led to his casting as the hero's best friend or inept nemesis, a Ralph Bellamy who lost the girl before the final fade-out.

"To paraphrase Alice's white rabbit, 'You're late, you're late, for a very important date,'" Dunne said, like a parent scolding his naughty child.

"What makes it very important, Dunne?"

"We have our privacy and for as long as we need it, for one. Or is that for two? Feel special? I do. All credit due his royal majesty, Mr. Louis B.—B. as in boss—Mayer. It's unlikely I would have the pleasure of your company if the decision was yours alone to make." His honeysuckle voice was

tempered by one smoke or shot of booze too many, but still knew how to make every word count.

I said, "The pleasure is all yours, Dunne, and you got me here, why? If it was to say goodbye, you could have invested in a postage stamp."

"It was to say thank you. I wanted to do that in person, face-to-face, especially since I heard you'd traded your Dick Tracy shield for what has to be a lucrative position with Mayer."

"They still know my name at Clifton's Pacific Seas."

"Well, the old junk dealer, he can afford to pay you twice, three times whatever the amount is, him being the highest-paid executive in the country. Or is it the whole world by now?"

"Thank me for what? It was my pleasure to get you convicted for as ugly a pair of murders as I ever dealt with serving on the force."

"And my pleasure, being convicted at the time, I assure you. Thank you for that, but that was then. Definitely not now. Now is for an entirely different reason, Detective Blanchard."

"Mister Blanchard. . . . Let me guess. You've come up with a story meant for me to buy hook, line, and sinker, get me racing off to rescue your sorry ass with whatever it takes to land you a new trial and a not-guilty verdict." Dunne's face lost any sense of expression. "Thanks but no thanks," I said, and got up to leave.

He called after me, quietly, "You couldn't be more wrong, Mr. Blanchard. I did not commit those murders, but your being here has nothing to do with any desire on my part to be retried, found not guilty, and set free. Quite the opposite is true. I am ready to meet my Maker, but strictly on my terms if your boss wishes to continue enjoying the benefits of my silence, and I assure you Mr. Mayer does—or you wouldn't be here."

"You have my attention," I said, and settled back down at the table. "Let's hear it."

"Where shall I begin?"

"The beginning works for me."

"The night of the killings, the MGM celebration in that cottage at the Ambassador Hotel, my date for the Oscar awards was Kelly Rush. I'd never met her, but it wasn't the first time the boys in publicity arranged twosomes for the fan mags and gossip mills. Get those cameras snapping pictures, sweet cream for an actor like me, trapped in the B's and always willing to do anything to bust into the spotlight that leads to the big-budget films. What I didn't know. Kelly was no actress, although she had the looks. She was a popular fixture at the Hacienda Arms, you know the place? Classiest whorehouse on the Sunset Strip. Run by Lee Francis. That's where H. Maynard Keynes enters the scene."

"Hal Keynes, the director."

"A Mayer favorite, a moneymaker who cranks out box-office hits, one after the next, on schedule and under budget, and so what if he's a voyeur

and sadist, a bisexual slug who throws sex parties when he isn't coaxing great performances out of Swanson, Shearer and Crawford, Marion Davies. Even Garbo. . . . Keynes had developed this thing for Kelly Rush. He wanted her at the Awards show and the party, but couldn't be seen in public with the beautiful tramp on his arm, so he put the problem to Eddie Mannix, who passed it on to Howard Strickling, who came calling on me to be Keynes's beard. I was uncomfortable with the idea, but Strickling said the magic words. He said, 'It's your best opportunity yet to see and be seen by people who are in a position to do wonders for your career, including Hal, and, of course, Mr. Mayer himself.'"

"And you bought the dream?"

"Why wouldn't I? Wouldn't you, knowing there was a star-making role coming up in Hal Keynes's next movie, *The Lady Says Maybe*, opposite Marlene Dietrich, on loan from Paramount? I'd kill for that part."

I laughed. It took Dunne a moment or two to realize what set me off, and he joined in. I lit a smoke from the pack of Lucky Strikes I pulled from my jacket pocket and offered him one. He waved away the offer, claiming, "I understand they're bad for your health." I laughed again, and again it took him seconds to realize why. "I guess I have dying on my mind," he said, staring into space with a look of inevitability that underscored his boyish smile.

"What was Thaddeus Clancy doing at the party?" I said, steering Dunne back onto the subject.

"Getting murdered, obviously. He was no pimp, the way you and all the papers made him out to be, only a poor sap getting his rocks off with Kelly when Hal Keynes walked into the bedroom, caught them doing the nasty, and—"

He aimed his arm and fired a finger gun multiple times.

"So now your story is Keynes killed them in a fit of jealousy, not you."

"It's the truth, but never my story to tell, or you think we'd be sitting here talking like this today? Keynes was never without a handgun holstered at his hip or under his arm, an affectation, like DeMille always carried a riding crop and Zanuck a polo mallet. Keynes was notorious for sending bullets into the soundstage ceiling or a wall whenever he wanted everybody's attention, which was frequently. Me, I had never in my life shot off anything but my mouth."

"You witnessed him shoot Kelly Rush and Thaddeus Clancy?"

"Heard. I had had too much to drink and was passed out in the bathroom, hanging like yesterday's wash over the bathtub, when I was startled awake by gunshots that were barely audible over the live jazz combo and the studio crowd celebrating like it was New Year's Eve. I struggled to my feet and staggered into the bedroom. Saw two naked bodies on the bed, somebody standing over them with a gun in his hand. I recognized Keynes and called his name before I got hit on the back of the head and my world came crashing down around me.

I woke up who knows how much later, only now it's quieter than kiss-

ing nuns in the convent, and my groaning signals Eddie Mannix and Strickling to double-time over asking how I am and what do I know, what did I see.

"I spelled it out for them, but when I got to Hal Keynes's name, Mannix propelled his fingers over my mouth. 'No,' he said.

"'Not what you saw and definitely not who you saw,' Strickling said. 'Would you like me to explain why?'

"And Mannix said, 'Tell him, Strick, and listen carefully, fella, you know what's good for you same as we know what's good for you.'

"It was hours later before the cops showed, followed by you and Whitey Hendry, from the studio's own police force, and you found me like you did in the bedroom closet, where and how they wanted me to be found, all prepped and ready to act out the dialogue they had given me as part of the scene they were setting for public consumption. . . . *It was me killed them. I saw her with him—like I suspected all along—and snapped; that's all; the way it was.* . . . How's that for memory? Not bad if I do say so myself. My delivery? As believable as ever after all this time. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Blanchard?"

I didn't have to think about an answer. "Your stupidity is what I'm buying," I said. "What on God's green earth could the Fixer and Mannix say or do that'd make you agree to a confession certain to land you on trial for murder and win a one-way ticket to the death house?"

"In a word, Mr. Blanchard—stardom. Strickling spelled out how the scene was to be played, and Mannix placed his hand over his heart, like he was pledging allegiance, and said, 'Speaking for Mr. Mayer, you got my solemn word he will do the right thing by you for helping shield Hal Keynes free and clear from fallout.'

"I said, 'At my expense? I'm expendable where Keynes is not? I'm ready to die for my sins, but not for somebody else's, Mr. Mannix.'

"Mannix said, 'We'll get the best lawyers in the business to represent you with their courtroom magic, pulling rabbits out of the hat that'll win you a not-guilty verdict. Ehrlich, we'll get him down from San Francisco, or maybe Jerry Giesler will have you strolling out of court to the front ranks of film stardom, with Mr. Mayer's personal stamp of approval. Remember how Giesler did the impossible over three trials in '35, getting Busby Berkeley acquitted of a second-degree murder charge for killing two and injuring five on Roosevelt Highway when he crashed head-on into one car and sideswiped another while allegedly blotto out of his mind? You got my word on it, pal, and in this town that's front rank.'"

I had a dog once, mixed breed, combination mutt and mongrel, that gave me the same sad-eyed look I was getting now from Dunne whenever Dog—that was my dog's name—knew he'd done something naughty, like treating the living room rug as a toilet.

"What went wrong?" I said.

"I believed him, about all that, and telling me how Mayer and MGM had influence at every level of government, with law enforcement, with all the

media; how they had the money, the power and the wherewithal to buy anyone they needed, anything they wanted. He used the night's Awards dinner as a cheap example, telling me how March beat Beery for the acting Oscar by one vote, but it only took a few phone calls and a modest donation to the Academy to get it declared a tie.

"He said, 'Before we're done we'll have at least one juror who sees it our way. That's all it takes, fella, one juror to shy from the pack and we have bought ourselves a hung jury, like in Buzz Berkeley. After that, maybe a second hung jury before the D.A. announces the evidence isn't strong enough to secure a conviction, and you move from a jail cell to a soundstage, your own dressing trailer, all the other trimmings we reserve for the best of the best.'"

"Yet here you are, residing in a San Quentin six-by-nine."

"Your doing, Mr. Blanchard. You were entirely credible on the witness stand, not so the two MGM studio cops who lied about being there with you when I was found in the closet, claiming I was drunk as a skunk and talking gibberish, but not once saying anything about murdering anybody. After that, Mannix's assurances and guarantees disappeared like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man*, along with Mannix himself. And Strickling, too. The Fixer having done his part to protect Hal Keynes, who's more successful today than he was back then."

I took a last drag from my Lucky, smashed what was left of it under my heel, and lit a fresh one. "Ancient history, Dunne. Get to the point. What compelled Mr. Mayer to take your phone call? What am I doing up here? What is it you're after?"

When I left him a half hour later, I had my answers.

Mayer's office was on the ground floor of the Art Deco administration building that was built outside the studio gates and named in memory of producer Irving Thalberg after his death in '36. Once past two secretaries and Mayer's gatekeeper, executive assistant Ida Koverman, you entered a space large enough to qualify as a candidate for the forty-ninth state, furnished and decorated in an all-white motif that the boss man had copied from Harry Cohn, who, it was said, had copied the motif from the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

Mayer was intent on a whispered phone conversation as I quick-stepped the long journey to his all-white circular desk on an all-white raised platform at the far end of the room. He looked up and acknowledged my presence with the typical, tight-lipped smile that always had me wondering if there was something wrong with his teeth, which I had never seen. Maybe not all-white or not all there? Not unlikely for someone who'd grown up dirt poor in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, and sold junk off the back of a wagon. His eyes were more revealing, always warm and suspicious at the same time, examining everything from a position of disbelief behind a pair of owlish wire frames that sat high on his prominent hawk-shaped nose.

He pointed me to one of the guest chairs fronting his desk and finished the phone conversation by slamming down the receiver. "Damn actors," he said, bringing up a growl from his throat. "Ingrates. I treat them like my own flesh and blood and it comes around to them treating me like so much *schmutz*, dirt, under their heels."

"I'll take care of the problem after we're finished here," Howard Strickling said, from his perch against a wall dominated by a French Impressionist oil by Renoir, two young girls putting flowers in their hats, that Mayer had picked up on one of his frequent trips to Europe.

"You need me to help lay down the law, Strick, give a holler," Eddie Mannix said. He was sitting at the grand piano, elbows on the closed keyboard supporting his position on the piano bench, fingers laced over his modest barrel belly.

"You put them in a movie called *Sweethearts*, they go and forget they each got a sweetheart waiting for them at home. What's this *meshuggah* world coming to anyway?" Mayer said, his eyes growing moist. He pulled a Cuban the size of a frankfurter from the Spanish wood humidor by the white emergency phone on the desk and clipped it with a surgeon's precision before he allowed Strick to hurry over with his cigarette lighter. He aimed a thick rope of smoke at the ceiling and smiled contentedly.

"Boys, I wanted us all together when we talked over what's next with this Jordan Dunne business," he said. "Chris, I first want you to tell them what you reported to me after you got back from seeing him at San Quentin yesterday, so they both should know." He attacked the Cuban again. "This is serious business, boys, so listen carefully with your thinking caps on straight."

A gesture ceded the floor to me, and I spelled out Dunne's version of events.

"The last time I came across so much bull was at the ring in Tijuana," Mannix said, swiping at the room with the back of a hand.

"Eddie, let the boy finish," Mayer said.

"Who'd believe Dunne anyway, this late date?" Mannix said.

"Eddie, enough," Mayer said.

I said, "Dunne swears he has no desire to blow the whistle on any one of you, stir up a hornets' nest, you in particular, Mr. Mayer. He is quite content and ready to pay the piper for murders he insisted to me he didn't commit, but there's a condition that needs to be met."

"This'll be a good one," Mannix said.

"The state will decide any day now whether to continue death sentence executions by hanging or switch to the gas chamber, one or the other, but not both. Dunne wants to be the last person hung in the state or the first to be executed in the gas chamber. He doesn't care which."

Strickling settled in the guest chair next to me. "Did Dunne explain why?" he said, more curious than concerned.

"Yes, he did, Strick. Dunne came to love the attention, the notoriety, especially the headlines the trial got him, the kind of fame he didn't get

with his movies. He believed it would come after he beat the rap—that's what you had led him to believe—only he didn't beat the rap. When he felt MGM had abandoned him, he tried to confess to the truth, get back into the headlines, but no one would listen. The public moved on to newer scandals, and he dropped off the radar, deader than Kelsey's nuts. Now, whether Dunne is the last convicted murderer hung or the first to suck in the gas, he believes he'll go down in the history books, a different kind of stardom for Jordan Dunne, the kind that'll have people talking and writing about him fifty, a hundred years from now. He's confident Mr. Mayer can make it happen either way."

"He's gone over the edge," Mannix said.

"Why would Mr. Mayer want to?" Strickling said.

"For the same reason Mr. Mayer took Dunne's phone call. For the same reason Mr. Mayer agreed to Dunne's request and sent me up to San Quentin to hear what Dunne had to say. For the same reason I suppose Mr. Mayer called this meeting after I filled him in on what Dunne had to say."

Strickling and Mannix turned to Mayer, who was sitting at attention in his throne of a chair, fondling his cigar and nodding agreement at some private thought.

"He tell you the reason, *boychick*?" Mayer said.

"No, Mr. Mayer. Claiming that secrets wouldn't be secrets if they were meant to be shared, he only said to give you this date if you asked me that question—January 30, 1912."

Mayer acknowledged the date with a nod. "And Jordan didn't say why? You don't know why?"

"No."

"Very loyal, that one. Worth a dozen H. Maynard Keyneses. Like a member of my own family. I never went back on my word, not once, with him, so why would he go back on his word with me?" He had turned on the tear ducts, an emotion he usually saved for contract negotiations when things weren't going his way. He said, "Boys, do everything you can to make Jordan's wish come true, but not with a lot of racket, if you know what I mean."

Mannix and Strickling shared a look. "And if we can't?" Mannix said.

Mayer fired a hard look at him. "I don't want to know from can't," he said.

"Have we ever disappointed you?" Strickling said.

"This wouldn't be the time or place to start," Mayer said.

I suddenly felt like an outsider at a convention that had been held more times than Bulova has watches. Some sixth sense told me to steer clear of whatever was about to go down. I said nothing, and no one seemed to care.

About a week later, Mayer sent me back to San Quentin for what turned out to be my final meeting with Dunne, to tell him Mayer had personally picked up the phone to ask for help from Artie Samish, the

influential lobbyist believed to wield more power than even California's governor, a consensus opinion he never talked about or bothered to deny.

Samish carried more than three hundred pounds on his six-foot two-inch frame and could take over a room by the simple act of entering it. He represented liquor and brewing interests, fishing, insurance and cigarette companies, lawyers, racetracks, and movie studios, MGM among them. He covered state government like a blanket, doling out campaign funds under a policy he called "select and elect." Consequently, it was the rare bill that passed without passing through his manipulative hands first.

I'd met Samish once, about a year and a half ago, introduced to him by Strick at the wrap party for *Captain's Courageous*, where he'd headquartered at the buffet table with Whitey Hendry, head of the studio's hundred-man police force, and was romancing stars brought over by Mannix and Vic Fleming, the director. "If you ever need a helping hand, I have two of them," he said, putting them both on exhibit before Mannix pulled him away from us to meet Spencer Tracy and Melvyn Douglas at one of the several bars strategically located around the soundstage.

Dunne was impressed when I dropped Samish's name. "Everything I ever heard about Samish, Samish can make it happen for me," he said. "You get back to town, tell Lazar Meir—that was Mayer's name coming out of Dymer in the Ukraine—I thank him for going the extra mile." He seemed genuinely moved.

I'd played it straight all the time with Dunne. I couldn't bring myself to be anything but a hundred percent honest now. "Not necessarily," I said.

That put a crimp in Dunne's smile. "Why? What else? Tell me, Mr. Blanchard."

"Before heading up here, I called Samish's office to see if I could get a progress report from him or if there was any message he had for you."

"And it was bad news?"

"It was no news at all. I couldn't get past Samish's secretary until I threw out Mayer's name. Samish got on the line after that, but only long enough to say he had the situation under control."

"What's wrong with that?"

"The way Samish said it—like he had no idea what I was talking about. Not ten minutes later, Eddie Mannix was on the phone screaming at me, his voice like fingernails scraping down a blackboard, telling me to quit bothering Samish, just deliver the message if I had any interest in keeping my job. I asked him if Mr. Mayer knew about his call. He said Mr. Mayer knew everything that ever goes on at the studio and hung up."

Dunne spent a minute in isolated thought, his index finger tracking the path of his missing Gable mustache back and forth, back and forth, while his hooded eyes canvassed the room. He came to some conclusion, settled back in his chair, his posture rigid where earlier it had been relaxed, and dry-washed his hands.

"Can I trouble you for a cigarette?" he said.

He filled his lungs and said, "You might call this practicing for the

inevitable, and for your Mr. Mayer's sake I do so hope that, with or without the help of Artie Samish, I become the first person to occupy the state's gas chamber." Smoke poured from his mouth and nose. "Would you have a pad and pencil I might borrow, Mr. Blanchard?"

I had both, a carryover from my LAPD days, when it was a slim dime-store notepad and pencil stub. Now it was a Louis Vuitton notebook and pen set that La Crawford gifted me with last Christmas. I slid it across the table.

Dunne nodded his thanks, and recited in a loud, ringing voice while writing down, "January 30, 1912." Nothing he wrote after that was anything I ever would have expected to learn.

I hadn't planned to be back at San Quentin for Jordan Dunne's execution, but he'd made me promise. He wanted to see at least one friendly—if not friendly, familiar—face looking at him through one of five witness windows of the octagonal metal chamber due to be flooded with deadly cyanide gas.

Inside the chamber, six feet across and eight feet high, were a pair of identical metal chairs with perforated seats marked "A" and "B." Two guards escorted Dunne in through a rubber-sealed door opened and closed by an oversized locking wheel and settled him onto the A chair with straps cinched across his upper and lower legs, arms, thighs, and chest.

They connected a stethoscope to his chest, so a doctor outside the chamber could monitor the heartbeat and announce the time of death.

Below the A chair was a bowl filled with a mixture of sulphuric acid and distilled water. A gauze bag above the A chair contained a pound of sodium cyanide pellets. The executioner was in another room and would be releasing the cyanide into the liquid upon a signal from the warden.

I hated what I was seeing, especially having come to believe in Dunne's innocence, half hoping the direct phone line connecting Warden Court Smith to the office of outgoing Governor Frank F. Merriam would ring, Merriam calling to deliver a last-minute reprieve.

Unlike the movies, the reprieve never came.

Before the gas was released, Dunne spotted me among the witnesses, answered my forlorn expression with a wry smile, and took a deep breath.

His eyes popped, his skin turned purple and he began to drool as oxygen was cut off from the brain, but he did not lose consciousness immediately; maybe two or three minutes after the gas hit his face. He began suffering spasms, as if enduring an epileptic seizure, his body movements restrained by the straps.

The process seemed to last an eternity, but the doctor pronounced Dunne dead eight minutes later.

I stuck around after that, while an exhaust fan sucked the gas from the chamber and Dunne's body was sprayed with a thick coat of ammonia, to neutralize any lingering traces of the cyanide. Execution staff members wearing gas masks and rubber gloves entered the chamber a half hour

later. They ruffled Dunne's hair to release any trapped cyanide before removing his body.

It wasn't yet noon.

I called the studio from a Standard Oil gas station phone booth before making the drive back to L.A. on Route 66. Mayer was somewhere between MGM and the racetrack, Ida Koverman said.

"Let the boss man know it's over and done," I said.

"He knows already, Chris. Warden Smith phoned him with the news just as Mr. Mayer headed off with Mervyn LeRoy."

"Mannix and Strickling?"

"I left word for Eddie and Strick, who'll be writing up a press story about how Mr. Mayer regrets the sad ending for a one-time member of the MGM family and how Jordan Dunne was one movie away from major stardom before committing those terrible murders. . . . Just between us, I suggested to Mr. Mayer how it might make a terrific screen story for one of our 'Crime Does Not Pay' series of two-reel programmers, and he likes the idea."

Mentally worn out by the time I got home, I flopped on the couch and wrestled my way through the night with visions of Jordan Dunne suffering pain, horror, and suffocation in that chamber of horrors, and for what? An immortality that wasn't meant for him? He'd gone to his death having traded truth for ego, the chance to be the first at something, only it hadn't worked out that way.

I verified the truth that afternoon in the studio commissary from Strickling, who came over and settled at my table while I was halfway through a bowl of chicken soup made fresh daily with strict obedience to a family recipe by Mayer's wife, Margaret, the daughter of a kosher butcher.

The recipe called for nine plump, two-year-old kosher hens for every three gallons of liquid, I remember him explaining to me my first week on the job. "You add chicken chunks and matzo balls, gets you a delicious bargain for only thirty-five cents the bowl," he said, sounding as proud of the chicken soup as he was of any of the studio's movies.

"Ah, the Jewish penicillin," Strick said. "Good for what ails you. What ails you, Chris? You look like death warmed over, when you should be celebrating Jordan Dunne getting the send-off he wanted, as the first convicted killer to leave California by way of the state's new gas chamber?"

"Except Dunne wasn't the first to go."

"Where'd you buy that idea?"

"It was a gift, from Jake Jacobs, the crime-beat reporter who was up there covering for the *Herald-Express* and remembered me from my days on the force. Never one to miss an angle, he pinned me down afterward, chasing after a quote. I gave him some blah-blah-blah and threw in how Dunne had become an historical footnote and why, and he shook his head loose from his neck, explaining otherwise."

"How so? Did Jake say?"

"He said he overheard some guards talking and followed up. The warden didn't want anything going haywire with the Dunne execution in front of the forty witnesses he had cleared, especially the press boys, so he rearranged the schedule to move up the next cons in line, Robert Lee Cannon and Albert Kessell, who took part in that Folsom Prison riot where the warden and a guard were killed. In the early morning hours after midnight yesterday, Cannon was steered into the chamber and seated in the A chair, then Kessell was cinched into the B chair. Everything went smoother than a baby's bottom, making Dunne the third person to die in the gas chamber, not the first one, and so much for him making the history books."

"Maybe not," Strickling said.

He signaled Rosalind, the duck-waddling waitress with the Norma Shearer cast in her right eye that made her look cross-eyed, to bring him a bowl of chicken soup, passed me the copy of the *Herald-Express* he had been carrying folded in his jacket pocket, and traded smiles and hand signals with Walter Pidgeon while I scanned Jake Jacobs's front-page story about the execution.

Actor Jordan Dunne, who aspired to film stardom, traded his lifelong dream for a death sentence when he cast himself in the role of murderer and killed two people in a fit of jealousy, Jake wrote in typical tabloid fashion, his prose as purple as ever. He paid the supreme penalty for his crime yesterday at San Quentin State Prison, and in so doing became the first convicted felon to die in the state's new gas chamber, allowing him to achieve a different and perhaps more enduring type of fame.

Strickling could have been the cat that ate the canary, the look he was giving me as he approached his bowl of chicken soup with soupspoon caution. "Jake called me after he spoke to you. He's been on the MGM gratitude list for years, more than earning his keep. He recognized your surprise at his explanation about Cannon and Kessell and wanted to be certain he hadn't spoken out of turn. I put him back on course. Thus, his story, pursuant to our arrangement with the late Mr. Dunne, is history, as it will be published everywhere else, here and hereafter."

I put the *Herald-Express* aside. "My telling you now, was this some kind of loyalty test, Strick?"

"Manner of speaking." He adjusted the linen napkin inside his shirt collar, careful to protect his Countess Mara tie, tried another soupspoon of chicken soup, and voted it a smile as large as the one he'd awarded me. "Was there anything else, something you might have shared with Jake that he neglected to mention?"

"Like the truth about who killed Kelly Rush and Thaddeus Clancy, and about Jordan Dunne's deal with the devil? I know who it is signs my paycheck, Strick. Whatever else I am, I'm loyal to a fault, and maybe that's my biggest fault of all."

"You'll be wiser still not to refer to him as the devil, most definitely not within his hearing, and let me share this with you: Everything you thought

was true was true, until almost the end. The chief was determined to keep his word. He had Eddie and me working overtime to make Jordan Dunne that first death in the gas chamber. He spent precious hours of his own working the horn. Calling everyone he figured could lend a hand, even Hoover, Ida Koverman's old boss. Even Hearst, still not entirely over his pique at having to move Cosmopolitan Pictures and his loving Marion Davies from MGM to Warner Bros. because of the favoritism shown Norma Shearer. And, of course, Artie Samish, who delivered the goods for the chief, but created the backfire when he applied his muscle to Governor Merriam, who has always considered Artie his archenemy. . . . Maybe a pinch too much salt in the chicken soup today? Hell to pay if the chief drops by the kitchen."

"Almost the end, you said."

"Artie phoned the governor and invoked the chief's name, unaware the chief had already spoken with Merriam and gotten his commitment to call Warden Smith and move Dunne to number one ahead of—and here's the rub—Cannon and Kessell. The governor blew a gasket. He phoned San Quentin and instructed White to restore the original order, putting Dunne back at the third spot, with as little fanfare as possible. The rest you learned from Jake."

"Merriam wasn't concerned about suffering the wrath of Louis B. Mayer because of his turnabout?"

"He had already lost his reelection bid last month, so how much could it matter if the lame duck became lamer before he turned over the state house to Culbert Olson come January? Of course, he doesn't know the chief has the memory of an elephant to go with the patience of Job. Words to live by, Chris, if you catch my drift. . . . Say, I'm game for another serving of soup. How about you?"

There'd been little show of his southern stutter when he told me, "Words to live by, Chris;" rather, the strength that I had learned during my years as a cop underlines a threat. I still hadn't shaken the thought by the time I reached my bank and made a long-term rental on a safe deposit box to hold the statement Dunne had dictated to me and signed—with me as his witness—on our last visit together.

The statement spelled out all he knew about Mayer on January 30, 1912. He knew plenty, and I understood the dirty little secrets Mayer was determined to share with no one and had successfully hidden from exposure through the years since.

Dunne had sold his silence for an MGM contract and the suggestion he'd one day be one of those "more stars than there are in Heaven," the slogan invented by the studio's East Coast publicity guy, Howard Dietz.

In fact, Dunne was on his way to obscurity six months later, when MGM released a *Crime Does Not Pay* two-reeler featuring John Eldredge as a fictitious second-string actor with murder on his mind and Stanley Ridges as

a heroic film director who discovers him in the act of committing a double murder.

About three years later, on November 21, 1941, the *Times* reported in lurid, front-page detail about the date with death kept by fifty-two-year-old Evelita Juanita Spinelli, "The Duchess," who ruled a criminal mob from California to Michigan. Tried and found guilty on two counts of murder, it took eight cyanide eggs and ten and a half minutes to make the homely, gray-haired Spinelli the first woman executed in the San Quentin gas chamber. There was no mention of Dunne, then or since.

Me?

I suppose I could have turned over the statement to Mayer, maybe earned a Boy Scout merit badge from him, but I figured it was more likely he wouldn't want some ex-detective walking around with that knowledge backed by written proof, and, maybe, an urge somewhere down the line to do a Dunne and begin mixing demands with threats of exposure. I didn't need him to unleash Mannix and Strickling, his two hounds from hell, on me. It made more sense to let sleeping hounds lie, and me sharing the lie with them in the land of make-believe.

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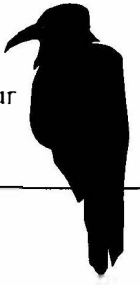

MYSTERY CLASSIC

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY RON GOULART

Last month we published part 1 of Fred MacIsaac's story "Go-Between". This month we bring you the more of Ron Goulart's informative introduction to this lost classic and the conclusion to the story.

Murphy shared his creator's peripatetic inclinations. In the dozen and a half Rambler yarns he crisscrossed the country, working as a reporter on big metropolitan tabloids and small-town sheets. He generated front-page stories that unmasked gambling kingpins, cunning kidnappers, tommygun-toting hoodlums and once a "night-shirted order that [combined] the worst features of the Ku Klux and the Black Legion." In all of the Rambler adventures certain things were certain. Murphy would always get a job on a newspaper, he would meet an attractive and bright young woman, he would crack a baffling case, and then, no matter how tempted to stay, would resume his rambles.

The intial story in the series, "Alias Mr. Smith," is set in MacIsaac's hometown of Boston. Others unfolded in Manhattan, Reno, San Pedro, Chicago, Hollywood, and New Orleans. About that latter story, "Murder on the Mississippi," the writer had some second thoughts. In an editorial column *Dime Detective* explained that after they had purchased it and were about to "shoot it off to the printer when out of the clear sky we got a frantic wire from Mr. MacIsaac on his way to California via the Panama Canal." He was sending several new pages, explaining, "My conscience won't let me get away with it. There is no ground in the old city high enough to permit an underground passage such as the story originally had. So I have evolved another solution which ought to work even better. . . . You see it had been years since I was in New Orleans and I'd forgotten the fact that it's below sea and river level."

MacIsaac often wrote while on the move. About himself he once explained, "On a minute's notice he will start on a thousand-mile motor trip across the mountains and desert with no more preparation than for a drive to the theatre. Usually he has no tools in the car, no jack, no skid chains and during years of motoring he hasn't yet learned to change a tire. When he has a breakdown he opens his typewriter and works on a story until some kind motorist comes along and fixes what is wrong with his car."

Like many another writer who turned out stories for the pulps, MacIsaac, who entered the field in the middle 1920s, was enormously prolific and like a smaller percentage of them was also very good. He wrote short stories, novelets, and a great many forty- and fifty-thousand-word novels. He was apparently about as fast and inventive as the British mystery champ Edgar

Wallace. He possessed an energetic, effective, and unobtrusive style. He was neither longwinded nor terse. And he had a strong sense of humor.

Only a few of the many mystery novels he wrote for a wide range of pulps ever made it into hardcover or paperback form. His best-remembered novel and one that saw various editions over the years is not a mystery but a science fiction tale, *The Hothouse World,* that follows in the footsteps of H. G. Wells's *When The Sleeper Wakes.*

Despite the fact that when not rambling himself he spent considerable time in the Hollywood area, MacIsaac only had one movie credit. In 1936, he collaborated on the script of *Mysterious Crossing.* This was a Universal Pictures B-picture based on the Rambler story, "Murder on the Mississippi." James Dunn, one of not a few actors who fell from grace by way of alcohol, played Murphy (the Rambler nickname was not used). A borderline plump fellow, he bore little resemblance to the pulp Murphy. Nor did he honor the Rambler's code. The Universal Story reference book says about the movie, "Traveling reporter stumbles on murder while crossing the Mississippi and ends up in the arms of the victim's daughter." MacIsaac's only other Hollywood credit was for a 1940 fifteen-chapter serial *The Green Hornet Strikes Again,* based on the popular radio show. MacIsaac is credited with providing a screen version from which a script was provided by others.

One other Rambler story was printed in an anthology some years ago. MacIsaac took his own life in 1940.

Go-Between

Fred MacIsaac

Chapter Four: The Sea Lily

About forty miles from Los Angeles and some seventy miles south of Malibu is a popular and attractive resort called Balboa. Balboa is built upon a long, narrow sandspit chopped up by inlets and canals, and seen from the hills of the mainland, it offers a suggestion of Venice.

The Pacific beats eternally upon the beach of Balboa, but between the

peninsula and the mainland is a stretch of quiet water several miles in length, containing an island more or less appropriately named Lido.

At the present time Lido is a popular headquarters for yachts, speedboats and houseboats, some of which can be rented by the week. Armand Pierre had used money supplied by George Nelson, the gambler, to rent a houseboat called the *Sea Lily* for a month. About nine o'clock in the evening following the capture of Mary Monmouth, he boarded the *Lily*, carrying a briefcase in which were copies of all the evening papers.

The *Lily* was moored at the mouth of a sluggish creek, and by the side of a marsh so vile smelling that no other houseboat was tied up within half a mile of it. Its windows were curtained and revealed not a trace of light; this Mr. Pierre noted with approval. As he came over the rail, a rough-looking person, wearing a sailor's white uniform, bobbed up to greet him.

"Who's this?" the sailor demanded.

"Pierre. Make the rowboat fast."

"O.K., boss"

Armand crossed the deck and pushed open the door of the deck-house. He entered a brilliantly lighted room and interrupted a poker game being carried on by five shirtsleeved players who included Nelson, Jerome and Giolotti, as well as two others named Travis and Rosenbaum. Travis was a tall, thin Englishman with deep-set eyes, high cheekbones and a habit of breathing exclusively through his mouth. He was by profession an air pilot. Rosenbaum was New York East Side Jewish. Each man of the five had a stack of chips, but Nelson had the largest stack.

"Well?" demanded the gambler.

"Not well," said Pierre. "The police have ordered Moe Solomon not to pay the ransom. And this bum that you picked up, Nelson, is a newspaper reporter."

"Yeh?" said Nelson. "I slipped him ten bucks on account of his nerve in asking for it and his smartness in knowing I was the only guy in Los Angeles who would slip him ten bucks; but it was your cute idea to take him out to Mary's."

"She always parks the stiffs and sends them back to L.A. on Sunday morning," retorted Pierre. "It was a sure way to get her chauffeur out of the place."

"Yeh, but we could have got somebody else to pass out. Or one of the regular guests might've done it."

"Anybody else would have known us. This fellow was a stranger and he was in a trance when we met him."

Nelson shrugged his shoulders. "Well, he don't know us, and so what."

"How do we know he wasn't shamming? I tell you he's a reporter on the *Recorder*. Here, read this. . . . Name of Addison Francis Murphy. Full account of how he woke up in one of Mary's bedrooms and how she looked and what they said to each other and how she sent him to town in the Rolls."

Nelson perused the article.

"And how's this hurt us?"

"He can put two and two together. And if he ever gets a look at your mug—"

"I'm sitting right here until the cash comes in."

"How's Mary?"

"O.K. Got her locked in the provision hold. I threw a mattress down there and one of the boys dropped her grub and water. I guess she'll keep, all right."

Pierre sat down and fanned himself with a newspaper.

"Hot in town. There's hell to pay."

"You said we'd get the dough in twenty-four hours. They're up."

"I thought, in his own interests, Moe would keep it dark. He told me on the phone it wasn't his fault. There were people in the room with him when he got the message and one of them was a newspaper woman. She broke her word. He says he'll turn a hundred thousand over any way we say."

"You just said the police wouldn't let him."

"That's right. But Moe wants Mary back at work. He'll come through if we can work out a way of getting the money. The cops are tailing him and all his agents. Things are so hot I think we better hold off a few days."

"And let the cops or the damn newspapers locate us."

"We're safe here. They figure she's either in Los Angeles or Frisco or across the line in Mexico."

"Well . . ." said Nelson resignedly. "Want to buy a stack of chips?"

"I'm too nervous. I'm sorry for that poor kid down in the hold on a night like this."

Nelson gazed at him balefully.

"She can take off her bathing suit," he sneered. "Listen, you ham actor . . . Don't you go soft on us. This was your bright idea. Now get hard."

"Give me a stack," said Pierre. "I may as well play, dammit. I'm nervous as hell."

The words had hardly passed his lips before the quiet of the cabin was abruptly shattered by the roar of a gun! The electric light globe above the table, the only illumination in the cabin, broke into a thousand pieces and darkness descended upon the players.

They leaped to their feet as one. Every man had a gun in his hand, peering into the dark. The door to the deck was slightly ajar, and a thin slit of darkness, less opaque than in the cabin, showed through.

"Got you," said a harsh, loud voice. "Come out, one by one, with your hands over your heads."

Nelson, beside Pierre, lifted his gun arm. Pierre pulled it down. "No shooting," he whispered. "That one shot was bad enough."

"You're trapped. You can't get away," said the voice. "First man out or I'll

shoot into you. I don't care if the shots are heard."

"Get going, boys," said Nelson. "Here you, Giolotti. You go first."

"Hurry," commanded the unknown.

The Italian stumbled across the cabin. He pushed the door open and stepped out. They heard the sound of a heavy fall.

"Next," commanded the master of the situation.

There were no volunteers. Nelson pushed the man at his right. "Go on," he snarled. "Where the hell—" He had suddenly missed Pierre, who had been close to him on the other side.

Pierre was gliding through the passage to one of the bedrooms. He opened the window, pushed up the screen and squirmed his way through. He managed to stand on the window-sill, reached the top of the deck-house with outstretched arms and pulled himself up. He heard another body land on the deck with a heavy thud. He crept like a cat along the deck until he came to the railing.

Three of his companions now lay flat on the deck below. Behind the door stood a man with a revolver grasped by the muzzle. Pierre drew his gun from his pocket, then pushed it back again. More shots from the houseboat would cause investigation.

"Come on, you rats," growled the man below. Pierre had both legs over the rail. He sprang then, and his shoes struck the fellow on the shoulder blades. The man pitched forward and Pierre fell beyond him. Pierre got up. The other man lay still.

This solitary police straggler had supposed he could capture six men singlehanded, thought Armand Pierre with a disdainful smile. He grasped the unconscious hero under the armpits. "Got him, boys," he called triumphantly, and dragged the man into the living-room of the houseboat.

"He was alone," he exclaimed. "Get another light bulb and put on your masks. We'll see how badly he's hurt."

"You're not yellow," remarked George Nelson to Pierre. "I hand it to you, boy."

"One of you go out and wake up those fellows on the deck," Pierre directed. "He knocked them out with his gun-butt."

"Can you beat that for nerve," commented Travis. He was on a chair and fumbling for the light bracket. In a few seconds the juice went on and the room was again lighted.

"The bum!" exclaimed Nelson.

"He's coming to," Pierre said. "Careful . . ."

Addison Francis Murphy was endeavoring to sit up. He was a little dazed, for he had struck his forehead on the hard deck, but he was recovering.

He saw above him three men wearing black cloth masks which dropped below their chins. He grinned.

"Looks like I came to the right shop," he observed.

"Say, fellow," demanded Nelson, "what made you think you was good

enough to take on a crowd, eh?"

Murphy laughed shortly. "Don't rub it in," he said. "I thought a mob mean enough to carry off a pretty kid like Mary Monmouth would be yellow as hell."

"Insolent bloke," commented the Englishman. "I say, let's dash his brains out."

"Your name is Murphy and you're a reporter on the *Recorder*," said Pierre. "What brought you away down here?"

"Oh," said Murphy coolly, "I was just rambling round."

The trio who had been flattened by the newspaperman came into the room.

"Is that the guy that slugged me?" demanded Giolotti. "Say you—" He drew back his right foot and then drove the toe of his boot brutally into the ribs of the man sitting on the floor. Murphy winced with pain, but suppressed a groan.

"Quit that," growled Nelson. "You have to talk fast to save your skin, fellow. How'd you find us?"

"Why," said Murphy, "I figured it out that a houseboat was the ideal place to hide a kidnapped girl. And on this coast there aren't many safe locations for a houseboat. So I thought the Lido was a good spot to start hunting. I've been on board half a dozen but this was the only one where there were men enough to make a poker game."

Jerome, who had gone out on deck again for a reconnaissance, now returned. "Got a knife?" he inquired. "I found Joe bound and gagged and tucked away at the stern."

"He's lying like the devil anyhow," said Nelson. "Let's knock him on the head and go on with the game. If there was anyone with him, he wouldn't have tackled us alone."

"And, being a reporter, he wouldn't spill his story until he had it," Pierre declared. "I know these newspaper dopes. But we won't knock him on the head yet. We'll put him on ice."

There was a mutter of indignation and protest, especially from the three who had felt the weight of the Rambler's clubbed revolver.

"You fools!" exclaimed Pierre. "We're lucky that that one shot didn't bring a mob down on us. And we don't want a dead body on the boat and if we throw him over into this lake he'll be found. Besides, he's going to be useful. Watch him a minute, men . . ."

He took Nelson by the arm and led him into a bedroom.

"He's our line of communication," he said. "I'll work it out. We'll hold him until tomorrow—"

"There's only one safe place to put him," put in Nelson, grinning beneath his mask. "That's down in the hold with the girl. No windows, no doors, nothing but the hatch, bolted on the outside."

They went back to the living-room. "The little woman is probably lonesome, boys," Nelson said. "We're fixing her up with company. Get up there, fellow, and trot along with us."

Murphy rose. He was in a very low frame of mind. He had been a fool to tackle the houseboat single-handed, but he had to be sure. And he hadn't been sure that it was Mary's hiding place until he caught snatches of conversation from the poker players, which floated through the thin walls of the deck-house. Then he had acted on impulse.

"Frisk him, boys," commanded Nelson.

They fell upon him with a will, but they were disappointed to find only five dollars and a package of cigarettes in his possession. Murphy was then pushed through a corridor between two bedrooms, past a kitchen and into a pantry. There was a trapdoor in the floor, the bolts of which were drawn.

"Look out below," called Nelson. "A present for you, girlie."

Murphy looked into a dark hole. He saw a ladder leading down and began to descend. The trapdoor was slammed down before his head was below the floor level, but he dropped from the ladder and avoided a fractured skull.

Chapter Five: A Job for the Rambler

The Rambler dropped three feet and landed with a jarring thud. As he landed, he heard a terrified gasp from just beyond him.

"A friend, Miss Monmouth," he said.

"I have no friends," came from the darkness. "Who are you? Why have they put you down here?"

"I'm the sap who passed out at your party Saturday night," he said. He tried to peer into the darkness. "I'm a newspaper reporter named Addison Francis Murphy."

"I remember you," Mary said, and despite her predicament, she laughed out loud.

Murphy was feeling about in his pockets. He found a paper of matches which the searchers had overlooked or didn't care to take. He lighted one. He was in a compartment about twelve feet long and fifteen feet wide, which was partly filled with packing cases, kegs and soap boxes. Sitting on a box, six feet away, was a young woman in a bathing suit.

"I was looking for you," he said lamely.

She laughed again. "You seem to have found me."

"Yes," he said ruefully. "I'm afraid I can't help you. I made an ass out of myself. Schoolboy stuff."

"I feel you're a friend," she replied. "Oh!" the match had gone out. "Light another one, please."

"No. They may come in handy."

"Well, come over and sit close to me. I've been horribly frightened, Mr. Murphy. These men are savages."

"Tough crowd, all right." He felt his way toward her and dropped on the floor of the hold at her feet. "Your disappearance has created a sensation," he said, smiling to himself. "You're on the front page of every newspaper in America. Big publicity, Miss Monmouth. Excellent in your business. No doubt about that."

"Yes, if I live to enjoy it."

"Oh, you're safe. You're worth a hundred thousand to these crooks."

Suddenly she broke into sobs. "I've been thinking of the Lindbergh baby," she said brokenly.

He reached out and patted that part of her which happened to be nearest. It was a naked thigh. She pulled away.

"Excuse me," he said. "I mean they'll pay the ransom and the publicity will be worth it to the film company." He happened to know that the police were determined to capture the kidnappers at any cost to their victim, but there was no need to frighten her.

"We may not be left here together," he said. "Tell me. Do you know the name of a man who was at your party night before last? A tall, dark man with a rather large nose, very large black eyes and exceptionally fine teeth. He wears sort of extreme clothes, slim-waisted."

"That's Armand Pierre. Of course I know him. But what has that to do with—"

He told her the story of his meeting with Nelson and Pierre, and what followed up to the time of his passing out. Then he added: "I got a job on the *Recorder* on the strength of your kidnapping and went down to Malibu. I found the costumes these four birds wore buried in the sand outside the house next to yours.

"I decided that my being at your house the night before you were snatched was no coincidence, and I had a hunch these two men who were so good to me had their reasons. Well, tonight I saw this Pierre get out of a roadster in front of a drugstore on Olive Street. I remembered him. He went to the telephone booth. When he came out I was tucked away in his cargo hatch. It was a long, rough ride. Fully an hour.

"When he stopped, I waited a few seconds before I lifted the cover of my hiding place. He had parked the car on a dark street and he was halfway down the street. A sign at the corner said 'City of Balboa.' I trailed him. He took a rowboat at a boat landing. I stole one and rowed after him, a long way back. I would have lost him except that this was the only vessel in this part of the bay. I ran the boat into the marsh, waded through the mud, came aboard from the land side, knocked over a man on guard and tied him up with one of his own ropes. I gagged him with my handkerchief and listened at the deck-house door.

"If I'd had any sense I'd have gone after the cops; but little Willie wanted to fight Injuns. I tackled them. Now look at me. And that's my story. . . ."

"I think you're the bravest man I ever heard of," she cried. "Why, I never heard of anything so daring. And such amazing deduction!"

"And here we are in the bottom of a houseboat. I'm going to light a match and look around."

"I'm not afraid, now that you're here. You inspire confidence. Really you do."

"I wish I could inspire myself with some. I had it knocked out of me."

He explained to her, then, just how he had been vanquished.

"But it was such a mad method," she cried. "Why didn't you fling open the door and order them to throw up their hands—"

"As in the movies." He chuckled. "Because you can't cover six armed men with one gun. One of them would have potted me. The other way was also risky; but I knew Pierre was an actor and I supposed the others were rats—"

"Please, Mr. Murphy. I am an actress."

"What I mean is, that I didn't suppose they were professional killers. I was wrong. Three or four of them are gangsters, by the look of them."

He lighted a match and started an inspection of the place.

"This," he announced, "is an old barge with everything above-deck removed and a house built on it. Its sides are too thick to kick through." The match went out.

"I wish I could see you, Mr. Murphy."

"I wouldn't do it, lady. I'm just as glad I can't see you."

"Why?"

"You're too darned good-looking."

"I think that's the sweetest compliment ever paid me."

"Plain statement of fact."

Murphy lighted a match again and began to move boxes and barrels, which moved the more easily because they were empty. He had hoped to find something he could use for a weapon . . . a forgotten axe or a heavy stick which might serve as a club.

Despite the absence of port-holes or doors, there was air of a sort in the place. Ventilation had been provided because it was a provision storeroom.

Finally, having used all but two of his paper matches, Murphy felt his way back to the girl. She was quiet, but when his shoulder touched her shoulder, he knew that she was shaking with silent sobs.

"Listen, kid," he said. "Get this in your head. You're safe. You'll be turned loose in a day or two. This is uncomfortable but you're not in pain, so stop crying."

"I shall," she said in a very low tone. "Are you safe?"

"Oh, sure." He was far from sure, but there was no sense in confiding his fears to her.

Half an hour passed. Mary's hand crept into his and he squeezed it encouragingly. Her hand was soft and very small for a tall girl. There was something about holding her hand that bothered him. Women had no business using electricity on a fellow.

Footsteps sounded overhead. Bolts were pushed back and the trapdoor lifted.

"Come up here, Murphy," called one of the bandits.

Mary threw both arms about him in a paroxysm of fear.

"No, don't go. Don't leave me," she implored.

"No choice, kid. You'll be all right."

"But maybe they'll k-k-kill you."

"Nothing like that. I'm all right. Keep a stiff upper lip."

"Let go that dame and come up here," commanded the voice on the deck above.

He turned the flashlight upon the lover-like spectacle below.

Murphy patted her upon the bare shoulder and went up the ladder.

Two masked men, guns in hand, were waiting for him. One of them he knew to be Pierre. The other, by his figure, he judged to be the gambler who had loaned him ten dollars.

They conducted him into one of the bedrooms. In the living-room the others could be heard talking in a good poker game.

"Here's the situation," said Pierre. "You can sit down, Murphy. I presume you remembered me and that you trailed me down here from town. I don't give a damn. You've been chinning for an hour with Mary and you're probably very sorry for her. So are we. That kid is going to die unless you deliver the goods for her."

"In that case, she isn't going to die," said the Rambler gravely.

"You know what happened to a couple of kidnappers up in San José," said Nelson. "They were lynched. They're putting a bill through the legislature that the governor will sign in a few days, making kidnapping a capital offense. We get ours whether we kill her or not. In short, we're desperate."

"I hope you get yours, boys. Got a cigarette?"

"Sure," said Nelson. He passed over a package of cigarettes and a paper of matches. Murphy lighted one and thrust the pack into his pocket.

"Moe Solomon, president of Sublime Films," said Pierre, "has agreed to turn over a hundred thousand in unmarked bills. Trouble is that the cops are all around him. Anybody who leaves his house for any purpose is trailed. The police want to catch us and they don't give a hoot what happens to Mary. We're stumped and so is Solomon. It costs him thirty thousand for every day the girl isn't at the studio."

"You're just breaking my heart," Murphy informed the speaker.

"So you're going to help us."

"Yes, yes."

"As a reporter on the *Recorder*, you can call on Solomon at his house for an interview. You'll give him a password which he already knows. He will slip you the money. You'll bring it to us tonight and you can take the girl ashore."

"I'm unworthy of such a great trust," the Rambler said mockingly. "Suppose I bring the police down on you . . ."

"Did you notice a seaplane moored in the bay as you came on board?"

"Yes, I saw it."

"We'll be aboard it. In an hour we'll be in Mexico. You'll find Mary, but she'll be dead."

"And suppose I give you the money and you hold out for another ransom."

"Do you think we'd take any further risk?" demanded Pierre.

"No. You're petrified as things are," said Murphy, and laughed. "Of course I'll get judged for aiding and abetting kidnappers."

"If you do, you'll be the first person who paid a ransom who's been jailed."

"We're on a spot, fellow," said Nelson. "We know we take a big chance. You can go to L.A. and spill everything to your damned paper and get a lot of cheap glory. If you do you're responsible for murdering that little lady down below. I've sized you up. Of course you think we'll scram and leave her here safe and sound after you've double-crossed us, why you'll go ahead and double-cross us."

"No," said Murphy thoughtfully. "You're filthy enough to murder an innocent girl out of spite."

"We don't want to hurt a hair on her head," Pierre said eagerly. "We're forced to take a chance on you and, as you can get away from us, the girl's life has to be the stake. I'll kill her with my own hand and, I don't mind telling you, I've been in love with her. Make up your mind."

"If I refuse, I'll get my throat cut."

"And if you fall down on the job, she gets her throat cut," said Nelson hoarsely.

Murphy was making smoke rings, thoughtfully.

"This money comes from a film company," he said slowly. "It's not wrung from the blood of relatives. Any film company would gladly spend a hundred thousand to get the publicity this job is getting Mary Monmouth. I hate to enrich a mob of cutthroats. I think there's a fifty-fifty chance you wouldn't have the guts to kill her if you were forced to get away in a hurry, but I don't want to put her in any risk of her life.

"Of course, I'm not at all sure the cops won't put a trailer on me if I call on Moe Solomon. I'm a new man in town. I was the last person to talk with her before she was snatched. I give you my word I'll get the money from Solomon, if he gives it to me, and I'll bring it here without tipping the cops, but what happens if they are on my tail?"

"We put a couple of bullets in Mary and take off in the plane," said Nelson grimly. "It's up to you to make sure they don't get wise to you."

"And what happens to me when I turn over the cash?"

Nelson laughed queerly. "Want a cut of it?"

"Just release Miss Monmouth."

"She goes free when we have a hundred grand in our hands," said Pierre. "Maybe we'll give you a bonus. Anyway, you'll have a scoop."

"O.K. Let me get started."

"You'll come back alone and unarmed," Pierre warned him. "We're nervous. If we notice anything suspicious before you return, we'll clear out."

"We'll consider you double-crossed us and you'll find a female corpse down in that provision hold," said Nelson. "So watch your step."

"If that should happen," Murphy replied, "I'll chase you murderers all the way to hell. I'll never let up; so bear that in mind."

"We understand each other, Murphy," said Pierre. "I'll row you over to Balboa."

The Rambler hesitated. "Can I speak to her? I'd like to tell her that I'm going to get her ransom."

"No. And you'll never get to see her again unless you bring back the money and no bloodhounds," the gambler assured him.

"What do I say to Solomon? Suppose he refuses to come across?"

"The password is Malibu," said Pierre. "Come on."

The prisoner passed through the living-room of the houseboat, jumped into the rowboat tied up at the accommodation ladder. Pierre followed and picked up the oars.

Halfway across the stretch of water, they passed close to the moored seaplane, dimly visible in the darkness because of her mooring light. The Rambler inspected it. It was a small plane, seating at the most two passengers with the pilot. The precious pair intended to double-cross their followers and escape in the plane with as much of the ransom money as they could get away from the rank and file!

Pierre had removed his mask when they left the houseboat and pulled toward the Balboa shore. He rowed nervously.

"Solomon lives in Beverly Hills," he said. "Where's your car?"

"Oh," said Murphy, "I came down in your cargo hatch. Recognized you when you went into a drug store."

Pierre swore under his breath. "I'm washed up in L.A.," he said. "I expected to be identified, but with this money and what I know about make-up they'll never catch me. You can take my car. I'll show you where it is. You'll find Solomon's house watched; you'd better phone up from your office that you're coming for an interview. Make him talk with you in private. Malibu's the password, remember.

"And when you leave his house, go to your office and write something to disarm suspicion. Then get down here as fast as you can. If you're followed, do something about it. Here's your gun. But come aboard the houseboat unarmed."

They reached the boat landing.

"If the police came with you," said Pierre, "we'll get signals from the shore. Time enough to dispose of Mary and make our getaway. Bear that in mind."

He led Murphy to a touring car, old but of a good make. "Good luck," he said, but did not offer to shake hands. "You can't miss the road to L.A."

Chapter Six: Followed

As the Rambler bowled swiftly along through the night, he was forced to conclude that the kidnappers had displayed good judgment in pressing him into service. No decent man would risk the murder of a young girl for a newspaper exclusive.

While his attempt to take the houseboat single-handed seemed rash, and

was certainly futile, he had been forced into it by circumstances. Having boarded the boat, knowing that one of his Saturday night companions had rowed out to her, he had been at once attacked by the deck hand, whom he had knocked out and bound and gagged.

If he had gone for help then, the eventual discovery of the gagged man would have warned Pierre that the houseboat was suspected, and the criminals would have departed in haste, either taking their victim with them or putting a bullet into her.

It wasn't a case of capturing the kidnappers now. Mary was a hostage for his return with the ransom. Her life, perhaps, was in his hands. And in his hands also, was one of the biggest newspaper stories in years; but he couldn't spring it.

He was the go-between of the bandits.

He could use the phone and have the mob captured inside an hour, and there was a chance that Mary would be found alive; but he dare not take the chance.

The Eastern type of gangster kidnapper might refuse to release the girl after receiving the money. But these were one-shot brigands. A hundred grand would satisfy them. He had to go through.

At eleven o'clock he was in front of the *Recorder* office. He went inside, told the city editor he had no developments to report, and then phoned Solomon's residence.

"Tell Mr. Solomon, please," he said, "that Mr. Murphy of the *Recorder* is on his way out for an interview. Mr. Johnson, the publisher, especially wishes details upon cost of daily delay upon Miss Monmouth's film."

"Just a minute, sir," requested the servant. After a moment he returned. "Mr. Solomon says, 'Come ahead out.'"

In thirty-five minutes Murphy was in Beverly Hills. Five minutes later he arrived at a great gate with huge posts which looked like stone, but were stucco. Two policemen were on duty. They questioned him but permitted him to pass when they saw his newspaper card.

Parked in front of the house were half a dozen automobiles, two of which were newspaper cars. Three or four reporters and a pair of police detectives were sitting on the front steps. When Murphy told the officers he had an appointment for an interview, the reporters at once demanded to know what was up.

"If you go in, we go in," one of them declared.

"I don't care if he doesn't," Murphy answered with assumed nonchalance. "This interview was arranged by phone between Mr. Solomon and Mr. Johnson, the publisher."

They insisted upon accompanying him to the front door; but there they were stopped by the servant, who told them that only Mr. Murphy could enter.

The Rambler was conducted into an ornate study, where a pudgy fat man with a huge nose and very bald head was sitting behind a desk too big for him. Murphy observed with satisfaction that the curtains

were down.

"Are the windows closed?" he asked.

"What a question," commented the producer. "Sure they are. I hate drafts. Say, young feller, I'd never give you this interview if my friend Johnson hadn't asked it. I'm tired of giving interviews. What good do they do? What right have the cops got to interfere with my business? My God, I'll lose this hundred thousand in one week—and if they kill her, it costs me a million dollars, so help me."

"Malibu," said Murphy softly.

"Eh. What's that?"

"Malibu."

Solomon's eyes popped wide.

"You come from them? Ain't you a reporter?"

"I'm a reporter and I come from them," said Murphy rapidly. "I located them but they captured me. I had to agree to be the go-between to save Miss Monmouth's life. If I'm not back with the ransom money in a few hours, they'll kill her and scatter."

"I got the money," said Solomon. "Yesterday I would have given it but the police won't let me. My house, they got surrounded. My employees, they search." He pulled open a drawer and slapped on the table a thick pad of banknotes. Their bulk dismayed the reporter. He couldn't leave the house carrying such a package.

"Inside your pants," said Solomon eagerly. "Look. They think you got a pot belly."

Aided by the producer, he padded his abdomen with big bills. They gave him an appearance of being ten pounds heavier below the belt, but might not be noticed when he buttoned his coat.

"Now give me some facts regarding your studio costs on this picture."

"What's that?" screamed the producer. "Go, man, go! I want that Mary reports to work tomorrow. Tell her how much it costs me. Ask her to come for just a few scenes if she can."

"I've got to talk to you at least ten minutes, or the boys outside will be suspicious."

Reluctantly the producer seated himself and gave figures en
the reporter's head dizzy. Finally he had enough.

"Control yourself, Mr. Solomon," pleaded Murphy as he tu
"Anybody who looked at you now would know something imp
happened. If word gets out, and the cops trail me, you'll lose your
and be responsible for Miss Monmouth's death."

Solomon wiped his bald head with a big handkerchief.

"That's right. I must be calm," he agreed. "Look. I sit here after you go, then sneak up to my room without saying anything to my guests. You sure you'll get her home safe?"

"You bet," said Murphy. He wouldn't have bet on it himself, but his assurance was necessary to keep Mr. Solomon from having hysterics.

He had made notes on some sheets of copy paper, which he showed

when the newsmen surrounded him at the door.

"Hell," one said disgustedly. "We've all got that stuff."

"I know it, but Johnson phoned down and said to send out and get it, so what could I do?"

One of the detectives stepped close to him and tapped his breast and side pockets as well as his hips. He felt the reporter's gun but that didn't interest him. In California all sorts of people carry weapons of defense.

"O.K.," he said. "You can go along."

Uncertain whether or not he was being pursued, the Rambler drove down to Los Angeles at a reasonable pace, parked his car in the rear of the *Recorder* building, went up to the city room and sat down at a typewriter. He did not use his notes, however. He wrote the story of his experience at Balboa, the fact that he was forced to be the go-between, the treatment of Mary Monmouth on the houseboat and the identity of the chief kidnapper, Armand Pierre. He left nothing unsaid which might be helpful in running down the kidnappers and, when he had finished, he put the story in an envelope, addressed it to the managing editor, and put it in the managing editor's letterbox. He knew that the managing editor did not arrive before ten-thirty A.M. and that his secretary did not come in until ten. By that time he would have concluded his business at Balboa and Mary Monmouth might be back home in Malibu.

After that the go-between went downstairs, found his car and headed south. There was considerable traffic and he was hopeful but not assured that he was unshadowed.

It is about twenty miles from Los Angeles to Long Beach, which is the best route to Balboa but also the most traveled. Murphy turned off while still in thickly settled Los Angeles and followed a sign which said, "Balboa via Santa Fé Springs."

This road led him through a district where oil derricks were as thick as tree[illegible]d where the air was tainted by oil.

[illegible]k. a pair of headlights gleamed like cat's eyes. Out through the [illegible] and became uneasily aware that the car behind did not gain [illegible] drop it.

[illegible]dn't escaped suspicion. He had been picked up at the *Recorder* [illegible]d they hadn't lost sight of him.

[illegible]t was a lonely road and, for some miles, straight as an arrow. Murphy fretted and cursed. The fool police were going to murder Mary Monmouth.

Maybe one of Solomon's servants was a police spy who had listened at the door. After having accomplished his mission successfully so far, he couldn't come to grief now.

It was only ten or twelve miles more to Balboa. The road curved ahead. At the right, he espied a side road. He swung into it and turned off his lights. In a few seconds the other car, rounding the curve, flashed by the

turn-off. The Rambler backed into the ditch, swung his car about, and waited. A minute passed and he heard the sound of a motor coming back. The car was coming slowly.

A policeman's business was to take chances. He thought of the poor girl in the bathing suit, crouching in the musty hold of the houseboat.

The headlights fell across the road. Murphy grasped his wheel and stepped on the gas. There was a horrified shout from the car on the main road.

Crash! Murphy's car plunged into the side of the other car.

It turned the other car over on its side with a sickening rending of wood and metal. A man emitted a piercing howl. Murphy saw a body hurtle out of the opposite side of the open touring car and heard its thud as it landed in the road. He backed. Both his fenders were telescoped and one of the headlights was smashed. The other car lay on its side. There was one policeman in it. Badly hurt, perhaps. And if the wrecked car caught fire, he would be burned to death.

He stopped his car twenty feet down the road and came back. The fellow lying in the road stirred and moaned. Murphy stopped over him and struck a match. It wasn't a policeman. It was an Italian of a type familiar to the Rambler. He rolled him over and touched his hip. Nothing. He pulled the man's coat open. There was a gun in a shoulder holster.

Thrusting the weapon into his pocket, he looked into the overturned car. The chauffeur had been caught behind his wheel. He was unconscious and was pulled out into the road with difficulty. He, also, was an Italian who carried his revolver under his left arm. Murphy unfastened the leather strap and removed gun and holster.

Both men were alive but badly hurt. There was no car in sight now upon this stretch of road through practically uninhabited country. Yet he had to go on. In a few minutes, no doubt, a car would approach, discover the wreck and lend aid.

The Rambler ran to Pierre's somewhat battered automobile, jumped in and sped down the road. His bumper and fenders had prevented injury to the motor, while his one headlight gave sufficient illumination.

Addison Francis Murphy, who had assumed that he was attacking a police radio car, was immensely relieved to find that its occupants had been gunmen. He suspected they were members of Pierre's gang who had been sent to Los Angeles to pick him up at the *Recorder* office. Pierre, who had warned him that the girl's life depended upon his shaking off pursuit, hadn't calculated that his own followers might be mistaken for police. He knew there had been seven in the gang; now two of them had been disposed of.

It was the Rambler's intention to turn over the stack of banknotes and secure the release of Mary Monmouth, but he was not going to let the bandits escape if there was any way to prevent it. He had no plan. He would take advantage of opportunities which might present themselves.

After a couple of miles the road made another turn and far ahead he

saw a brightly lighted boulevard across which cars were speeding. During the trip to town with Pierre, he had kept his eyes open and he knew this was the main road from Long Beach to Balboa. He stopped his car, removed his coat, and adjusted the gun straps over his left shoulder. There was a chance that Pierre would be content with tapping his pockets, since only professional gunmen carried their weapons tucked under the left arm.

A few miles down the high road he saw a sign on a road opening to the left, to the effect that Newport and Balboa were in that direction. He turned. The zero hour was approaching.

Murphy's conviction was that, after he had turned over the ransom, he would have to battle for his own life.

Pierre and the fat man, for the sake of the money, had risked his broadcasting their description. Before the police could lay hands on them their plane would land them in Lower California, Mexico, a thousand-mile-long peninsula which is lawless except for a strip close to the American frontier. It was quite unlikely that they would leave Addison Francis Murphy behind to direct the pursuit. When he went on board the houseboat, he was going to his death and he knew it.

He flashed through Newport and ahead lay Balboa. He found a street leading along the bay shore and finally picked out the boat landing where Pierre had put him ashore. He parked his car and walked toward the float.

As he stepped upon the platform, two men who had been lying in a rowboat jumped up and stepped ashore.

"Murphy?" one asked softly. It was Pierre.

"That's right."

"Got the money?" demanded Nelson.

"You bet."

He glanced around. It was very dark. It was so late that the whole town had gone to bed. Pierre thrust the muzzle of a gun against his stomach.

"Hand it over."

"Nothing doing. Where's the girl?"

"We'll send her ashore as soon as we reach the houseboat."

"She comes ashore with me."

Pierre prodded him with the weapon. "Do as you're told," he snarled.

"Go ahead. Fire that gun. Wake the town. See how far you'll get with the cash," said Murphy.

The fat man pulled at Pierre's arm.

"He's right," he declared. "No shooting. We're on the level, Murphy. If you've got the cash, Mary's no use to us."

"Frisk him, then."

Chapter Seven: The Double Cross

Nelson tapped his pockets and to Murphy's disgust, pressed his hands against the left breast of the reporter.

"Ah-hah," he exclaimed. "Trying to put something over."

He opened the man's coat and found the holster. He drew out the weapon.

"I ought to put a bullet in you, you rat," Pierre growled.

Murphy shrugged his shoulders. "Fire away," he said with more indifference in his voice than his heart.

"Where's the money?"

"Inside the front of my pants."

Nelson touched the bulging abdomen and chuckled.

"Sure that's money?" he demanded.

"Look here, boys. I've taken this chance to get the girl. I've got one hundred thousand in five hundred and one hundred dollar bills. Now you keep your part of the agreement."

"Fire away.", he said, with more indifference in his voice than his heart.

"Fair enough," said Nelson.

"Stand right where you are," Pierre commanded. "Come here, George."

He led his companion away and Murphy heard them whispering.

They returned. "O.K.," said Nelson. "We'll row out to the houseboat. You'll turn the money over and we'll count it and then we'll bring you and the girl ashore, if you give your word to drive straight with her to Los Angeles. We have to have an hour in which to make our getaway."

"I'll give you my word we won't stop between here and Los Angeles."

"Get in the boat," said Pierre harshly. "Sit at the stern where we can both watch you. No funny business."

Murphy stepped into the boat and sat down at the stern. Pierre took the oars. Nelson sat directly in front of Murphy, a revolver in his right hand. The little boat moved out on the black surface of the bay.

No word was spoken. The oars were muffled and made little sound. Just how much good had he done Mary Monmouth, the Rambler wondered. They would take the money and then bump him off. Maybe they would carry off the girl with them. Minutes passed. Pierre rested on his oars and flashed a flashlight four times.

Over at the right were four answering flashes. Pierre resumed rowing and presently, very dimly outlined, Murphy saw the seaplane a hundred yards ahead.

And now he understood their plan. They were not going to the houseboat. In a couple of minutes they would run alongside the plane. Its motor would start. They would put a bullet in the head of the bearer of the ransom, secure the money and board the plane. Its pilot was waiting and ready. Two men would be left on the houseboat with Mary Monmouth. In their fury at being abandoned, they would probably kill her and get away as best they could. Whether Mary lived or died, Addison Francis Murphy would have come to the end of his earthly adventures.

The idea did not appeal to him. He drew up his knees, leaning back on the seat. Suddenly he drove both feet with every ounce of strength available at the fat stomach of the gambler two feet away from him.

The shock received by Nelson was terrific. His breath went out of him

like air from a blown-out tire. His arms spread wide and his gun went flying out of the boat. He toppled over backwards.

Murphy was up, tearing loose the board on which Nelson had been sitting. He lifted it above his head. Pierre dropped the oars and reached behind him for his gun. Nelson had fallen partly against the port side of the boat.

Unable to reach the oarsman before the weapon could spit fire, Murphy stepped on the port rail of the boat and his weight, with the two hundred pounds of the gambler, caused it to tip over.

The occupants went into the water, but Murphy was holding the heavy three-foot plank.

The whole thing happened so suddenly that neither of the bandits made an outcry. All three men sank silently beneath the black water.

Buoyed by the board, Murphy came to the surface almost at once. Suddenly a head appeared, three or four feet distant. He launched himself toward it. Kicking hard with his legs, he lifted himself partly out of the bay, raising high his piece of planking. A hand came out of the water holding a revolver. Pierre had continued to clutch his weapon as he went head first into the sea. Its muzzle was less than a foot from Murphy's breast. With an oath, he pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. A moment's immersion had wet the cartridges in Pierre's magazine—cartridges guaranteed, no doubt, to be waterproof.

And then, down came the boat seat with vicious force upon the top of the head of the bandit leader!

Pierre disappeared. Murphy peered into the murk for a sight of Nelson. He heard a stifled cry and swam toward the right with no intent to rescue. Nelson was gone, however. At least Murphy couldn't find him. And Pierre was gone—for good, he hoped.

His own plight would have been serious save for the piece of planking, for he wore heavy shoes and his clothes were horribly heavy.

Holding onto the plank with one hand, he struggled until he succeeded in getting off his shoes. Then he managed with great difficulty to swing out of his coat. He tried to get his bearings. The plane was no longer visible but as he strained his eyes, the pilot again made use of his flashlight. Murphy knew, now, the direction of the marsh at the side of which the houseboat was moored.

Four of the seven men had been disposed of. One was on the plane. That left two on the houseboat. Odds of two to one did not worry Rambler Murphy.

The water was not cold but he was thoroughly chilled before his feet struck the mud of the marsh, and he fell exhausted on the shore. The fate of the pair who had been in the boat did not trouble him—they had intended to break faith, rob him and slay him, and he had struck first.

Blessing the absence of a moon, he crept along the shore, narrowly

escaping a quicksand at one spot. Ahead loomed the bulk of the houseboat, blacker than the night itself. For the second time that evening he crept up upon the land side and lifted himself over the rail. His eyes, somewhat accustomed to the darkness, could distinguish no one on deck. But presently he heard a man cough. The cough came from the other side of the craft and forward.

Shoeless, his feet made no sound. The fellow was leaning over the rail, waiting for the return of the boat. Murphy was behind him. Murphy, who had not abandoned his bit of planking, brought it down on the fellow's head as he had crashed it down on the head of Armand Pierre. He caught the man as he crumpled. It was the white-clad seaman, overpowered for the second time that night. This time, he needed no gag or bonds. . . .

There was a revolver in his pocket which the Rambler secured. Six bandits out of the way.

He approached the deck-house, and pulled open the door. The seventh man, an Italian, sat at the table with rows of cards in front of him. He laid down a card as the door opened, glanced up. As if by magic, a revolver appeared in his hand.

Two shots rang out simultaneously, but Murphy had had a chance to aim. A bullet hit the Italian in the chest and he fell forward on the table. The Rambler heard a leaden slug hum past his right ear.

"Seven," he exclaimed. He ran at top speed along the corridor and into the pantry. He pulled the bolts of the trapdoor to the hold.

"Miss Monmouth," he called.

No answer. His heart sank. Had they already disposed of her?

"Miss Monmouth!" he roared. "Mary!"

"Yes," said a shaking voice.

"Thank God! It's Murphy. Come up."

"I must have been asleep," she said in a puzzled tone. "Maybe I'm still asleep. Where have you been, Mr. Murphy?"

"Come on, kid," he pleaded. "Everything's all right. They've gone. You're safe."

"Oooh," she moaned.

Murphy slid down into the hole and stumbled over the girl. She lay stretched on a mattress. She had fainted.

When she came to, she was lying on a bed in one of the chambers. Murphy was rubbing her hands and staring down at her anxiously.

"What became of them?" she asked.

"Some of them are dead, I expect. There's a wounded man in the room out there and another on the deck."

"Where are the police?"

"Well, it didn't seem necessary to call the police. I handled the situation in my own way."

The girl sat up, stared intently at him and astounded him by throwing her

arms around his neck and pressing her lips to his. Being human, Addison Francis Murphy responded properly. When she released him, his head was going round and round.

"You cuddle down here," he said nervously. "It's about time the police did come into the picture."

He went into the living room, inspected the Italian who was alive but unconscious, and went out to look at his handiwork on deck. This man was unconscious.

Murphy drew his revolver and fired five shots into the air. Reflecting that he was now without ammunition, he secured the weapon of the wounded man in the living room. When he returned to the deck, he heard the roar of an aeroplane engine and saw a searchlight laying a white beam the length of the bay. The airplane had cast off her moorings and was moving rapidly. In a moment she had attained sufficient speed and rose into the air.

A few minutes later a lighted motorboat with a siren blasting the silence of the night came into view.

For the first time in his life, Addison Francis Murphy thought that he really was in love. Mary Monmouth was beautiful. Mary had magnetism plus. Mary was infatuated with him. In fact Los Angeles for several days had been more or less crazy about Reporter Addison Francis Murphy. The Chamber of Commerce had made resolutions about him. The Mayor had given him the keys of the city. Mr. Solomon made a magnificent gesture and turned over to him five thousand dollars.

The Rambler and Mary had been guests of honor at a great banquet at the Ambassador. He had been on the set at Sublime to see her act. They hadn't had much time together but they understood each other. Publisher Holt had agreed to pay Murphy a hundred fifty dollars a week. He had so much glory he was sick of it.

But the hip-hurrah was over and Murphy was going out to Malibu to have dinner with Mary. There would be no other guests. Addison assumed he would be an engaged man when he left and he didn't think he minded. Mary was wonderful.

The dinner was wonderful too. Mary had thrown herself into his arms and held hands with him during the caviar and soup. Then she wanted to hear the story of his life, but before he could open his mouth she was telling him the story of her life. Murphy could only listen. . . .

From that she switched to her work in the studio and told in detail the parts that she had played and how successful they had been. She sent for her folios of press clippings. She revealed to him the art of being a great actress. It seemed to the Rambler that he had never heard the pronoun "I" used so often in the course of a couple of hours.

And while she talked Murphy was thinking. She was a wonderful girl but she was entirely self-centered. She loved him, maybe, but he was going to

be part of her entourage, one of her possessions. And when they were together she would discuss her art and her achievements. Night after night. Year after year. And she would tell him what they were going to do, not ask him. She was a great girl but she needed a special kind of husband.

Murphy glanced at his watch. It was nine P.M.

For some reason he had been reading steamship ads lately. Places to go on a honeymoon. There was a steamer sailing tonight for Tahiti. At midnight. He could make it in three hours. Only Mary wouldn't let him go.

"Excuse me, Mary," he said abruptly. "Now, sit still. Sure, I'll be back."

A moment later, Miss Monmouth heard a motorcar starting and departing at great speed.

Her maid entered. "Mr. Murphy said to tell you he had to go," she said. "And he don't know when he'll be back."

"Oh," exclaimed Mary Monmouth.

And at midnight, a young man with no baggage and no hat but with five thousand honest dollars in his pocket, bought a ticket at the pier and went on board the 20,000-ton South Sea Liner *Malola*.

Black Orchid Novella Award

Robert Lopresti

Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe books spanned the thirties through the seventies, and though in some ways they exhibited a certain timeless quality, in others they charted the changing face of New York City over nearly half a century. This year's Black Orchid Novella Award winner shares the Gotham setting of Wolfe's series, and vividly evokes the bohemian atmosphere of its particular era, the late 1950s. We're delighted to announce that AHMM favorite Robert Lopresti is this year's BONA winner.

THE RED ENVELOPE

"Are you trying to blow that thing up, Ike?"

It took me a moment to realize someone was talking to me. I stopped tinkering with the espresso machine and looked around.

There was only one customer in the New Roses Coffeehouse. He was in a booth near the coffee bar, leaning over a large mug of black.

"My name is Thomas," I told him. "Not Ike."

He nodded solemnly. "You just look like an Eisenhower fan. I'm Dwight Delgardo. And if you keep turning the pressure knob up that machine is going straight through the ceiling to join Sputnik."

I wanted to ask what made him an expert on espresso, but I thought better of it. First, he was my only customer. Second, he probably did know more about the machines than I did, since I had first seen one only two weeks before.

The Eisenhower comment was more annoying. It was true I had backed the general's reelection with my first-ever presidential vote two years earlier, and I knew my crew cut, white short-sleeved shirt, and narrow tie weren't as fashionable in Greenwich Village as they had been at the University of Iowa, but personal remarks from strangers were almost as new to me as temperamental java pots.

Still, the customer is always right. This one wore his black hair in the style of a Caesar, although I don't think Julius or Augustus went in for goatees. He had a gray turtleneck under a black sport coat, and when he stood up I saw that everything lower down was black as well. His age was around forty and a cigarette dangled from his lips.

"I guess I'll wait for Richie," I told him.

"Good idea. Mr. Renessey is a master of the froth fountain. I take it you're the new owner."

"That's right. Thomas Gray." We shook hands.

He smiled. "Ah, I'm a poet too."

"Excuse me? I'm no poet."

"Your namesake was, man. Eighteenth-century English. 'Elegy Written in a Country Graveyard'?" He raised his eyes to heaven and recited:

> "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
> Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
> The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

I shook my head. English poetry hadn't been big in my business management classes.

"No? 'Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.' Also from Mr. Gray. That was—" He yawned. "Sorry. I'm not usually up this late."

I stared at him. "It's nine in the morning."

"Right. I usually go beddy-bye before this, but I had an appointment."

I realized that Delgardo was preparing to end his day just as I began mine.

There was a lot to get used to around here. We had a coffeehouse back in Ames where I grew up, called Daisy's. It opened around dawn and served hot java, pancakes, and eggs until two in the afternoon.

Uncle Henry's place in Manhattan kept a slightly different schedule. The idea of drinking coffee at midnight baffled me.

"You inherited the place from Henry, I take it."

"That's right. He was my mother's older brother. He left Iowa before I was born, but I met him a couple of times when he visited."

"Henry was a nice guy, with a great heart." Delgardo winced. "I shouldn't say that, should I? His heart carried him off."

I nodded. Henry had been a hundred pounds overweight so no one was greatly surprised when he dropped dead on MacDougal Street one night.

"Your uncle was a great lover of poetry." He cocked his head. "Will you keep the open mics going?"

"I'm not making many changes yet," I assured him. The place turned a profit and if there was anything I had learned in business school it was if it ain't broken, don't fix it.

"But you've changed the schedule. Opening in the morning."

"You have to try some new things," I admitted.

"Very cool. I might have some suggestions, Tom."

"Thomas, if you don't mind."

"Thomas it is. People call me Delgardo or Del." He held out his cigarette pack. "Gauloises?"

"Excuse me?"

"French cigarettes. A little taste of the Left Bank."

"No thanks. About those open mics—"

But he was looking past me. "Whoops. Here's my appointment. Catch you later, man."

The new customer was a redhead in her thirties. She wore a cream-colored suit with a long skirt and carried a purse she could have used to smuggle coffee pots.

"Hi, Sam." She was talking to Delgardo. Hadn't he said his name was Dwight?

She asked for tea, and I was grateful for that. I had finally found the instruction manual for the espresso machine, but it was in Italian.

I went about the work of making sure the place was bright and sparkly for another day, but I kept an eye on the couple. What kind of business was a poet conducting at nine in the morning? Reciting a haiku? Taking an order for a dozen sonnets?

Delgardo produced a handful of Polaroid photos and the lady in cream started flipping through them. From her expression they weren't pictures of cute little bunny rabbits. She started out grim but soon shaded over to outrage, and then to white-hot fury.

Finally, she slammed the snapshots on the table and opened her giant purse. She dug far enough to find a wallet and yanked some bills out of it. She banged them down, stuffed the photos into her bag, and walked out. Stalked out is closer to it, I guess.

She never touched the tea, but I decided not to take that personally.

Delgardo was making the bills into a neat pile, whistling under his breath.

"Shall I take that away?" I asked.

His hands folded reflexively over the money. "Oh, the tea. Go right ahead. I despise the stuff."

He studied me as I picked up the saucer. "You're probably wondering what that was about."

"None of my business. Of course, technically this *is* my business, and you're apparently using it as an office."

"I pay rent." He pointed to his cup. "You see, I occasionally perform little services for my friends."

"This friend didn't seem too happy."

"Some people won't take yes for an answer." Delgardo shrugged. "She thought her hubby was having an affair. I just provided the visual image to solidify the concept."

"Oh. No wonder she was angry."

"Don't ask questions you don't want answered. That's what I told Bernard."

"Bernard?"

"Her husband. The guy in the photos."

I did a double take. "He *knew* you were there?"

"I only have a little Polaroid camera, Thomas. I can't do trick photography with it. Pretty much have to be in a well-lit room to get anything at all."

"But why would Bernard let you—"

"Do you know what it takes to get a divorce in the Empire State, man?"

"No."

"Well, let me tell you, the grounds for divorce are thin on the ground. Adultery is one of the few and you need ironclad proof of that. That's what Bernard and his better half both wanted. Dig?"

"Is there a lot of poetry in snapping those kinds of shots?"

He seemed to enjoy the question. "Artists have been doing nudes since they learned to scratch on a wall with a stick. And God knows poetry is full of sex. What it *isn't* full of is money, which is why I occasionally do favors like this. I guess the only beats making a living from poetry are Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg."

He frowned. "And judging from your blank phizzog you've never heard of them."

"What do you mean, beats?"

"I'm a beat poet, Thomas."

"Oh, you're a beatnik."

Delgardo winced. "No, I'm not. Nobody is. That's just a fantasy the so-called journalists dragged out of their empty skulls, okay?"

"Okay."

He stood up. "I'd better toddle off to my wee garret. It's a pleasure meeting you, man."

"And you. Listen, didn't you say your first name was Dwight?"

He lit another cigarette. "I believe I did."

"But your client called you Sam."

"Can't sneak anything past you."

"So which is your first name?"

He smiled. "Well, apparently it used to be Dwight. Then it was Sam. We'll see what tomorrow will bring."

I was still pondering that when Richie Renessey moseyed in. My cook was a tall skinny man with a sandy crew cut atop a bulbous head. He made me think of a turkey baster.

He looked around the completely empty room. "How are the new early hours working out, Mr. G.?"

If irony was banned Richie would be an outlaw. Or silent. Probably both, since he could be sarcastic with his eyebrows.

"Give it a chance, okay? We had some customers. One of them was a guy named Delgardo."

"That reminds me. You wanted to talk about Henry's most loyal customers."

"I did?"

"The people who run up big tabs and seldom pay."

"Oh, right. We have to discourage that, Richie."

"Well, you missed a chance to start. Del is one of the biggest non-spenders in the place." He turned to the espresso machine and frowned. "Were you trying to make this thing explode?"

☠☠☠

Like millions of other newcomers to New York, I was trying to get my footing. Nothing at home had prepared me for Greenwich Village, or even taught me to pronounce it. (Richie had had a big laugh over that.)

I decided the next time I saw Delgardo I would give him a bill and an ultimatum: No more free java. He'd pay his outstanding tab or find another place to peddle his Polaroids.

That conversation turned out differently, because by the next time he wandered in, a week later, my coffeehouse had become a crime scene. To be precise, someone had managed to get himself murdered just outside my back door.

Imagine how a proud business owner feels finding the front of his shop surrounded by police cars. That was the treat waiting for me two nights after I met Delgardo.

I had been at a political event that evening and had arranged for two of the main participants to come back and visit the New Roses. When we saw the police cars they offered to come in with me, but I convinced them to take a rain check.

A cop stood at the door like a bouncer. I had to identify myself to be permitted into my own place. As the officer marched me over to his boss I saw half a dozen of his brethren interviewing my customers and employees.

The police lieutenant was the baldest, palest man I had ever seen. He appeared to be furious, which was not surprising since he had been talking to Richie, a man who could have made Dale Carnegie kick puppies.

"You own this asylum?" the lieutenant growled. His voice was curiously high pitched.

"Thomas Gray, that's right. What happened?"

"Murder happened."

"Murder?" I looked at Richie. "Who got—"

"Gray!" Lieutenant Gunderson stuck his face directly in front of mine. "Talk to *me*. In fact, let's go somewhere private. You have a hidey-hole?"

I led him to Uncle Henry's office, which I was trying to think of as mine. I sat behind the desk, but the cop had no intention of sitting in the other chair. Apparently he thought glowering was more effective done from above. He was right.

"When did you last see the victim?"

"Who was it?"

"Andrew Yates."

I gaped at him. "Really?"

"No. It was Nikita Khrushchev."

I didn't know how to reply to that.

Gunderson snorted. "Andrew Yates, supposedly an artist. You put his paintings up all over your walls."

"No, I didn't."

"No? Maybe some vandal snuck in and hung them up." He seemed taken with the idea. "That's what it *looks* like happened. Hard to believe anyone would put them up on purpose."

What could I say? I agreed with him. I had seen worse paintings than Yates's work, but I wasn't planning to hang one over my couch.

"The paintings were installed while my uncle was still alive. I took over when he passed away."

"Yeah?" That had his attention. "How did your uncle die, exactly?"

I told him about the heart attack and he took down the details. I was sure he planned to check my story against the coroner's records. I was also sure that that would get him nowhere.

But that was the problem, as it turned out. *Everything* the cops did on this case got them nowhere. And that's where things stood the next time I saw the beat poet.

Delgardo crumpled the bill into a ball. "Come on, Thomas. You know I'll never pay that off. Don't push it or you'll lose me."

"*Lose* you? Richie says we have cockroaches in the men's room. Maybe I can lose them too."

Some people would be offended to be compared to insects. The poet just smiled. He had never heard a metaphor he didn't like.

"They don't boost your business like I do. Ask Richie. People come to watch me perform at your open mics."

"This is Greenwich Village. I don't have to pay entertainers. If I don't keep the door latched they break in."

"I'm not talking about the ones that chase people away. I'm an *attraction*. But if you aren't interested in that, how about if I work off my debt?"

"Thanks, Del, but I don't have an adulterous spouse, and I don't need any poetry."

"You need poetry more than anyone I know, man. But I was thinking of something else. As soon as I got back to town I heard everybody talking about your murder."

I winced. "Not *my* murder. Not in any sense."

"But you're stuck with it, aren't you? Let me solve the crime for you. I've done it before."

"I thought that was the police's job."

He grinned, like a man holding all aces. "It sure is. How are they doing so far?"

He had a point. Since the night of the killing, detectives had been hanging around like, well, would-be entertainers, asking my customers random questions and expecting free coffee. One was nursing a black with three sugars near the door even as we were speaking. I was raised to respect the police, but I was beginning to get over it.

"Okay," I said, "you have a deal. Solve the killing and I'll comp your bill. So how do you do it?"

"You tell me."

"Me? I don't know anything about solving crimes."

Delgardo shook his head. "No, I mean you tell me about the event. I was out of town, remember?"

I remembered. He had spent twenty minutes telling me about his brilliant performance at a jazz festival before I managed to hand him the bill.

"Oh." I thought about it. "What am I supposed to tell you?"

"Everything you know about the night of the murder."

So I told him about my charming discussion with Lieutenant Gunderson.

"For God's sake," said Delgardo. "*You* missed the murder too."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

He sighed, a man burdened with incompetent helpers. "Let's start with the sacrificial lamb. The dead painter. Andrew Yates? Was that his name?"

I nodded. "You never met him?"

"Don't think so. The phizzog in the paper wasn't familiar."

"I only met him once. I can't believe I could get in so much trouble because of somebody I knew so briefly."

"No? I should introduce you to some chicks I know."

"Chicks?"

Delgardo made a face. "Come to think of it, maybe I better not."

He looked around at the paintings hanging on the café walls. There were almost two dozen of them, all small, each with a price next to it.

"Have they been selling?" he asked.

"A few have, since Yates died."

The poet launched a cigarette. "Some vultures like art in their nests, I suppose."

"If it *is* art."

Each of Andrew Yates's paintings looked like the negative of a color photograph: All the colors were there, but wrong. A forest of blue trees with purples branches under a yellow sky. Everything carefully observed, artfully drawn, and deliberately distorted. What was the point?

And that, I explained to Delgardo, was exactly what I had asked Yates when he showed up at the coffeehouse a few days after I took over.

Yates had been a tall, limber-timbered man in his late thirties. He had scruffy hair and a dark beard.

"That's the whole purpose of art, Thomas. To make you look at something you see every day like you've never seen it before."

Myself, I thought art was something to cover stains on the wall, but I suppose he was entitled to his opinion.

"That's what I like about it, honey," said Franny Sharrup, butting in. "Your paintings are a metaphor for what art is supposed to do. Re-vision the world. Neo-Fauvism!"

Franny made her living as an art critic, another profession we managed to struggle by without in Iowa. She freelanced for a lot of publications,

including the city's many newspapers. Franny had twice made it into *The New Yorker* and wasn't shy about mentioning it. She was another regular at the New Roses, but unlike Delgardo she paid her bills on time. She was middle-aged, a bit oversized, and she always wore dresses in bright summer colors. That day it was sunshine yellow.

Franny had been a friend of Uncle Henry's and had chosen the art for his walls. Richie had told me: "It was what you call mutually beneficial. She got to play curator, which is French for little tin god, and Henry could point to her whenever some would-be van Gogh came whining for a chance to share his masterpieces with the world."

That sounded good to me so I had told Franny to carry on curating.

"I love your stuff," Mimi Willison chimed in. She was a little wren of a girl, about my age, with a whispery voice. She taught English to immigrants; I wondered how they managed to hear her. "Did you always want to be an artist?"

Yates leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Nope. When I was a kid I wanted to be a cowboy. By the time I grew up and discovered that wasn't an option anymore the war had come along. I'll tell you, that experience made me look at everything differently. When it was over I walked out of Camp Waldport with a briefcase full of sketches and went to Los Angeles to sell them."

"I'll bet they went like hotcakes," said J. K. Skelly. He was one of those would-be van Goghs that Richie had mentioned. A short and blubbery man in his forties, he had earlier called Yates's work "kiddygarden sketches." But now that the man was here he was resorting to sarcasm. Fortunately, or maybe not, he wasn't as good at sarcasm as Richie, but Yates didn't seem to notice.

"Nope. Nobody wanted my work and when I saw what was in the galleries I understood why. So I went to art school to stretch my talent."

"I hope it didn't get stretched out of shape," said Skelly, still sneering.

"So far, it's reached all the way to New York," said Yates, with a big grin. "This is my first show in town, all thanks to Franny here."

"And Thomas and his uncle," said Franny.

Ben Teele snorted. "Like there aren't enough artists in town without dragging them in from the sticks."

"Wait a minute," said Delgardo. "There are too many characters in this movie. Who the hell is Ben Teele?"

"A big brawny guy with a mustache like a Civil War general. In his mid twenties, I guess. He works in the garment district. He's another regular."

Delgardo looked past me with a smile. "And speaking of regulars, here's mine."

Her name was Claire; I never heard a surname. She was a statuesque blonde with a high pile of hair and a tight black sweater that stretched in all sorts of interesting ways. Rumor had it she was an aspiring actress, although she didn't talk much about classes or auditions.

She slid in beside Delgardo and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Hi, Thomas. What are you boys up to?"

"Your friend here is explaining how he can solve a murder."

"Ooh!" Claire squealed. "Really, Del? I've heard about this, but I've never seen you do it."

The poet shrugged. "I wanted to, baby, but all the killers seemed to be on strike. Can't get good help these days."

"You've really done this before?" I asked.

"I have a knack for it. It has something to do with thinking like a poet. Poetry is all about observation and precise noting of details."

"Are you going to do it now?" Claire asked, wide eyed.

"We are working on it, baby. It's not like getting a piece of pie at the Horn and Hardart."

"Those automat things are amazing," I said. "I ate at one yesterday—"

"And lived to tell the tale," said Delgardo. "My heartiest congratulations."

"Let's not talk about food," said Claire. She was on a perpetual diet, although I didn't see anything about her that needed shrinking. "There's a murder to solve, boys. Get to it!"

Delgardo sighed. "You were telling me about the Civil War general."

I ran the conversation back in my head and found the droopy mustache. "Oh, right. Ben Teele. He didn't like Yates either."

"Not a big fan of post-Impressionist painting?"

"Not a big fan of Mimi Willison paying attention to Yates."

"Can't blame her for that," said Claire. "Andrew was a doll. I thought artists looked like Picasso or what's-his-name Dalí. Weirdos. But not him."

Delgardo was interested. "Was he a ladies' man?"

Claire sipped espresso thoughtfully. "Well, he didn't seem to be chasing anyone in particular, but lots of women go for that type." She smiled. "I prefer poets, personally."

Delgardo seemed complacent about that. "Who else didn't like Yates?" he asked.

"Let me think. I mentioned J. K. Skelly?"

"The artistic rival, yes. Were Skelly and Teele here the night Yates got killed?"

"Beats me. I wasn't, remember?"

Delgardo pushed back from the table, irritated. "And that was lousy judgment, man. Where were you again?"

"I was watching my cousin make a speech. He's running for city council."

"Wow!" said Claire. "Are you like the Rockefeller family, or something?"

"Not much like them, no. After I inherited this place from my Uncle Henry I found a folder in his office about a distant cousin, Victor Bond."

"Regrettably not a Rockefeller," said Delgardo. "Because I never heard of him."

"Just you wait. He's a lawyer and he's been working for the Republican

Party for years, behind the scenes. They've been grooming him for office and this year is his chance."

"I never heard Henry mention him."

"Well, that's the thing. Apparently Uncle Henry decided to never meet him. What he wrote in the folder was 'McCarthyism!' With an explanation point."

"What's that?" asked Claire.

"Joe McCarthy," said Delgardo. "The late and unloved senator from Wisconsin. Used to be one of the most powerful men in the country until he went so power mad he managed to make anti-Communism unfashionable. Is your cousin Victor a follower of Tailgunner Joe?"

"Not a bit. His politics are very sensible."

The poet nodded. "Coming from you that probably means he's a right-winger, but not loony. How does this tie in to Yates?"

"I'm not sure it does. As far as I know they never met him."

"Pronouns again, Thomas. If you're going to help me help solve murders you have to learn to report properly."

"Which pronouns?—hold it. Who says I want to solve murders? I just want to get the cops out of my coffee shop."

"So far it seems like *everybody's* staying out," Delgardo noted, and it was true the place was pretty deserted that night. "Maybe you could use some extra income as a Crime Stopper."

"Just like Dick Tracy," said Claire, grinning. She really was adorable.

"Let's concentrate on one thing at a time," I said, and tried to remember what that one thing had been. "Pronouns."

"Right. You said 'They never met him.' Who's who?"

"Oh. I mean my cousin and his wife Helen never met Yates."

"Got it. I take it you decided to meet them, even though your uncle's ghost wouldn't approve."

"Ghosts don't get a vote. Except in Chicago, of course."

"I don't understand," said Claire, so there was a pause while Delgardo told her about the Democratic machine in Chicago and their habit of registering voters who happened to be deceased.

Nothing kills a joke like explaining it.

When that was settled I steered back to the main road. "Yes, I called my cousins and they wanted to meet me."

"Family reunion," said Delgardo. "The ties that bind and strangle. If you're sure they never met Yates, let's not bother with them."

"*I* want to bother with them," said Claire, pouting prettily. "Maybe he'll be the next mayor, or something."

Delgardo waved a hand at me, generously permitting me to bother with the Bonds.

"Okay, like I said, Victor is an attorney at one of the big firms downtown. His wife Helen is from old money in Albany. Her grandfather controlled shipping on Lake Erie, or something like that."

"So she's the coin behind the throne," said Delgardo.

I nodded. "A lot of coin too."

My cousins had invited me to visit them at home. It turned out that the Bonds lived not far from the Museum of Natural History in an apartment that could have passed for a museum itself. It wasn't full of dinosaurs and stuffed lions, but with antique tables and overstuffed chairs. I suspect a square foot of the Oriental rug in their living room was worth more than my whole coffeehouse.

The first person I saw after the maid let me in was a fiftyish-looking guy who didn't have a straight line in his body. Slumped shoulders, droopy jowls under pudgy cheeks. He couldn't have looked more hangdog if his name had been Fido.

"I'm Jim Ingells," he explained morosely. "The campaign manager." We shook hands, and he led me into the living room.

Cousin Victor, on the other hand, was a handsome, trim, forty year old with intelligent eyes and the smile of a politician. The smile looked the same in Manhattan as it had on the mayor of Ames.

He had been sitting on a sofa that looked expensive and uncomfortable, but he stood up when I walked in. "Thomas?"

"That's me." We shook hands and he introduced me to Helen.

She was probably a few years older than Victor, but in excellent condition, and dressed like she was headed off to tea with the mayor's wife.

We exchanged the usual stories about relatives and I assured him that Iowa winters were as miserable as he remembered, and then got to what had brought me to the city.

"I'm sorry I never knew Henry was living in New York," Victor said. "And now he's passed on."

"Well, he only found out about you recently," I said, choosing not to mention the "McCarthyism" scribble.

"The truth is, I don't suppose Henry and I would have had much in common," said Victor, still smiling. "I hear he was a bit of a pinko."

"Don't speak ill of the dead, dear," murmured his wife.

"He wouldn't think I was speaking ill, so does that count?" Victor shrugged. "I'm still learning how you are supposed to speak when people pay attention to you. I'm running for office—you heard about that?"

I nodded. "I think it's great. And I think your policies make a lot of sense. After I called you Mr. Ingells sent me some folders."

"Did he send you a campaign button?"

"No."

Bond pulled one out of his jacket: BOND WITH BOND.

We talked about the New Roses, and Victor seemed genuinely interested. "I've heard about those coffeehouses in the Village."

"Beatniks," said his wife, and shuddered.

I thought about telling her what Delgardo had said about beatniks and decided not to. This conversation seemed to be full of things that

weren't being said. I suppose a lot of family gatherings were like that.

"Excuse me, sir." Jim Ingells had come into the room. He seemed agitated and his Adam's apple bobbed as he spoke. "The party chairman is on the phone."

Victor stood up. "I'd better take this."

Helen watched him go with a tolerant smile.

"How did you two meet?" I asked.

She looked back at me, distracted. "Meet? Oh, when I graduated my parents took me on a vacation up near Portland. Victor was working for a man who took people on hunting trips."

"Love at first sight?"

She thought about it gravely. "Hmm. No, it took a few days on *my* side anyway. But he was a good-looking man, and a war hero."

"I hadn't heard that part."

She nodded. "He commanded a naval vessel in the Pacific. My father had been in the cavalry in the Great War, so naturally Papa was thrilled when we started courting."

I told her about my father, who was in the infantry—

"Boring," said Delgardo. "Let's move on."

"Oh, come on," said Claire. "It's so romantic!"

"Mating habits of the moneyed class? I don't think so."

"Hmmph," she said, folding her arms.

I couldn't resist. "It really is, Del. Meeting like that in the Maine woods, hundreds of miles from anywhere—"

"It's all bears and mosquitoes up there. Besides, you said these would-be Rockefellers weren't here the night of the murder. More absentees! Why are we even discussing them?"

"Because *I* wanted to hear about them," said Claire. "And, unlike you, Frank, Thomas is a gentleman."

I did a double take. "Frank?"

Delgardo shrugged. "She likes Sinatra."

It was hard to get used to a man who considered his first name as changeable as his clothes. Considering that he always wore black and gray, maybe more so.

"Anyway," I said, "it isn't quite true that the Bonds weren't here the night of the murder. Remember I told you I went to a political event? That was Victor, speaking a few blocks away."

Delgardo frowned. "Who would a Republican want to shake paws with in the Village?"

"It was a meeting at the Church of San Giovanni."

"Little Italy. Okay, that makes sense."

"Victor's a great speaker. He really had them—"

"Boring," said Delgardo, and this time even Claire nodded.

"Fine. The Bonds invited me to hear the speech and I invited them to drop by here afterwards. I even put up a sign on the wall." I waved my

hands to shape the sign. "Meet Victor Bond, Candidate for City Council. With the date and time underneath."

I sighed. "I did a great job on it. A shame it was wasted."

"No doubt your marketing professor at Iowa State would be proud," said Delgardo.

"Actually I went to the University of Iowa. Iowa State is in Ames, where I grew up, but it's the agriculture school—"

"Wonderful." He tapped his espresso spoon on the tabletop, one of his more annoying habits. "But I'm confused. *Did* the cousins come or didn't they?"

"They did. In fact, they drove me over from the event in their Lincoln. But when I saw the police cars outside I suggested they let me off and keep going."

Claire was wide eyed. "Wow. Didn't they want to know what was going on?"

"Of course they did, and they offered to come in with me, but the fact is—"

"Fact is," said Delgardo, "every politician worth his graft wants his picture in the paper, but not for appearing at a crime scene."

"That's about it," I agreed.

"So your conservative cousins are just a red herring." The poet sighed. "This investigation might move a little faster if I could talk to someone who was actually present the night of the *auto-da-fé*."

"That's easy," I said. "Hey, Richie, come join us."

Richie was behind the coffee bar reading the *Village Voice*. "I'm a little busy."

"Feiffer can wait," I said, pleased that I remembered the name of the paper's star cartoonist.

"Feiffer's too cutesy for me. I prefer the subtle social commentary of *Nancy and Sluggo*." He sat down next to me and gave Claire an appreciative ogle. "What's the buzz?"

"We're delving into the death of one Andrew Yates," said Delgardo. "Your testimony is required."

"If I confess can I go back to my paper?"

"Does it have job ads?" I asked.

He sighed. "Okay, boss. What do you want to know?"

"Tell us about the night Yates died."

"Dark," said Richie. "Waning moon, as I recall. Temperature in the fifties with a promise of rain—"

"I swear to God you *will* be job-hunting in a minute," I told him.

A shrug. "Okay, you left around seven for the political shindig, leaving Sherry and me to cope with the mob."

"Who's Sherry?" asked Claire just as I asked: "What mob?"

"Sherry's the evening waitress," said Richie. He scratched his egghead. "And the mob consisted of J. K. Skelly and Franny Sharrup."

"And what were they doing?" asked Delgardo.

"Franny was doing a double espresso. Skelly was nursing a hot cocoa."

"We don't care what they were drinking, Richie," I said, with all the patience I could fake. "What were they *doing*? Talking to each other? Admiring Yates's paintings?"

"Searching the alley for blunt instruments?" added Delgardo.

"Is that what killed him?" asked Claire. "Ugh." She shuddered, which was an attractive thing to see.

"They were discussing the finer points of art, as I recall," said Richie. "Namely, Skelly was explaining why Franny should put his stuff up on the walls instead of humoring talentless hacks like Yates. He said Yates's stuff looked like a photographer got sick in the darkroom."

"Funny," I said, "I had a similar thought when I first saw them."

"That's particularly amusing," said Richie, "since Skelly said you're a bourgeois Babbitt who didn't know Picasso from Pissarro."

I didn't, as it happened, but the charge still grated. "I hope you defended me."

"Absolutely. I challenged him to a duel, but before we could get the flintlocks loaded more customers came in."

"You'd better watch—"

"Customers," said Delgardo. "Who?"

"Tourists from some hellhole in the Midwest, by the look of them." Richie glanced at me, and smiled. I guess I still wasn't up to his fashion standards. "Doesn't matter. They split long before Yates's head did."

"Ugh," said Claire. "Don't joke about death."

Richie shrugged. "Taking it seriously doesn't make it go away, sunshine. And joking doesn't bring it closer."

That was almost profound, for Richie.

"So the tourists left," Delgardo prompted.

"Right. But before they did Mimi Willison came in. I thought she was going to walk right out."

"Why?"

"Because she stopped, looked around, and headed back to the door. But then Yates arrived."

"You think she'd been looking for him?" I asked.

Richie gave me a funny look, the one that seemed to say *I'm over the Iowa speed limit again*. "No, Thomas. I think it was a co-inky-dink. In fact, she walked right past him but he called her name and she stopped. They grabbed a table near the front. She had tea, and he—"

"We already know about your flawless memory for drink orders," said Delgardo. "And we're incredibly impressed."

"I am," said Claire. "What do I drink, Richie?" She blocked her empty glass with her hands.

"Orange juice. You want a refill? On the house."

"Wait a minute," I said. I *was* the house.

"Moving right along," said Delgardo. "I'm surprised Yates didn't seek out Franny, or vice versa."

"Didn't see each other. Yates and Mimi were near the door, like I said, and the artsy twins were way in the back. Which is where Yates and Mimi wished they were in a minute."

"Yeah? Why is that?"

"Because that loser friend of Mimi's came in, and he was sore."

"You mean Ben Teele? What was he sore about?"

"He didn't stop to explain it to me, Thomas, but my guess is that it had to do with seeing Mimi with Yates."

"Are Ben and Mimi an item?" asked Claire.

"In his dreams," said Richie. "Anyway, Teele started yelling at Mimi. Called her some rude names and Yates got between them."

"A fight?" I said. "They fought in here and you didn't tell me?"

Richie rolled his eyes. "No bloodshed, boss. Ben said they deserved each other and split."

"Did you tell Gunny this?" asked Delgardo.

"Who's Gunny?" I asked.

"Lieutenant Gunderson to you."

"That's what you call the investigating officer? *Gunny*? How do you know him?"

Delgardo shrugged. "Like I said, I've helped out with a few of these jambalayas before."

"And besides," said Richie, happily. "Gunderson is his brother-in-law."

That got Claire's attention. "He's married to your sister?"

"No. I used to be married to his." Delgardo waved it away. "Long story."

"You didn't tell me you'd been married," said Claire, eyes narrowing.

"Moving right along," I said, "*did* you tell Gunderson about the argument?"

"Well," said Richie, "you know I hate to gossip, but seeing that this was an official investigation, and I was representing the flagship of the Thomas Gray empire, I felt you would want me to cooperate fully."

I swear, he could have made the Pledge of Allegiance sound sarcastic.

"Good," said Delgardo. "So if there was anything there the constables would have found it by now."

"And that's your investigation?" I asked. "The cops already looked there, so I won't?"

"I'm just one man, Thomas. A brilliant man admittedly, but brilliance includes knowing your limitations. We need to find the gaps, the *lacunae*, that the police may have missed. Some details could have been skipped over."

"Like a marriage, for instance," said Claire.

"Richie," I said. "Get her an orange juice. On the house."

When Claire had her drink Delgardo started in again. "So what happened after Ben Teele graced the room with his absence?"

"Well, the hubbub had got Franny and Skelly's attention, so they came over to see how Mimi was coping."

"Was she upset?"

Richie pondered. "Nah, cranky. She thought Teele was acting like a

jerk, which he was. They sat down together and shot the bull."

"And then what happened?"

"That jazz trio showed up. The one you hired to annoy the customers."

I bristled. "I thought they were pretty good."

"Yeah, well." He shrugged, as if my approval was damning evidence against them. "Moldy figs."

"Excuse me?"

"Ugh," said Claire.

"Moldy figs play old-fashioned jazz," Delgardo explained. "Dixieland and the like. Not cool, but maybe it still sells in Ohio."

"Iowa," I said.

"You want help picking jazz bands, man?" asked Delgardo. "Because I know a little something about that—"

"What about the band?" I snapped. "Are *they* suspects?"

"No dice," said Richie. "They were on the stage when it happened."

"How do you know when it happened?" asked Delgardo.

"Because I saw Yates go back toward the john. And I heard Sherry scream when she went out the back door to dump garbage and found his body." He looked at me. "You ought to give her a bonus, you know. Hazardous duty pay."

"I'll give it careful consideration," I lied. "And the band was onstage the whole time?"

"Exactly. Don't ask me who else left the room, though. A lot of people started dodging when those guys were squalling." He shuddered.

"So somebody followed him outside and hit him with a pipe," said Delgardo.

"Oh, man." Claire shuddered again. "This isn't fun anymore."

"Just a little longer," said Delgardo. He had uncapped a fountain pen and was scribbling on a paper napkin. "Okay, Thomas. Here's your assignment."

That startled me. "What are you talking about?"

"I want you to talk to our suspects."

"Now, wait a minute. *You're* the one who said he could solve the crime."

"I'm having a busy week. Ginsberg is in town for a reading. Plus, there's a publisher talking about doing a chapbook of my poems. Besides, didn't you tell me you wanted to get to explore the neighborhood?"

"Yes, but—"

"And you said you wanted to get to know your customers better, didn't you?"

"Sure, but—" I looked at Richie who was holding my jacket. "What's this?"

"It's chilly. You don't want to catch cold."

He had gone to get it even before Delgardo had announced I was leaving.

The poet generously told me to pick my own order for the interviews. "Just make sure you ask them the four questions."

"What, is it Passover already?" asked Richie.

"Not *those* four questions. I have prepared one for each suspect." He

pushed the napkin across to me. "Can you read them?"

"A single question designed for each," said Richie. "I was wrong. That ain't Jewish, it's Zen."

Delgardo's writing was surprisingly clear, but the questions weren't. "You can't be serious. Most of these have nothing to do with the crime."

"The problem with you, Thomas, is that you are not a poet. *Everything* is related."

I picked up his napkin by its one unsmudged corner. "Maybe everything is, but *these* aren't. Does it matter who I ask which question?"

He scowled. With his goatee that made his face look demonic. "Of course it does! I put the names by each one. If you can't figure that out—"

"Frank," said Claire, putting a hand on his arm. "He's kidding you."

Delgardo gave me another look. "Okay, Iowa. One for you. Now go get me some answers."

He walked me to the door. "This may be obvious but I thought I should mention it. One of those four could be a killer, so keep your wits about you. Dig?"

"I get that." I looked back where Claire was giggling over something Richie had said. "What about Richie and Sherry? Aren't they suspects too?"

"Absolutely, man. I'll check 'em out myself."

That was good. If I tried to interrogate Richie I'd probably end up guilty of murder.

"She's something, isn't she?"

I jerked away, guilty of staring at his girlfriend. "Claire's very attractive."

He nodded with satisfaction. "You want one of your own?"

"What are you talking about?"

"This in Manhattan, Thomas. Beautiful girls are drawn here like hares to lettuce. There are a thousand Claires in this town. I'll fix you up with one, if you like."

It was chilly, but a lovely October day. If there were any trees worth mentioning in Greenwich Village I'm sure the colors would have been magnificent.

Richie happened to know that J. K. Skelly had a studio on Houston Street. (When he told me how New Yorkers pronounce "Houston" I thought he was kidding. He wasn't, but maybe the whole city was.)

The New Roses was near the corner of LaGuardia and Bleecker, so it was an easy stroll to Houston, however you pronounce it.

The building seemed to be a warehouse converted into a couple of dozen small offices. Skelly shared his space with two other painters. Fortunately for me, Skelly was there, and the others weren't.

He opened the door, breathing hard, and glaring. "Whaddayawant?"

"Mr. Skelly? I'm Thomas Gray from the New Roses Coffeehouse. Remember? I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions."

He blinked. Whatever part of the universe he had been doing his painting in, it was taking him some time to return home.

"Coffeehouse," he rumbled, and shook his head. "Right! Coffeehouse. You want to show my work there."

That was an announcement, not a question.

"Well, I'm thinking about it. May I come in?"

Another pause. Then he threw the door open. "Come in! Come in! It's an honor to have you, Mr. Roses. Uh, have a seat."

I expected him to whisk a paint container from some grubby stool, but instead he yanked a sheet off an old-fashioned upholstered wooden chair that looked like it belonged next to an antique dining room table with clawed feet. I guessed that Skelly or one of his studio mates had brought it in specifically for potential purchasers and gallery owners.

He was wearing a white smock which seemed to identify him as either a painter or a butcher. The red stuff on his sleeves didn't settle the issue.

The next fifteen minutes passed slowly. *Very* slowly. Skelly had had a busy year, painting countless canvases and not selling them. They were stacked into every space that the other two artists hadn't stuffed with their own work.

If he was expressing his soul he needed to consult a clergyman immediately, preferably one who specialized in exorcisms. I made a mental note to warn Franny that his stuff was *not* going up on any walls I owned.

But meanwhile, there was a murder to solve.

"This is really, um, amazing stuff, Mr. Skelly, and I will give it all the consideration it deserves, but there's something that needs to be addressed first."

Skelly's eyebrows dropped. "What's that?"

"Well, I'm still trying to find out what happened the night Andrew Yates died."

He got it faster than I expected. "You think I killed the jackass?"

"Of course not. I'm just wondering what you might have seen."

"You should be talking to the *other* jackass. The one who tried to punch Yates."

"You mean Ben Teele?"

"If you say so. Whoever he was, I was hoping he'd smack Yates's smug, arrogant face in, but no such luck. I already told the cops, *he's* the one."

"But Yates was still around when Teele left. When did you last see the artist?"

"A few minutes after the noise began." How bad could that band have been? "He went to the men's room to make more art." He smirked. "Get it? That's what his so-called art is—"

"I get it. Did anyone go that way after him?"

Skelly thought about it. "Didn't see anyone, but I was talking to your cook."

"What about?"

"Oh, this and that." He looked away. "When are you gonna decide about my paintings? Other places want 'em, you know."

"I'm sure."

Richie hadn't mentioned talking to Skelly. The fact that the artist obviously didn't want to tell me what they had been talking about made that all the more interesting.

My next few questions went nowhere. Then I remembered Delgardo's napkin.

I tugged it out of my pocket for a surreptitious glance. "One more. What did you do during World War II?"

I felt like an idiot. Like most of Delgardo's brainstorms I didn't see how it related to the case at hand, but I was raised to finish what I start.

Skelly obviously couldn't figure out the purpose of the question either. "You need to know that to judge my art?"

"Well, Veteran's Day is coming up and I thought we might do something special—"

"I'm not sharing the space with a bunch of other daubers. Bad enough I have to do that here. Look at this crap." He waved at the other men's works. "Bunch of jackasses."

"But what did you do during—"

"Tank jockey. Followed Patton all the way up Italy."

"Yeah?" I smiled. "My father was infantry. Died at the Battle of the Bulge."

"Lot of good men did. I got my bell rang in the Apennines." He pointed to his temple. "Sent home with a steel plate."

He waved at a canvas covered with clashing greens and grays. "That's what inspired this one. I call it *Dawn in Monte Castello*."

I still wasn't sure why I was wandering through Greenwich Village trying to do the cops' job for them, a job that Delgardo had also promised to do. But I'll admit the poet was right; it did give me the chance to get out of the New Roses and explore the neighborhood.

And here's the dirty little secret. I was enjoying myself. Maybe I was even good at it. All those detective shows on the radio when I was a kid seemed to have sunk in.

Franny lived in a walk-up on Gay Street. I walked past a bunch of kids playing with the new toy every child seemed to need that year, the hula hoop, and went inside. Her apartment was on the fourth floor.

Today her dress was sparkly green. She looked like a meadow covered with dew, but I didn't mention it. "Come in, Thomas. Want a beer? Wine? Uh, Thomas?"

I was looking around her apartment. Gawking, really.

What do you expect to find in an art critic's lair? I thought I'd see art. No such luck.

There were two bookcases crammed with oversized books, but the walls around them were light gray, and empty.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"Oh. A beer would be great. I was just admiring your apartment. It's very, um, neat."

She laughed as she went over to her fridge. "You were expecting to see Rembrandts? I can't afford them on a journalist's salary. And I won't put cheap prints or bad paintings on the walls. So I keep my art in books. Here you go, honey."

She poured from the bottle into a proper beer glass and pointed to a couple of black leather chairs.

"I'm glad you called, Thomas. I've been trying to figure out who Andrew's heirs are. Someone has to take the remaining paintings and the money for the ones that sold. We don't want the leftovers sitting around your back room for years, do we?"

I grimaced. There was barely space in that back room for a spare coffee bean. "I hadn't thought about that. I'll see if Lieutenant Gunderson has any ideas."

"That's great, honey. Mind you, the paintings can stay up until next month, when my new boy's stuff arrives. Oh, you'll love his work! It's like the neo-Expressionists, but gloomier. Really dark, and brooding—"

"Sounds peachy," I said, hiding behind my beer glass. "Franny, I'll be honest with you. I came here because I'm trying to find out what happened the night Andrew got killed. If people think it had something to do with my coffeehouse, it could put me out of business."

"Oh." She raised her eyebrows in a look of concern. "Sure. How can I help?"

So I heard the same story again, with more detail about which painters Skelly had complained about.

"Do you remember what happened when Ben Teele came in?"

"I'll never forget it. I thought he was going to knock that poor girl down. And Andrew! What a knight in armor, the way he pushed in between them. He wouldn't even make a fist, would you believe it? He said, 'I won't fight you, Ben. Just calm down.'"

"And did he calm down?"

"No. He called Andrew a pansy and walked out. You know what a pansy is, honey?"

I nodded. "Even in Iowa."

She grinned. "Who would have guessed? But that was typical man-thinking. If Andrew really *was* a pansy why would Ben care about him being with Mimi?"

"Good question. Do you know anyone besides Ben who had a grudge against Yates?"

"A grudge?" She made a face. "I was kind of hoping it was a random mugging. You keep hearing about all these juvenile delinquents and heroin addicts running around—"

"Apparently his wallet wasn't touched. So they think it was, well, personal."

"I gotta tell you, honey, when I think of *personal* a thump on the head isn't what comes to mind." She shuddered. "That's right, isn't it? I heard somebody whacked him with a hammer or something."

"A plumbing pipe, I heard."

"Hammers, pipes. Mayor Wagner needs to start cleaning the alleys, that's what I say. All this construction makes killing too easy. What was your question, honey?"

"Grudges."

"Right!" She sipped beer and stared at a gray wall. "Well, there's Skelly. That's just professional jealousy, of course, but you know artists." She raised her eyebrows. "Or maybe you don't, you lucky boy. They *do* take things personally."

"Did you ever hear him threaten Yates?"

"Threaten him? No, just call him a no-talent. Usually in terms he didn't understand. Andrew thought *dilettante* was a good thing."

"Any reason Skelly would be particularly upset about being passed over? Was he desperate for money?"

Franny laughed. "He's an artist, honey. Of course he is."

She knew nothing about anyone else who was mad at Yates, and nothing of interest about Richie or Mimi.

I still had Delgardo's napkin question. "One more thing, if you don't mind. How did you hear about Andrew in the first place?"

"Let me think. I got a package with some pictures of his work. Yeah, that was it."

"Was that unusual?"

"Honey, I've been published on art in *The New Yorker* twice. It's a rare day someone doesn't send me some hot tip on the next Jackson Pollack. Most of them go straight in the bin, but I liked Andrew's stuff."

"Who sent it?"

"Christ, I don't know." She gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling. "You know, it's just possible . . ."

Franny got up and went over to a beat-up file cabinet under the window. "Some day I have to get organized . . . Have another beer. I know it's in here somewhere."

I was halfway down the second bottle, and she was mostly through the bottom drawer—scattering its contents on the throw rug—when she hit pay dirt.

"Ha! Yates is at the end. Who would ever guess I filed things alphabetically for once?"

She held up her prize. "I knew there was something odd about it. Take a look."

It was nine by twelve, the size of a standard manila envelope, but she was right. It wasn't the usual item. It was plain paper, not manila, and it was red.

"Ugly shade," she muttered.

Franny's name and address were scribbled on the front in pencil. No return address. There was a Brooklyn postmark, dated May fifth, and four three-cent stamps.

I didn't see any clues. Of course, I didn't know what Delgardo was looking for. That was beginning to annoy me.

"May I look inside?"

"Be my guest, honey."

There were three pieces of paper printed on both sides, six sides in all. Five of the pages made up an article about Andrew Yates from an art magazine I had never heard of. The sixth was a full-page illustration of a painting by a man who apparently couldn't afford clothes for his models.

"Thomas?"

Maybe that one had held my attention a little too long.

"Oh. There's no return address, so how did you get contact him?"

"How *did* I?" Franny looked at the article. "Here it is! He was living in Colorado and it mentioned the Denver gallery where he was showing. I sent them a letter and asked them to forward it. I wonder if they know he's dead?" She scribbled on her legal pad. "I'll bet *they* know about his heirs."

"Was Andrew surprised to hear from you?"

"Thrilled and astonished, honey. He had no idea who sent me this."

That was interesting. For the first time I had a suspicion that Delgardo might know what he was doing. Maybe the killer had sent her the article. In fact—

"On the other hand," said Franny, interrupting my victory lap, "Andrew was like most artists, as disorganized as a cathouse on fire. He might have sent out fifty copies of that article and the next day forgot all about it. Want another beer, honey?"

I didn't know where to find Mimi, but Ben Teele was in the phone book. I had put him off because I wanted to wait until he would be home from the garment district. The fact that he had a violent temper had nothing to do with me postponing the visit. Would I lie?

When he opened the door Teele had a chicken leg in one hand and a napkin tucked into his belt. "Yeah, I know who you are. What do you want?"

I gave him my usual explanation, and he started shaking his head. "I already talked to the cops. I don't need to talk to you, too, buddy."

"That's right, you don't," I said. "And I don't have to let you back into the New Roses. Consider yourself banned."

I almost reached the stairs before he changed his mind. "Wait a minute. Damn it, wait!"

That confirmed what I suspected. There were a dozen coffeehouses within a few blocks of his apartment, but there was only one where Mimi Willison hung out. I didn't think it was Richie's espresso that changed his mind.

"Come on in." He stepped out of the doorway.

Whatever Teele did in the garment district, he must have been pretty good at it. His apartment was twice as big as Franny's and three times the size of the place I had shoehorned into.

He had been eating on a TV table in front of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. He turned off the set and waved me toward a sofa.

"I don't mean to be rude. But the cops acted like they thought I killed that moron. Me!" He shook his head in amazement.

"Well, I hear you had had a disagreement with him a few minutes before he died."

"Not really. I was mad at someone else, and he just happened to be in the same place."

"Was that someone Mimi Willison?"

Teele gave me a suspicious look. "What do you know about her?"

"That she's a regular customer at my place. And that I sometimes see her there with you."

"She's my girl. Which means she shouldn't be in there without me. Especially not sitting with another man."

"I hadn't realized you two were a couple. How long has that been the case?"

Teele dropped the chicken leg back on his plate. "Maybe we aren't yet. But we're going to be. She likes me."

"And you like her?"

"Of course!"

"Do you often try to punch a girl you like?"

"I didn't! I was just trying to talk to her and that moron got in the way."

"I heard he stepped between you before you could strike her."

"That's a lie!" His shout made his mustache puff out like a curtain in a windstorm. "Who told you that?"

"People who saw it. What did you think of Andrew Yates?"

"I *said* he was a moron. I don't know why she was even talking to him."

"Doesn't she have a right to talk to people?"

He decided not to answer that. "Besides, I wasn't mad because of him at all. I was mad because we had a dinner date and she stood me up."

"Oh? Where was that supposed to be?"

"At the White Rail. I waited half an hour and she never showed. So I went back to your joint and—okay, I lost my temper."

"You're lucky Yates kept you from doing something she could never forgive."

Again, no answer.

"Where did you go when you left?"

"Home." He waved a hand. "Right here. I already told the cops this."

"One more question, and I'll bet they didn't ask this." I didn't have to consult Delgardo's napkin anymore; I had them memorized. "Who did you vote for in 1956?"

He jerked back as if I had slapped him. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Ask Delgardo, I almost said. Instead I tried to look mysterious. "If you're embarrassed to say—"

"I'm not embarrassed. I voted for Stevenson. You want my choices for dogcatcher and village idiot too?"

So he was a Democrat. No surprise; the neighborhood was lousy with them.

"No, that's fine. Thanks for your cooperation." I stood up.

So did Teele, and he went up quite a ways, being almost a head taller than me. "Are you talking to everyone who was there that night?"

"Everyone I can track down."

"Well, skip one." He stepped closer to me. Too close. "Leave Mimi out of this, understand? I don't want you bothering her."

Mimi was considerably shorter than me. I wondered what it would be like for her to have this guy looming overhead.

"Thanks for your help," I repeated as we walked to the door. I waited until I was out in the hallway before I added, "Remember what I said about not coming to my coffeehouse anymore?"

"Yeah. So?"

"It stands. Stay away."

He was swearing as I walked down the hall.

Speak of the devil. When I got back to the coffeehouse Mimi was chatting with Richie. We sat down for coffee and a chat.

"No, I most certainly did *not* agree to have dinner with Ben Teele. Not at the White Rail, or anywhere else." Her whispery voice grew husky with intensity. "He made a reservation and said he wouldn't take no for an answer. Have you ever noticed that people who won't take no for an answer don't listen to anything else you say?"

"I've heard he almost got into a fight with Andrew Yates."

"He tried, yes. But Andrew wouldn't make a fist. He stood his ground but he held up his hands up like he was surrendering and said, 'I'm not going to fight you.'" Mimi shrugged. "I guess even Ben realized that punching a man who wasn't defending himself wouldn't impress anybody, so he turned around and marched out."

"When was the next time you saw him?"

"So far, never. Which is too soon by me." She sipped coffee and licked her lips. "Why all this concern? Are the police threatening the coffeehouse or something?"

"I don't think an unsolved murder on the premises is good for business. Mind a few more questions?"

"No. This is fun. You're good at it too." She smiled. "Just like the detective on TV. What's his name? Mike Shayne!"

I doubted that. Shayne would have probably had another question ready. I had to stop and think.

"What were you and Andrew talking about before Teele arrived?"

"He asked about my job. You know I teach English to immigrants? And

then we talked about New York. He wanted to know how to get tickets for *The Ed Sullivan Show.*"

She didn't know of anyone with a reason to attack Yates. "Except for Ben Teele I suppose. And he had no reason—*doubly* had no reason, since there was nothing between Andrew and me, and even if there were, it would be none of his business."

Mimi was no help on establishing alibis for the others who had been there. By the time she was running a finger around her empty coffee cup and licking the result, I had nothing left to ask except Delgardo's question. This struck me as the craziest of the bunch, but I did my duty.

"One more thing. Have you seen Hitchcock's new movie, *Vertigo?*"

Her gray eyes went wide. "No! I've heard it's great. Have you?"

"Not yet."

"I'd love to see it. I'm a big fan of his." She paused. "The master of suspense, right?"

Okay, I'm not the brightest Don Juan in the crowd, but I knew she expected me to invite her out to the show.

Damn Delgardo anyway.

I didn't know if this was his plan or a dubious side effect. But I didn't appreciate being thrown into this situation.

"Well," I said. "I hope you get the chance to see it soon."

Mimi slumped in her seat. Then she opened her purse. "Listen, "I'm going to give you my phone number, okay? Just in case you think of more questions."

She scribbled the number on a piece of flowery stationery. "I gotta go. Nice chatting with you, Thomas. I hope you find your answers."

I had a feeling I could have handled that better. I had a feeling almost any man would have.

I went into my office and brooded for a while. Then I went to the kitchen and found Richie doing something diligent with hamburger buns.

"I have a question for you."

"The beginning of wisdom."

"I asked you before if Mimi Willison had come in looking for Andrew Yates."

Now I had his attention. "So?"

"So, you gave me a funny look before you answered."

"Was it this one?" He squinted one eye, opened the other one wide, and rocked it from ceiling to floor and back.

"I'm serious. Why did you react like that?"

He sighed. "Because I don't think Mimi was looking for Yates or that jerk Teele."

"You thought she was looking for me, didn't you?"

Richie grinned. "Wow. How did she finally get your attention? We were wondering whether a striptease would be enough."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Delgardo said it would be wrong to interfere with your invincible Iowa innocence. His exact words. So, are you going to ask her out? Do you need a chaperone?"

"Richie," I said. "Look me in the eye."

He frowned, and did so.

"Am I laughing?"

"No."

"Then you might consider the possibility that I don't think this is funny."

"Got it, Mr. G." He turned back to the burger buns.

"One more thing. Skelly told me he was talking to you just before Andrew died. What about?"

"What was it? Oh, yeah. He wanted to know if we had any tea."

"Well, of course we do. It's all over the menu."

"It better not be. He meant reefer." Richie raised his eyebrows. "Mar-i-jua-na?"

"I know what it is. I hope you told him we don't sell narcotics."

"I sure did, boss."

"Can you really get stuff like that around here?"

He shrugged. "This is New York City. If you have the cash, you can get unicorn horns."

"But why would he come to the New Roses looking for it?"

"Well," he sighed. "Maybe Henry occasionally put his hands on some."

I stared at him. "My uncle was a drug dealer?"

"He wasn't in the playgrounds pushing heroin, boss. Henry liked the occasional joint and was known to share it with friends. He wouldn't have trusted Skelly with it, though. Henry had good taste." Richie shrugged. "In spite of the movies the reefer didn't turn him into a crazed killer. Go figure."

"So people were smoking that stuff right in the coffeehouse?"

"Nah. They usually went out in the alley."

"Where Yates got killed."

"More or less."

"You think that's how someone got him out there? An offer of marijuana?"

Richie rubbed his crew cut. "That makes sense, boss. Hey, maybe there was a crazed killer, looking for a buzz."

"Did you tell the police about this?"

"It didn't seem like something they needed to know."

I couldn't argue with that. "But which of the suspects knew there used to be drugs here? And that the alley was where it was smoked?"

"Oh, just about everybody." Richie smiled nostalgically. "Henry was very fond of the stuff."

"Please tell me there's none of it here now."

"Don't sweat it, boss. The first time I spoke to you on the phone I decided you had a stick—" He cleared his throat. "I mean you were a stickler for law and order. So some of Henry's friends destroyed the supply."

"You're sure it's all gone? There are cops hanging around—"

"Relax. We burned it all. Look, these buns aren't going to stack themselves."

I left him to it. I was almost to my office when I stopped dead. They had burned it all. Oh.

Back in my desk I looked at the flowery page with Mimi's phone number.

Don't get me wrong. I had dated plenty of girls in Iowa. Okay, not plenty, but some. That was the problem. Mimi was too much like the girls back home. Pretty, mousy, shy.

And Delgardo said the city was full of gorgeous, bubbly women like Claire. So many women like her that there might even be one for me.

I dropped the page into my wastebasket.

When Lieutenant Gunderson stomped into my office a few minutes later my first thought was that he had heard about the marijuana somehow and arrived to arrest me.

Turned out he had a different problem. "What the hell are you doing, Gray?"

It was pretty obvious I was going over the accounting books, but I figured that wasn't the answer he was looking for. "What's wrong, Lieutenant?"

"You tell me! I hear you're harassing my suspects. Maybe out in Kansas they like vigilantes playing Marshal Dillon, but we don't appreciate it here."

"Who complained?" I asked.

"You mind your own business," he said. "By which I mean this pit, not a murder investigation. You get me?"

I thought about saying that since his detectives were hanging around my place, pit or not, it seemed only fair that I go out and do their job. I just nodded instead.

"One more thing," said Gunderson. "Have you met a man named Delgardo?"

I think my jaw dropped. "Well, yes."

"Stay away from him. The man's a nut. He's dangerous."

Nice way to talk about your brother-in-law. *Ex* brother-in-law. I thought about something Delgardo had said, about how few and extreme the grounds for divorce were in New York.

The pale cop turned away and marched toward the door.

"Lieutenant, what's Delgardo's first name?"

"Mud," he said, and kept walking.

"Calm down," said the poet. He had finally dropped in around eleven and I had given him an earful.

"Okay, Thomas. I admit I thought Mimi might have wanted to get to know you better. I figured what harm could it do? And besides."

"Besides what?"

He grinned. "I couldn't think of a question for her. Symmetry demanded one for each suspect. Dig?"

I wanted to throw him out, preferably though a window, but I wanted even more to get the cops out from underfoot. So I told him about the interviews.

Delgardo stroked his goatee and listened impassively. I had no idea whether he was learning anything, or even paying attention. When I finished he tapped his spoon on the table and stared at nothing for a moment. "You said Teele was eating chicken."

"That's right."

"Did he cook it himself?"

I banged my fist on the table. "How would I know? What possible difference can that make?"

"Everything links up somehow, man. The White Rail is not cheap. I wonder how much bread the guy spends on meat. But never mind."

"So what have you found out, by the way?"

"Me?" He smiled. "I found out what Teele does for a living. He designs women's dresses."

"Really? He doesn't seem the type."

"No, he doesn't. And Dr. Freud would say that explains why he's so pushy with women. Trying to prove what a Hemingway he is." Delgardo torched another Gauloises. "Oh, Richie and Sherry are off the list. Plenty of witnesses put them in the clear."

"Glad to hear it." I didn't want to think a murderer was cooking or serving in my shop.

The most important thing is that red envelope. I need to see it."

"Why didn't you say so? Franny gave it to me. It's in my office."

He brightened. "That's great, Thomas. There might be hope for you yet."

I ignored that, and went to fetch.

When I got back Delgardo was scrubbing his table with a napkin. "Put it down here."

I did and he gave it a careful examination, one side and then the other. "Very interesting. Now let's see if there's a prize inside."

He read the article, front to end, and even examined the painting of the naked lady on the last page.

"Are you getting anywhere?" I asked.

"Hmm? Oh sure, man. It's pretty obvious who the killer is. I was just looking for contradictions." He smiled. "Don't want to look silly during the show."

"What show?"

"Ah. That's where you come in, Thomas." He told me what he had in mind.

Half a dozen times I told him he was crazy, but he just shrugged. "If you want the curse of an unsolved murder hanging over your place, that's up to you. But I know your uncle would have—"

"Okay, okay. We'll do it."

"Good." He tapped the red envelope. "You have a safe in your office, by any chance?"

"I do." Uncle Henry had glued the combination to the wall beside the safe, which seemed to defeat the purpose. I had taken the numbers down, and went a little nuts trying to figure out how to change the combination. I suppose that if the instructions were somewhere around, they were probably in Italian.

"Good. Lock the envelope up, man. That dingus is the heart and soul of the caper."

I couldn't for the life of me figure out how. Maybe the red paper had something to do with Communists? Or did the fact that it was mailed in Brooklyn mean something? I hadn't yet crossed the bridge to Brooklyn, so it all seemed mysterious to me.

"So we need to get all the suspects here," I said. "Oh, damn it."

"What's wrong?"

"I told Teele never to show up here again. Now I have to invite him back."

"I'll have Gunny do it. His invitation carries more authority."

That reminded me of a question of my own. "It's pretty obvious the lieutenant doesn't like you."

"A lot of history under that burning bridge, I'm afraid."

"I asked him what your first name really was and he wouldn't tell me. Why is that?"

A quick grin. "Well, it's like this, Thomas. My so-called Christian name is irrelevant, but Gunny's is actually embarrassing. That's what keeps him quiet."

"Okay. Eight P.M. tomorrow." I stood up.

"Wait a moment. I want your cousins to be here too."

"The Bonds? Why?"

Delgardo puffed his Gauloises and gave a Gallic shrug. "How often do you get to meet a man who is running for city council? Maybe he can fix my parking tickets someday."

I told Richie about the plan. "Sounds like fun," he said. "Henry will be spinning in his grave, though."

"Yeah? Why is that?"

"He would never let Del pull one of his stunts here. Your uncle liked the guy but he didn't want a bunch of cops and robbers wandering around the place."

"Oh. Del told me he'd done this sort of thing before."

Richie nodded. "But never here. He always had to gather people together in somebody's living room for his little Perry Mason games. The beat boy is moving up in the world."

"That reminds me. If he's such a big beat poet why is he hanging around my place? I don't see a lot off other people dressed in black spouting verse in here."

He grinned. "You mean you haven't figured it out?"

"You know what? I'm getting awfully sick of people asking me that. Is New York City some kind of puzzle I'm support to sort through till the pieces fit?"

"At least you figured *that* out. Del hangs out here because the beats *don't*. He doesn't want them to see him doing his day job."

"And what's that exactly?"

"Solving crimes. Catching unfaithful spouses. It makes him look too much like a nine-to-fiver, and that's bad for his reputation."

"Then why does he do it?"

"It's the only thing he's good at."

"This place is going to drive me crazy."

"Then it's a good thing you aren't changing its name."

"Name? Want do you mean?"

"New Roses? Neurosis. That was Henry's sense of humor." Richie offered me a smirk. "You haven't figured that out yet?"

"I don't get it," said Jim Ingells. My cousin's campaign manager's frown made him look like a troubled basset hound.

I had come over to my cousin's campaign office because Ingells had made it clear on the phone he wouldn't even mention the invitation to Victor.

"Why should Mr. Bond—much less his wife—go to Greenwich Village to watch some amateur try to solve a murder?"

"I'm asking a favor," I said. I knew how much politicians liked favors. "I'm trying to get this mess cleaned up before it affects my business."

"How could they help? They weren't even there the night of the killing."

"I don't know. But the investigator I hired says it's important."

"What's important?" said Victor. He had stuck his head out of his office. "Hello, Thomas. It's good to see you again."

Ingells started to tell him about the plan but I jumped over him to explain. I pointed out that the victim had been a veteran. "And being a war hero yourself—"

"Mister Bond is a very busy man," Ingells snapped. No chief of staff likes it when you go over his head to the actual person involved.

My cousin was grimacing. "War hero! You've been talking to Helen. I commanded a supply ship in the Pacific, but that ocean is a big place. We never even saw a Japanese plane. Honestly, I had the most boring career in military history."

My approach wasn't selling, so I tried to explain the event in a different way. "It will be a sort of performance. A lot of people are worried about violence in the city and this is a chance to speak up about it. Offer solutions, express concern."

Ingells gave me a look containing both irritation and admiration. I had hit the perfect tone. What politician would skip a chance to talk to concerned citizens about crime?

"We've got a free evening, don't we?" Victor asked.

"It's supposed to be a planning session, sir. We have to—"

"So the three of us can plan in the taxi on the way over. Besides—" He gave me a smile. "We can finally see my cousin's place of business."

"But Mrs. Bond—"

"Has been complaining that we don't have time for the arts anymore. She'll enjoy a little theatre."

I wasn't sure my cousin-in-law would mistake Delgardo's soirée for Shakespeare, or even Rodgers and Hammerstein, but that was Victor's problem.

"How does this work?" Richie asked the next afternoon. We had put a sign on the door saying the New Roses would be closed for a private party.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, is this a courtroom or catering? Am I providing food? Are the police footing the bill?"

That was a stumper. I knew Lieutenant Gunderson wasn't going to offer to treat everyone to Richie's famous grilled cheese sandwiches. But I couldn't imagine having all those people in my shop and not making coffee and tea available, at least. For free or on sale?

I thought about all the cops Gunderson would be bringing, and all the free java they had cadged so far.

"Everybody pays," I told Richie.

"Truer words were never spoken, boss."

Delgardo arrived first, around seven. He was with a blonde, but she was definitely not Claire. This one was taller, solidly built, and dressed in black from sweater to boots. Her hair was cut almost short enough to be a man's, and she carried a set of bongos casually over one shoulder.

"This is Puff," Del explained. "She's my accompanist."

Puff nodded and strolled past me to the stage. She seemed to have nothing whatsoever to say. Come to think of it, that might be why Delgardo thought she was a good partner.

Gunderson showed up a few minutes later, looking mad enough to chew through a pack of Delgardo's French cigarettes. He refused to meet his ex-brother-in-law's eye and I could see how much he loathed being reduced to accepting help from that corner.

Ben Teele came next. He smirked at me under his droopy mustache.

Franny Sharrup and J. K. Skelly came in together—she in a voluminous red number, and he in a corduroy jacket with patches. He would have looked like a college professor if it weren't for the paint splotches on the sleeves.

The Bonds arrived just before starting time, Victor looking determinedly upbeat and Helen just confused. I got the firm impression that

she had never been in a Greenwich Village coffeehouse and might be willing to sacrifice several inches from her fur coat not to return.

She held her purse against her chest as if she expected someone to steal it. Or maybe she thought she might need it to fight off rats.

The last to arrive was Mimi Willison. She wore a pastel pink dress that showed off more skin than she usually revealed. After a glance to make sure that Ben Teele and I had noticed her, she ignored us both and sat down next to the lieutenant. Teele headed toward her, glanced at Gunderson, and thought better of it.

I started the show by thanking everyone for coming and inviting them to buy coffee or tea. Several cops glared at me when they realized I meant them too.

Then the lieutenant got up. Looking at his pale face I thought at first he was having some digestive problems. Then I realized he was trying to appear pleasant.

"On behalf of the City of New York I thank you all for coming. We appreciate your cooperation and good citizenship. This gentleman—" He couldn't quite bring himself to look at Delgardo. "—is hoping to reveal the truth behind a terrible crime that took place here a few days ago. None of you is legally required to stay. But we do appreciate your help." He paused and couldn't seem to think of anything to add, so he sat down.

Delgardo and Puff then climbed onto the stage. The drummer sat on a folding chair toward the back and wedged her bongos between her knees. The poet stepped into the spotlight. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, seeming to gain an inch or two in height. The man definitely loved a crowd scene.

"Good evening, all. My name is Ellery Delgardo. The lady back there is my friend Puff. I'm hoping you can help us answer a couple of questions tonight."

He raised his right hand dramatically and Puff slammed out a staccato rhythm on her drums. He closed a fist and the beat abruptly stopped.

"The first question, children:
Where does the burden of guilt belong?
That's what the good lieutenant yearns to know.
That's the answer he lives for.

Me? I live somewhere else.
And for something else as well.

So, here is my question, children:

Is there a place for art?
A place in America the way this nation lives and breathes today?

The only art most of us yearn to own
Are pictures of Benjamin Franklin
In shades of green and gray.

An artist came to this city
To the den of the Franklin worshippers.
He wanted to show us beauty,
Beauty you can't fold into your wallet.

Was that the crime for which he died?
Was that—"

"Get on with it!" Gunderson yelled.

Delgardo sighed, his shoulders drooping. "Okay, Gunny. We'll do it your way. Who had a motive to kill Yates? The guy had just hit town for the first time. I admit it is easy to hate some people the first time you meet them." He smiled in Gunderson's direction. "But from what I hear Yates wasn't a bad cat. So the first question is, did any of these good folks—" He waved a hand at the crowd. "—know him before he hit New York."

"We've already asked them," said Gunderson. "They all say no. We know our job, dammit."

Delgardo raised a hand like a preacher.

"You know your job.
So you say.
But what is the job of the detective man?
The sleuth is a critic, that's all
Finding flaws in another man's work.

The criminal—
Ah, children! He is the artist.
The creator.
Destruction is his true design."

"So let's see if we can help you do your job, Gunny. Mr. Ingells. You weren't here on the night of the murder, so I'll bet no one asked if you knew Yates. Am I right?"

The campaign manager nodded, his jowls looking more hangdog than ever. "I never *did* meet him."

"Mrs. Bond, is that true for you as well?"

She looked irritated. "Yes, of course."

"And your hubby, I assume. Mr. B?"

My second cousin was scowling. "Correct. Get on with it."

Delgardo raised a hand and Puff slammed out a dramatic bang-bang-bang. "See, that's the problem. I don't believe you."

Bond looked like an Iowa tornado. "And I should care because—"

"Because I can back it up. I think you and Yates met during the war. Thomas, you're shaking your head."

I was a little shocked to become part of the show. "Well, Yates was in the Army and Mr. Bond was in the Navy. What were the odds of them being in the same place?"

"Slim. It was a pretty big war. But there are a couple of problems with what you just said." Delgardo raised a finger. "One. Yates wasn't in the Army. And two—" Another finger. "Bond wasn't in the navy."

Helen was furious. "This is nonsense. Thomas, I'm sure you meant well, but this man . . . Let's go, Victor."

But her husband wasn't moving. He also wasn't taking his eyes off the poet. "I want to hear what he's going to say about me."

> "Very wise.
> Let the man speak.
> Maybe he'll spin out a rope for us to hang him with later.
>
> Well, I've got rope enough to tie it all together
> But first we must untangle the knots."

Delgardo looked back at me. "Thomas, why do you say Yates was in the Army?"

"He told me so." I struggled for the exact words. "He said, 'When I got out of Camp Waldport after the war I had a file case full of sketches . . .'"

"And you thought Waldport was an army camp."

Everyone was looking at me. "Isn't it?"

"Nope. It was a labor camp in Oregon where conscientious objectors were sent to work as lumberjacks. Loggers, they call them out there."

Mimi cleared her throat. It was the first time she had spoken. "My uncle was a conscientious objector. But he served as a medic in the infantry."

"A lot of them did," Delgardo agreed. "But the hardcore, the ones who refused to wear a uniform at all, were sent to work camps."

I was remembering how people described Andrew Yates standing between Teele and Mimi, willing to be struck, but not to defend himself. I don't know a lot about pacifists, but that sounded like one.

"Waldport was run by the Mennonite Church, and it had a reputation as the art camp. A lot of writers and artists came out of there. They even had their own publishing house, the Untide Press."

Skelly was sneering. "They must have worked real hard if they had the time to write books."

"Five of us died," said Bond. Everyone turned to stare at him. He was looking at the floor. "A lot more were injured. Logging isn't as dangerous as a war, but it isn't office work either."

Ingells, the campaign manager, dropped his face into his hands. He was seeing his job disappear.

Bond's wife was staring at him as if he'd started speaking Chinese. "What are you talking about, Victor? You were in the *navy*."

He still wasn't looking at her. "I never meant to lie to you, my love. It just got out of hand."

"I think I know what happened," said Delgardo. "You told her you were a C.O., didn't you?"

"Not exactly," said Bond. He sighed. "Look, after I was released from that camp I went over to Portland."

I remembered telling Delgardo that my cousins had met in Maine. I forgot that there was also a Portland in Oregon. I had been off by a mere three thousand miles.

"I got a job with a man who arranged hunting trips. I told *him* I had been a C.O., meaning a conscientious objector, but he had been in the navy, where that means commanding officer."

Bond shrugged. "It seemed easier to let it go than to keep explaining. Then when you and your father came along and you were so proud of what you thought I had done—"

Mrs. Bond looked like she was having thoughts no pacifist would approve of. "So all these years you pretended to be a hero."

"I never did. And I *begged* you not to use that word."

"But why did you refuse to fight? I've heard you talk about our brave soldiers, and your father in the Great War—"

"You never met my father," said Bond, "because he died from the gas he inhaled in France. But what hurt him more were the lies the government and the newspapers told to get us into the war, about Germans bayoneting babies and crucifying soldiers on church doors." He shrugged. "When we started hearing horror stories about the Nazis I thought it was the propaganda machine starting up again. I didn't know that this time the atrocities were *real*."

"You two can discuss this at home," said Lieutenant Gunderson. "What I want to know is who killed Yates." He turned to Delgardo. "Are you saying Bond did it to keep this secret?"

Delgardo looked at me. "How about it, Thomas?"

"He couldn't have," I said. "I heard him speaking at a church just before Yates died. Mrs. Bond was there. Mr. Ingells wasn't."

Everyone looked at the campaign manager. His Adam's apple did its bob. "Me? Why would I kill him? I didn't know he existed."

"But you knew about your boss's war record, didn't you?" said Delgardo. "Thomas said you changed the subject when he mentioned Bond's war years."

Ingells shook his head. "I didn't know about that labor camp, but I understood that the war was something he didn't want to talk about." He looked at Bond. "I thought maybe there was a court-martial or something like that."

"Where were you that night?" asked Gunderson.

"I was in the office, working on another speech."

"Alone?"

"Excuse me, Gunny," said Delgardo. "You're ignoring the main fact."

The pale lieutenant looked like he was grinding his teeth in frustration. "And what is that, exactly?"

Again, the hand. Again, the bongos.

"Coincidence.
I'm crazy about coincidence.
A coincidence is a little rise in the chess board
That gives us a chance to look around
To see what the grand-master players have in mind for us.

But too many coincidences?
Somebody, somewhere, is kicking the table."

"I swear," said Gunderson, "I'm gonna shoot you myself in a minute."

"Okay. Think about this. The Bonds just happened to plan a visit to the New Roses at the same time Yates had his art on the walls. What are the odds of that?"

Bond pointed a finger at me. "*He* invited us. Thomas Gray!"

I swallowed hard. "I found your name in my uncle's files. And Yates's art was already in place when I got here."

"Exactly," said Delgardo. "And why was it on the walls? Franny, you recommended it to Henry, right?"

She was ready, bright eyes wide. "That's right, honey. Back in May someone sent me an article about Yates. I liked his work and suggested it."

"And you told Thomas you don't know who sent it."

"There was no return address."

"But lucky for us, you kept the envelope."

She nodded. "Just to keep the pages in. I gave it to Thomas."

"Bring it out, please," said Delgardo.

"Wait a minute," said Gunderson. "I'm coming with you."

The lieutenant followed me to my office. I stopped in front of the safe and looked at him.

"What?"

"Please turn around, Lieutenant."

He sighed elaborately, folded his arms and showed me his bony back.

I spun the combination and opened the door. Gunderson was beside me instantly, so it was a good thing there wasn't any reefer in there anymore.

"I'll take it," he said, reaching in with a handkerchief and grabbing the red envelope by a corner.

"Be my guest," I said, since there wasn't much choice.

"Cool," said Delgardo when we reappeared. "Gunny, can you pull the pages out for us?"

The cop found another handkerchief and pried the pages loose. He spread them out on a table, and a lot of the guests gathered in for a look.

"Three pages from *Rocky Mountain Arts*," said Delgardo. "We know Yates didn't send them. He was in Colorado, and this was mailed from Brooklyn. So, who sent them to Franny?"

No one had a suggestion.

"Answer came there none. If we don't know *who* maybe we can figure out *why*. Why did someone want Yates to come to New York?"

"To kill him," said Gunderson.

"Could be. But in that case why wait until he had been in town for weeks? No, I think it was because something had changed. Changed that very night. Come on! Who's got it?"

No one spoke up.

Delgardo pointed at me and I jumped a foot. "There he sits, ladies and gents! Not the killer, but the changer. Thomas was the wild card. He invited the Bonds to visit the coffeehouse that evening. Even put up a sign to tell everyone they were coming."

"Oh," I said. For the first time I thought I had a vague sense of where this was going.

"If Yates was still in the coffeehouse when they arrived he would have immediately recognized his fellow pacifist from Camp Waldport. And we know he wasn't shy about talking about his war days. So the secret would have been out."

"But," the cop complained, "we've already established that the Bonds didn't kill him."

"True as sunlight. But there was someone else with a strong motive for keeping his war record a secret. Wasn't there, Mr. Bond?"

My cousin's chiseled features had been sinking into a deeper and deeper scowl. Now his expression changed as if a light bulb had gone on above his head. "Oh, for Pete's sake!"

"You figured it out," said Delgardo approvingly.

"I was thinking it was *you!*"

"Not me, man. I don't indulge in that sort of game."

"What are you talking about?" said Mrs. Bond, getting angrier by the minute.

Her husband looked away. "I'm being blackmailed. Someone threatened to reveal my war record."

"How much have you been paying?" asked Gunderson.

He swallowed. "Two hundred dollars a month."

"Of *my money?*" gasped his wife.

Bond looked at her, then away. "I did it for you, dear."

Helen's expression said *wait until we get home.*

The lieutenant had the trail now. "The blackmailer had a motive to keep Yates from meeting Bond."

"Sure. If Yates spilled the beans the bad guy's meal ticket was gone."

"Then why send Miss Sharrup the article? Why would he want to take the chance of bringing Yates to town?"

Delgardo smiled. "Somebody explain it to the good lieutenant."

I couldn't resist. This was elementary business-school stuff. "The blackmailer wanted to increase his customer base."

Gunderson frowned. "Come again?"

"More victims. Yates would know the names of other people from the camp, and some of them might be trying to keep their war records hidden."

"Exactly, Thomas," said Delgardo. The blacklist caused a lot of people to cover up anything in their past that looked more left-wing than, say, Adlai Stevenson."

He raised a hand to his lips and seemed surprised not to find a cigarette in it. "Where was I? Ah! Now, this is important. Franny, was there anything else in the envelope?"

She looked thoughtful. "No, I don't think so. That was all."

Delgardo raised his hand and Puff wailed out another riff of bongo madness.

"Oh, God," moaned Gunderson.

> "That's the burden, children.
> That's the weight,
> The weight of guilt."

He pointed at the envelope. "Gunny, read the postage, please."

The lieutenant held the envelope at arm's length, looking a bit embarrassed about being far-sighted. "Twelve cents."

"Bingo!" said Delgardo. "Why is there twelve-cents postage for three pages in an envelope? I doubt if it weighs even two ounces, but let's assume the sender wanted to be careful. Two ounces costs eight cents to mail now, and only cost six before they raised the rates over the summer."

Everybody frowned at him and he frowned back at us. "Come on, people! Why would anyone put so much extra postage on an envelope? Anyone?"

There were a lot of shrugs.

Delgardo smiled. "Congratulations. You're all right! There's no reason to do that. So they didn't."

"You mean Miss Sharrup is lying about what was in the package?" asked Gunderson.

"I beg your pardon," said Franny.

"What *was* in it?" asked Bond.

"No idea," said Delgardo cheerfully. "It doesn't matter a bit, because the pages about Yates were not."

"You've lost me," said Skelly.

The poet sighed. "Connections, folk. That's what life is *about*, for God's sake. We still have to deal with the coincidence of Bond and Yates com-

ing together. Thomas, why did you invite the Bonds here in the first place?"

I blinked. "Because I found papers in Uncle Henry's office saying they were distant cousins. Since they were the only family I had in New York, I wanted to meet them."

"But Henry had decided not to. Why?"

"He found out about Bond's politics. Said he wasn't eager to meet a McCarthyite."

My cousin went red. "I am not a McCarthyite!"

"If you say so," said Delgardo, peacefully. "But how did Henry get the idea that you were? Richie, do you think he went to the library and looked Bond up?"

My cook looked surprised. "Henry? Never. Not a book guy."

"So he would have had someone do the research for him," said Delgardo. "Who did he know who was a researcher? Maybe someone who writes for a living?"

Everyone turned to Franny Sharrup. She said nothing, her lips in a tight little line.

"Dig," said Delgardo. "Henry asked Franny to look up his distant cousin. What she told him, true or false, convinced him he didn't want to meet Mr. Bond. But maybe she found something she *didn't* tell Henry. Namely, that he was hiding his experience in the war."

"This is libel!" said Franny.

"Slander, actually. As a writer you should know the difference. Where was I? Oh, when did the blackmailing start, Mr. Bond?"

"In April."

"That was a month after my uncle found out about him," I said.

"Bingo. So if I'm right, Franny realized she had a moneymaker. She started looking for other former Waldport residents who might be willing to discuss their fellow inmates. She came up with Yates and invited him to come to New York. There was no risk since Henry had decided to never invite Bond to the coffeehouse."

"But then he died," I said, "and I changed the rules."

"Exactly. And when Franny saw the sign you so helpfully put up she realized she had to get rid of Andrew Yates. She talked him into the back alley somehow—"

Don't mention the marijuana, I was thinking.

"Then she just had to drop her handkerchief or give him some other reason to bend over. With a big pipe she didn't need to be very strong."

"So where did this envelope come from?" asked Gunderson.

"Franny knew she might need to explain how she came to know about Yates. She had the article she had found when she was researching him, and she had an envelope from the right month for her story, with no return address. The postage was wrong, but I guess she didn't notice that."

"This is all lies," said Franny Sharrup.

"In that case," said Gunderson, standing up, "your bank accounts won't show two-hundred-dollar deposits every month since April, will they?"

The look on her face said otherwise.

The party broke up after that. Victor Bond promised to invite me to dinner some time, but I didn't think that couple would be planning any social events together for a long time.

Mimi walked out without a glance at anyone. Especially at me.

Franny Sharrup left in shiny metal bracelets.

Puff, the blonde drummer, stopped on the way out. She met my eye and nodded solemnly.

"Bumpy," she announced. I decided it was probably a compliment. I also concluded that if there *was* such a thing as a beatnik, Puff was it.

Pretty soon there was no one left but Richie cleaning up, and Delgardo nursing a last espresso.

"That was pretty impressive," I told him.

"Hmm?" He looked up, blinking like a man awakened from a doze. "Sorry, man. I'm always out of it after a performance."

"Was that a performance?"

He grinned. "Of course it was. A little improvisational poetry show. That's the main reason I do these things. To get an audience that ***really*** pays attention. So, Thomas my friend, have I paid off my tab?"

I had forgotten about that. "I guess you have. A deal's a deal."

"Good. I'll start a new one tomorrow."

"One question. Did you suspect Franny from the start? Is that why you asked how she heard about Yates?"

"No. She didn't stand out until I saw the envelope. Have you figured out why I had you ask the other clowns those questions?"

"You wanted to know what Skelly did in the war to see if he had been at Camp Waldport. And you wanted to know about Teele's politics—okay, why?"

"If he were a Republican he might have known about Victor Bond. Somebody was trying to hide the connection and if it weren't your cousin, it was a blackmailer. What are you looking at me that way for?"

"I am wondering how *you* know so much about Camp Waldport."

"Untide Press published Kenneth Patchen's first book of poetry. And the only book by Glenn Coffield, the first beat poet."

"Huh. What did you do during the war, by the way?"

"Me?" He seemed surprised by the question. "Oh. The infantry wasn't desperate for poets, so I wound up working for the War Department as a translator."

"A translator."

Delgardo tipped his head back, catching the last drops of espresso. "Spanish. Russian. Give me a dictionary and a head start and I can handle Polish."

"Oh." That seemed reasonable enough. "Well, anyway, tonight was a tri-

umph, Del. Say, it's too bad Claire wasn't here to see it."

"Claire?" He frowned as if he couldn't remember who she was, then looked around vaguely, as if expecting to see her. I guess the performances really *did* take a lot out of him. "She's gone back to Bob."

"Bob who?"

"Bob Smith. Bill Jones, I forget. He was her childhood sweetheart and now he's a junior exec at IBM or ITT. Or maybe *A*TT. Who can tell the difference?"

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Someday he'll be a junior vice president and they'll have a split level in Westchester and three kids. She'll drive to PTA meetings in their station wagon and she'll look at the other moms and think 'I'm cooler than they are, because I used to bounce the bed with a beat poet.'"

I stared at him. "That's the most depressing thing I ever heard."

"Nah. It'll make her life seem much more tolerable."

"I was talking about *you*. How often does this sort of thing happen?"

He got to his feet. "You're making the mistaken assumption that I wanted more than a bounce. I didn't."

"I don't believe you're that shallow."

"The depths of my shallowness are beyond your fathoming, young Thomas. Where are you going?"

I was heading for the wastebasket in my office. "To find Mimi's phone number. Maybe she'd like to catch a movie sometime."

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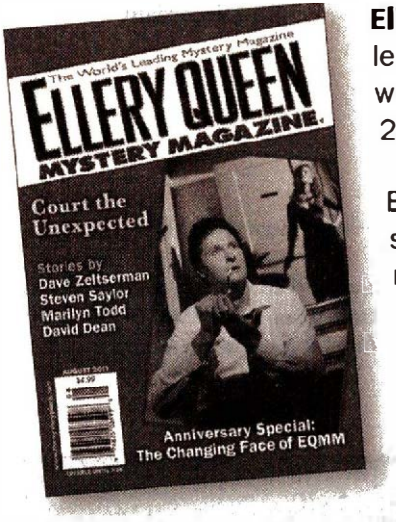

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Solution to the June "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Renoir
B. Ottoman
C. Bonnets
D. Entry
E. Reviews
F. Twain
G. Horoscope
H. Antics
I. Hammerhead
J. Notches
K. Bush league
L. Oddities
M. Occupation
N. Kissimmee
O. Essentials
P. Debates
Q. Accidental
R. Nanette
S. Districts
T. Pointless
U. Raffled off
V. Imitation
W. Neighborly
X. Tatami
Y. Emmenthal
Z. Discordant

QUOTATION

Author — ROBERT HAHN
Work — BOOKED AND PRINTED
(*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*—July/August 2011)

"In *A Lesson in Secrets* . . . Winspear augments a solid mystery with trenchant details about the social and political atmosphere of the times and continues to make Maisie Dobbs one of the most interesting and formidable characters in modern detective fiction."

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER
by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

PI GLA QVUFOQBIW OU BPI QVCZB VN XCMSOQ VXOUOVU VN BVBLS ABCXOWOBJ, LUW BPLB'A L PLZW BPOUD BV SOFI GOBP OU L ATLSS BVGU.

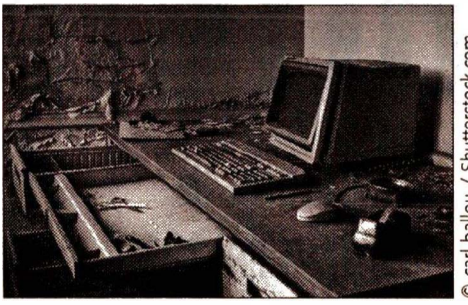
—IFI NOAPIZ

CIPHER: _
ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 192

THE STORY THAT WON

The January/February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Katherine Sheriff of Round Lake Beach, Illinois. Honorable mentions go to Jed Power of Peabody, Massachusetts; Daniel LeBoeuf of Lakeland, Florida; Gina Kingsland of Lyndhurst, New Jersey; Joshua Rodgers of St. Gilbertville, Iowa; Karen Thornhill of Memphis, Tennessee; Barbara Martens of Moorestown, New Jersey; John T. Hancock of Butner, North Carolina; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; and Edward Perez, Jr. of Orland, California.



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RATS!

KATHERINE SHERIFF

The woman in the slinky evening gown looked out of place in the dark dusty room with rats crawling through the garbage on the floor. She desperately rummaged through the desk drawers.

"I have to find that disc!" she thought as she roughly pulled open another drawer. "If I take too much time, they will notice I am missing from the party."

She had been allowed into the gangster's headquarters after months of working undercover. She was surprised to learn that Manny the Snake, the city's most powerful gangster, preferred to run his operations from this dilapidated office with an ancient looking computer. Manny was suspected of selling stolen artwork from museums across the country to patrons in his exclusive casino. She believed that he was behind the thefts, but the police had not been able to find evidence to prove it.

"Only one more drawer." It slid open with a creak, revealing a stack of black discs. Turning on the computer, her face was cast with a greenish glow. She tried the first disc on the pile and smiled triumphantly. It contained detailed information of the crimes. "This is going to put him away for a long time."

"Sorry, sweetie. Not this time," a voice from the shadows hissed. He was about to fire his gun when he suddenly cried out, "A rat bit me!"

As Manny was distracted, she took the opportunity to capture him. Putting on the handcuffs she said, "I thought rats were prey to Snakes!"

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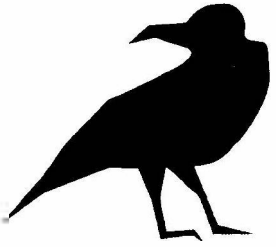

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine (May 2012)
From "Wind Power" by Eve Fisher:

—Eve Fisher

He was convicted in the court of public opinion of total stupidity, and that's a hard thing to live with in a small town.

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