# ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2008

## Killing Time

A Josie Prescott Antiques Mystery

BY JANE K. CLELAND

Plus More Great Crime Fiction by

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*Cover by John Sposato*

## FICTION



## MYSTERY CLASSIC



## DEPARTMENTS

# EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

## CHARACTERS APART

Whether they be world-weary cops who have seen every horror imaginable or brilliant but misanthropic ratiocinative detectives, characters in crime stories are often somewhat set apart from their neighbors. Several of this month's stories feature characters blessed and burdened with a degree of isolation.

Shunned by the New York auction houses after she helped put a shady dealer in jail, antiques appraiser Josie Prescott has relocated to the seacoast of New Hampshire. In Jane K. Cleland's "Killing Time," Josie finds once again that her knowledge of the decorative arts, knack for research, and dogged integrity are qualities that make her a good amateur sleuth—even while they doom her to some uncomfortable situations. Ms. Cleland is the author of three novels featuring Josie Prescott; the second, *Deadly Appraisal*, recently received the David Award for Best Novel at the Deadly Ink mystery conference.

As cops deemed too essential to be spared for military service, the "four horsemen" of the Racket Squad also find themselves slightly out of step with the wartime culture of World War II Detroit; in Loren D. Estleman's "Sob Sister," the horsemen must deal with an ambitious reporter who gets wind of their plans to pursue a bootlegging operation. In "Blind Side," Peter Sellers poignantly captures the mindset, motives, and lonely courage of a bullied young man who is staring down his demons. And a young detective encounters the hollowness of a vibrant but decaying New Orleans as he investigates the death of a prominent prostitute in O'Neil De Noux's "No. 40 Basin Street."

This month's issue also features a trio of tales featuring lawyers, some noble, others not. Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "Discovery" pits a small-town attorney against the big guns of the railroads. Brian Thornton's "Suicide Blonde" concerns a lawyer and fixer for a Las Vegas operator in the early sixties. And James Lincoln Warren's "The Warcoombe Witch" is a tale told *by* a lawyer about the defense of a "witch" in the eighteenth century.

Our mystery classic this month, "A Perverted Genius" by Silas K. Hocking, features a village curate who is perplexed by a spate of robberies. In addition, we have a challenging logic puzzle by Robert Kesling and a look at the fall lineup of crime television shows in J. Rentilly's Reel Crime column.

# KILLING TIME

## JANE K. CLELAND

Driving up Ocean Avenue, which ran alongside New Hampshire's three miles of shoreline, I decided to play hooky.

Instead of hot-footing it back to my company, Prescott's Antiques and Auctions, after acquiring a stellar collection of snow globes from a retiring professor, I was going to go for a walk on Rocky Point beach. It was twelve thirty on a sparkling bright mid November day, and it was almost sixty degrees, more than twenty degrees warmer than usual.

I parked on the sandy shoulder not far from Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast. I'd sold a fair number of antiques to Valerie Lane, the owner, and on a whim I decided to pop in and say hello.

A silver Sonata driven by a striking redhead was backing out of Valerie's small parking lot as I walked between Valerie's white van and a gold Impala to get to the walkway. She headed south.

Mounting the steps to the porch, I read the message embroidered on a heart-shaped pillow hanging on the front door: "Welcome! Come on in and call hello!" I stepped inside.

"Valerie! It's Josie! Josie Prescott."

"Coming!" a woman, maybe Valerie, shouted from somewhere upstairs, then a moment later, Valerie's head and torso appeared at the top of the stairs looking over the banister.

Valerie was a full-figured brunette, about my age, mid thirties, with an easy smile and a great eye for Victorian antiques and collectibles. Through the wooden balusters, I could see that she wore a silky robin's egg blue dressing gown. She held it closed, clutching a handful of fabric to her bosom. It was great looking, and I found myself wondering where she bought it.

"Hi, Josie!" she said, smiling. "Long time, no speak. How's the antiques biz?"

"Good. Everything's great. Listen, I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm going for a walk on the beach and just popped in to say hello. Is everything good with you?"

"That's sweet of you. Everything's fine. You sure picked the right day for a walk."

Joel Spector

"It's gorgeous out, isn't it?" I agreed. "Well, I'll see you later, Valerie."

I crossed Ocean Avenue, clambered up a dune, and skittle-ran down the side to the surf. I was on a hunt for driftwood. When I was a kid, before my mother died, we'd trek to Nantasket Beach, south of Boston, each November, just the two of us, and seek out the best-looking driftwood, a crucial element in the elaborate holiday decorations we created each season. I hadn't done it since I couldn't remember when, and this year I was determined to find a perfect piece and restart the tradition.

I headed north. Plenty of driftwood was scattered about, most of it tangled in seaweed, but nothing that fit the bill. After about thirty minutes, I turned back. An hour into my walk, just as I was about to give up, I found it—the perfect specimen, hidden behind an old log. It was a two-foot length of knurled applewood, sea- and sun-bleached to a satiny dove gray.

The screams, when they came, were piercing, and louder than the crashing waves. I spun toward shore, but I couldn't see over the dunes. I raced up the sand toward the street, driftwood in hand. The screams didn't stop. From the top, I saw a middle-aged woman wearing a Macon Cleaners uniform standing on the Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast's front porch.

She was shrieking, her eyes clenched closed.

I ran-slid down the dune, dashed across the street, and took the stairs two at a time to reach her on the porch.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Jes" was embroidered on the pocket. She clutched a mop to her chest as if it were all that was holding her up. She didn't appear injured.

"What's happened, Jes?" I asked.

She didn't stop yelling. She didn't know I was there. I touched her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" I repeated. "Tell me."

She opened her eyes wide and I saw terror in her eyes. "Upstairs!" she managed, choking on the word. "Oh my God . . . oh my God . . . oh my God!" She began wailing, and folded into herself. The mop clattered to the porch.

My mouth went dry. I looked toward the parking lot. The only vehicle was the Macon Cleaners van. "Where's Valerie? Ms. Lane?" I asked.

"Grocery shopping," she moaned. "Oh my God!"

"What is it? What's upstairs?"

"Mother of God . . . he's dead."

I dug my cell phone out of my purse and called 911. The police

dispatcher told me to stay outside, away from the house, and to wait for the police to arrive. I took Jes's arm and guided her into the parking lot.

Four minutes later, a patrol car driven by a uniformed police officer I didn't know came charging into the lot. Jes, the maid, stood silently.

He tried to get information from her but couldn't. She was unable to say more than "Upstairs" and "Mother of God."

He started off toward the porch, spoke into his radio, then entered the house. I caught the door before it swung closed and stepped inside behind him. He stopped three paces in to listen. I backed into the corner behind him. The grandfather clock was ticking. Somewhere outside a dog barked. The refrigerator cycled on, then off.

The police officer fingered open his holster as he started up the stairs. My heart was thudding. I followed. When he reached the second-floor landing, he paused and glanced around.

Three closed doors, labeled, ROSE, TULIP, and VIOLET, were visible, one to right, the other two in front of us. A fourth door, on the left, stood open.

The officer drew his weapon and eased into the room with the open door. I stayed on the landing. After several seconds, I heard him speaking and crept toward the room. He was staring at something on the floor on the far side of the bed and talking into his radio. I saw rumpled sheets and a nightstand with a lamp on it. I stepped over the threshold.

"What are you doing in here?" the police officer snapped at me. "Get out!"

"Sorry," I replied, and as I turned to leave, I peered over the bed. A man lay on the floor. He was naked. His face was swollen and purplish gray. He was, beyond doubt, dead.

Detective Claire Brownley stared at me, her sapphire blue eyes meeting mine. "You didn't touch anything? Not even the watch?"

"What watch? I didn't see a watch."

She held up a see-through plastic evidence bag containing a gold pocket watch clipped to a chain. There was a circular onyx fob dangling at the chain's end.

"No. From what I can see, though, it's a beauty," I said.

We were sitting in a patrol car while the crime scene investigators worked inside. Valerie hadn't returned from shopping. The maid, who'd blurted to Detective Brownley that she knew nothing and that she was going to faint, was being interviewed in an unmarked police vehicle on the other side of the lot.

"The watch was under the nightstand near his body," she told me. "Do you think it's valuable?"

"I'd need to examine it. Some pocket watches are hugely valuable; others are worthless."

She nodded and was about to speak when Valerie drove up in her white van. Valerie opened up the side door and I saw a sea of white plastic grocery bags. Detective Brownley stepped out of the vehicle. I followed suit.

Valerie stood by her van as Detective Brownley approached her. She turned to me. "Josie?" she asked. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

I nodded but didn't reply.

"Someone died," Detective Brownley told Valerie. "The body was found in the room marked 'Wisteria.' Who was assigned to that room?"

Valerie looked stunned. She shivered despite the scarf wrapped around her neck and the down vest zipped all the way up. "Someone's dead? Who?" she asked.

The detective pushed some buttons on her cell phone. When she'd arrived, ten minutes after the first police officer found the body, she'd taken a head shot of the murder victim on her cell phone. "Do you recognize this man?" she asked, turning the phone so Valerie could view the display.

Blood drained from Valerie's face as she stared at the photo. One second, her complexion was rosy, and the next it was ashen. "What happened to him?"

"The ME is just starting her work," Detective Brownley replied, watching Valerie with laserlike focus. "Who is it?"

Valerie scanned the parking lot. "Where's Phyllis?" she whispered. "I don't see her car."

Detective Brownley paused, then said, "Ms. Lane?"

"That's Murray Jenkins. Phyllis is his wife. They're from Tampa. They decided to spend the fall up here. They've been guests since late September."

"What did they do with themselves all day?"

"I don't know." Valerie shrugged. "Murray stayed inside most of the time. Phyllis was gone a lot. I think she was a photographer. She carried equipment around—good stuff. I'd see her in the garden sometimes taking shot after shot of a flower or a leaf."

"What other guests are here now?"

"Besides the Jenkinses? Just Shannon. Shannon McIver. She's a CPA from Boston. She stays with me one week a month while she's working at the university. She's their outside auditor."

"So she's at work now?"

"What time is it?" Valerie glanced at her watch. "Just after two. Yes, she should be."

"When did you last see each of the Jenkinses and Ms. McIver?"

"This morning at breakfast. Phyllis drove off. Shannon left for the university. Murray went to his room." She shrugged. "It was a typical day."

"What did you do after breakfast?" Detective Brownley asked.

Valerie took in a deep breath and held it for a moment. She swept her hair back, then took another deep breath. "I cleaned up the dishes. I made a grocery list." She shrugged again. "I checked the computer to see if I had any e-mail. Nothing unusual happened. It was a regular day."

"Were there any phone calls? Did you see anyone after breakfast?"

"There were no calls. Shannon came back for lunch, as usual. I allow her kitchen privileges as part of my deal with the university. She got here about twelve fifteen. Josie stopped by about twelve thirty to say hello. Jes from Macon got here right afterwards, and I left around one to do some shopping. Shannon would have left to go back to her job about one fifteen."

"Does that timing sound right to you, Josie?" the detective asked.

"I guess so. When I got here, Valerie's van was here, and a gold Impala. A silver Sonata was leaving at the same time as I arrived. When I got back from the beach, about one thirty, the Macon Cleaners' van was the only vehicle in the lot."

"The gold Impala's Shannon's. The Sonata is the Jenkinses' car," Valerie said. "Was a woman driving? A redhead?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Then Phyllis must have come back sometime during the morning and I missed her. It's a big house."

"Do you have contact information for Mrs. Jenkins or Ms. McIver?" Detective Brownley asked Valerie.

"Yes, both of them. Inside."

Detective Brownley used her radio to contact someone called Tillman, got permission to enter, then turned to me. "You can go. I'll be in touch."

I watched Valerie and Detective Brownley walk inside, then crossed Ocean Avenue, climbed a dune, and faced the ocean. I stood on the shifting sand for awhile, listening to the waves as they rolled to shore and watching the sea gulls spike and dive, and then I drove slowly back to work.

I was in my office on the phone with my boyfriend, Ty Alveraz, filling him in, when Wes, the annoyingly assertive cub reporter for the *Seacoast Star*, called.

"Whatcha got?" Wes demanded.

"Hi, Wes, I'm fine, thanks."

"So? What did you see? Was the dead guy really naked?"

"I'm on the other line, Wes. I'll call you back."

"Josie," he whined, "it's urgent! I've got a real shockeroonie."

Curiosity warred with an aversion to encourage Wes's unseemly delight in all things scandalous, and curiosity won. I told him to hold on, explained to Ty that I had to take another call, then said, "I'm back. What's your *shockeroonie?*" I rolled my eyes as I spoke the word.

"You first."

"I don't know anything, Wes."

"What are you talking about? You called 911. You found the body."

"I didn't find the body," I protested. "The cleaner from Macon did."

"What's her name?" Wes asked.

I felt it beginning again. Wes had a gift. He invariably drew out more information from me than I wanted to provide. I let him because I knew the score: if I didn't give information, I wouldn't get information. And Wes had sources everywhere, from the police to telephone companies to bankers. Wes and I had our own sort of quid pro quo and our own rules. Before answering, I demanded anonymity, and he argued that he was only asking background questions. After a familiar squabble, I succeeded in wresting a commitment from him.

"So, what's the maid's name?" he asked.

"I don't know, but her uniform had the word *Jes* embroidered on it."

"What was the murder weapon?"

"I didn't see anything nearby," I replied. My throat closed as I recalled the murdered man's face. "I don't even know how he died."

"Asphyxiated," Wes said.

"Suffocated?" I asked, shocked.

"Strangled." Wes sounded bloodthirsty.

"With what?"

"According to my police source, they don't know. Something soft, like a sheet. Not a rope or an electric cord, which would have left marks. You didn't see anything?"

"I saw sheets. The bed was unmade."

"What else? A towel lying around?"

I thought back to the scene. "No, nothing like that."

"Did you know him?"

"No. Nor his wife."

"How about the other guest? Shannon McIver?"

"No." I swiveled to face my window and gazed out past my bare maple tree toward the church on the other side of the woods. "What's your shockeroonie?" I asked.

"I have two. First, you know how they said their names were Phyllis and Murray Jenkins? And that they were from Tampa? Well, guess what? There's neither a Phyllis Jenkins nor a Murray Jenkins in Tampa!"

"Well then, who are they?" I asked, bewildered.

"No one knows. There's no ID. No wallet. No laptop. The police have run his prints and there's no match."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would people lie about their names in Rocky Point?"

"Makes you wonder, huh? There's more—are you ready? They were able to recover trace evidence from under the dead guy's fingernails—blood and tissue."

"Whose is it?"

"Who knows? Until they have someone to compare it to . . . you know the drill."

"What do they do now?"

"Hope his wife comes back soon."

The next afternoon, Detective Brownley showed up without an appointment, wanting to talk to me. I told Gretchen, my receptionist, to send her up.

I started my company in an old canvas factory. I refurbished it to include a luxurious, high-end auction venue on one side; a cavernous warehouse for sorting, cleaning, and storing inventory in the middle; and a Spartan tag-sale shack on the other side. There was a big office in the front. My private office occupied the mezzanine level.

From the landing, I watched as Gretchen walked the detective to the spiral staircase that led to my office. Per my insurance company's requirements, no one was allowed to be in the warehouse unescorted, not even a police detective on duty.

"I was wondering if you can tell me anything about the victim from this watch. Apparently, it's his," she said after we were settled in matching yellow Queen Anne wing chairs. She dangled the plastic bag containing the pocket watch. "According to both Ms. Lane and Ms. McIver, he wore it all the time." She extended an arm. "The lab is finished with it."

I opened the bag and allowed the watch to spill gently onto the table, then I picked it up and held it to the light. The watch was

gold, a terrific example of a classic gold damaskeened pocket watch. Made by the Waltham Watch Company, it featured a pristine white porcelain dial, black Arabic numerals, red five-minute marks, and black spade pointers. Inside there was an inscription in delicate script:

For Edmund T. Blair
25 Years Faithful Service
1972-1997

"Did you look up the name?" I asked.

"Yeah—no luck—there were almost a hundred fifty thousand hits. We checked the Waltham Watch Company too. It's out of business." She shrugged again. "So what do you think? Can you help?"

I turned the watch over. The etched design was ornate, featuring vines, hanging fruit, blossoms, and tendrils. The Waltham Watch Company mass produced watches, but this one didn't look like a mass produced product, and if it wasn't, there was a chance I could trace it. "I can try," I told her.

"Thanks," she said.

I slid the watch back into the plastic bag and walked her downstairs. Gretchen took digital photos and typed up a receipt, our standard procedure for an antique left for appraisal.

"I'll call as soon as we know something," I told the detective.

"Hurry, okay?"

I nodded, understanding the exigency. She was out of options and was counting on me.

I showed the watch to my appraisers, Sasha and Fred. Sasha, my chief appraiser, was shy and quiet, diligent and persistent, with small-town style. Fred was assertive and confident, a pit bull, with big-city sass.

"We need to find the owner," I told them.

"It's a Waltham," Fred said, snorting dismissively. Fred was an antiques snob and Waltham had produced something like forty million watches.

"What about the fob?" I asked. "It looks like onyx. Any chance we could trace it?"

Fred held up the circular black stone attached to the watch chain through flat links. The stone was encircled in chased gold. "Unusual," he said. "And engraved—it says, '. . . *a form of madness.*' "

"I know that. Is there more?" I said, racking my brain trying to recall the reference.

"No," he said.

"My dad quoted it," I murmured, feeling the familiar stab of loneliness and loss whenever I thought of him. I missed him every

day. "I know I know it. Give me a minute." I shut my eyes, then opened them. "It's from *Man's Rise to Civilization*, by Peter Farb. The quote is something like romantic love exists, but people need to recognize it for what it is—a form of madness." Seeing Fred and Sasha's astonishment, I added, "My dad loved words used well," then shook my head to chase the memory away.

Fred leaned back with a knowing grin and pushed his square-framed glasses into place. "That's pretty good."

"What's on the reverse?" I asked, bringing our conversation back to work.

Fred turned the stone over and examined it under a loupe, then scrutinized the gold, turning it slowly. "Nothing on the stone. And just '14 K' stamped on the ridge."

"Sasha, what do you think?" I asked.

"We could research companies that awarded gold watches for twenty-five years' service in 1997."

I nodded. "What else?"

"The inscription's worth a shot."

"Fred? Any other ideas?"

He shrugged. "Nothing's likely to work. Whoever owns it now probably bought it used. Tracking down the company or the inscription is more likely to lead to a guy who bought it from a pawnshop ten years ago and sold it on eBay five years after that."

I nodded again. "You're probably right. Still, we've got to try . . . I'll take the watch and the inscription. Why don't you guys give companies who gave gold watches in 1997 a whirl?"

"Okay," Sasha said.

Fred agreed without enthusiasm.

Upstairs, I used a loupe to examine the pocket watch millimeter by millimeter. Woven into a vine near the bottom, clear as day, I spotted letters: RfTD. It meant nothing to me.

I Googled the initials and got more than a thousand hits, articles and press releases about Roy farrell Thomas Design. From my reading, I gathered that Roy farrell Thomas Design had been a big deal design studio based in San Francisco back in the '90s. That Mr. Thomas used a lowercase middle initial was one of many eccentricities he and his studio were known for.

I clicked on a retrospective in *Design Issues @ Work* referencing a change in ownership. Mr. Thomas had sold his studio to Shapiro Graphics, an L.A.-based full-service graphics agency, in 2004.

I called Shapiro Graphics and got a nice woman in personnel, but she couldn't help me. No Roy farrell Thomas Design employees were employed by Shapiro Graphics, and if any ever had been, she was unaware of it. She passed me on to the client relations

manager, a crabby-sounding man who acted as if he could get some work done if only clients would stop bothering him.

"Kill 'em with kindness," my dad once told me. "Works better than going toe-to-toe."

"I'm sorry to disturb you," I said, apologizing in a ploy to soften him up.

It didn't work, but my persistence did, and finally he explained that Shapiro had bought Roy farrell Thomas Design for its client list, not for the designs, so he could provide no useful information. I asked to be transferred back to the woman in personnel, and when I asked for Mr. Thomas's contact information, I struck out again. Last she heard, he was living somewhere in Costa Rica.

Fred called up. "Finding companies who in 1997 gave watches to retirees is impossible. There's no central listing. There's nowhere to search. There are no experts to ask. It's a bust."

I told him that he and Sasha should go back to other appraisals, and I turned back to the inscription.

Detective Brownley said she got too many hits on the name. I thought for a moment, then Googled "Roy farrell Thomas" and "Edmund T. Blair" and "pocket watch," and I got no hits. I tried again, this time dropping Mr. Blair's middle initial from my search. Just because he used it didn't mean other people were as diligent. A single reference appeared: Mr. Blair's obituary in his church's online newsletter. He died in Lee, Massachusetts in 2005.

The article stated that Edmund Blair had loved his Roy farrell Thomas watch, the one he received from Landler Metal Works when he retired. And that he was survived by his wife and one son, Chester, a playwright, who lived in New York City.

Further research provided a photo of Chester Blair at the opening of his latest Broadway hit, *No Time for Crying*. It was hard to be certain that Chester was the murder victim, since the only time I'd seen his face, it had been misshapen and discolored, but I was fairly certain that I was staring at a photo of the dead man.

I searched for more information about Chester Blair and found a long, juicy article in *New York Monthly* from last year. Chet, as he was known, was apparently quite a ladies' man. He spent a lot of time tearing up New York City hotspots with a variety of young women, everyone from actresses who performed in the plays he wrote to waitresses who served him to neighbors who lived in the same trendy Tribeca locale, and more or less, he got away with it. One woman sued him for paternity, but the tests proved he wasn't the father of her baby. Another woman attempted suicide when she learned she was one of three women he was dating, but as she'd already attempted suicide several times in the past, the news

reports referred to the incident as unfortunate, not blame-worthy. Chet had never been married.

I called Detective Brownley to report.

I stopped by the Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast on my way home to see how Valerie was doing. She invited me in for a cup of tea, and led the way into her comfortable red and white gingham country kitchen. She wore a yellow turtleneck sweater and jeans, and she looked bone weary.

We sat at a rectangular table that jutted out from the far wall. A stacked washer-dryer was off to one side. Rhythmic churning told me that the washer was in use. A turquoise plastic laundry basket, filled with darks, rested nearby.

"This is Shannon McIver," Valerie said, introducing me. "Shannon, this is Josie Prescott. She's an antiques dealer and appraiser."

Shannon was a wispy blonde, with skin so white it was almost translucent. She wore a navy blue suit with a V-neck, sea-shell pink blouse. She sipped what I took to be green tea out of a big mug. The mug had an illustration of a va-va-voom-looking woman sitting at a desk, smiling. The text read: "World's hottest accountant. Only your receivables age." She appeared shell shocked.

I greeted her, then asked Valerie, "How are you doing?"

She shrugged as she fussed with the teapot, but didn't reply. She poured me a cup and slid it onto the table.

"Any news?" I asked.

The washer clicked off and she walked to the machine to switch the loads. "Nope."

"Have you spoken to the police?" Shannon asked me.

"Yes. Briefly. How about you?"

She shivered and nodded. "They came to the university to get me. It was awful. I was with them all afternoon yesterday and most of this morning."

I glanced at Valerie to see if she was listening, but I couldn't tell. Her back was to me. I saw her toss the blue negligée and its matching belt into the dryer.

"How did it go?" I asked Shannon.

She stared into her mug. "They wanted a DNA sample."

"What did you say?"

"No." She looked up at me. Her eyes were pale gray and red-rimmed. She'd been crying. "I said no. I want to help. I liked Murray, but no way am I letting my DNA get into a police database."

"It's a terrible situation all around," I said diplomatically.

A rat-a-tat-tat sounded on the kitchen door. Through the window,

I saw Detective Brownley's stern countenance staring at me. Valerie opened the door. I stood up.

"Ms. Lane, Ms. McIver, I'm glad to find you both here," she said. "I have a few more questions."

She spoke to them, but she was pinning me with her eyes.

"I was just leaving," I said. "Nice meeting you, Shannon. I'll talk to you soon, Valerie. Thanks for the tea." I got out of there before Detective Brownley could corner me and start asking me questions.

Wes called as I was driving home. I slipped in my earpiece.

"We need to talk. Can you meet me?" he asked imperatively.

It was dark and I was tired. "I can't, Wes. It's late."

"Josie!" he exclaimed, sounding astonished. "It's important!"

I wasn't impressed. Everything was urgent to Wes. "Sorry. Tell me on the phone."

He sighed, Wesian for acquiescence. "I hear from my police source that you ID'd the dead guy through his watch. Why didn't you call me?" he griped.

"Do you have any news about the missing woman?" I asked, ignoring his question. "The woman who's *not* Phyllis Jenkins?"

He sighed again, no doubt wanting to be certain that I knew that he was disappointed in me, then said, "Yes, I do." He paused. "Give me something, Josie. I'm on deadline and I need *something.*"

I considered my options—what I could reveal and what I should hold back. "I have a photo of the pocket watch."

"E-mail it to me."

"Okay. Tell me about the woman."

"She's a New York City actress, Dahlia Hearns. Mostly Off-Broadway and a couple of TV commercials. She's slotted for the lead in Chester Blair's new play. They've been up here while he's revising the script. He likes to get out of New York to write. She's keeping him company. They're not married."

"Where is she now?"

"She went to New York, but now she's back here. She came voluntarily. Chet was just about finished with the revision. He was going to join her in a day or two, whenever he was done. She drove back to get their apartment in order."

"Why didn't he keep the car?"

Wes chuckled. "He didn't drive. Can you believe that?"

Having lived in New York City for a decade, I could, in fact, believe it. "Yes," I said. "So, Dahlia and Chester are an item?"

"Yup. They've been living together for more than a year. They're checking whether he was screwing around."

"I heard he was quite a playboy," I commented, curious about Wes's take on the subject.

"That's not even the half of it—are you ready for an info-bomb? The police have proof that he and Shannon McIver were having an affair this fall."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed, astounded, then not. I recalled Shannon's red eyes. "Why would they think that?"

"They found evidence at Macon Cleaners—a dirty sheet from Shannon's room. Val gave them permission to search the B&B and Shannon gave them permission to search her room, apparently not thinking that the police would track down soiled sheets. There was no question about which inn the sheets came from—Macon kept each client's linens separate; nor was there any question about which room the sheet came from—only Shannon's room had twin beds. The tests showed that Shannon and Chet had sex."

"I can't believe it! He was sleeping with Shannon *while* he was there with Dahlia?"

"Yup. There's more! The test also showed that the blood and tissue found under Chet's fingernails *didn't* belong to Shannon."

My brain was reeling. "What do they think happened?" I asked.

"They think that maybe Dahlia killed him. She left that morning, then came back. What if Dahlia walked in while he and Shannon were having a lunchtime canoodle? Maybe Dahlia went nuts."

I thought about it. Shannon's car was there at twelve thirty when I saw Dahlia pull out and head south. "It's possible," I acknowledged, and told Wes about the sequence I'd observed.

"Yeah, maybe, but Dahlia denies everything. She's sticking to it that the police tests are wrong, that Chet wasn't having an affair with Shannon, and that his playing around was a thing of the past."

"What does she think happened?" I asked.

"She thinks that he was killed during a robbery—after all, his laptop and wallet are gone. She figures the thief didn't steal the pocket watch only because it fell under the bedside table—he missed it. She said that Valerie left the inn unlocked during the day, which is true, so anyone could just walk in. But when she was asked why a thief would choose the one occupied room to ransack, you know what she said? That thieves are often irrational." He chuckled again. "She's refusing to give a DNA sample too. But they can't find evidence of a fight or anything else relevant, so they can't get a court order."

I paused for a long moment, trying to assimilate everything Wes just told me, then asked, "Wes, there's something I don't understand. If it *wasn't* robbery—where are the laptop and wallet?"

❦❦❦

The next morning, I woke up with a conviction and an idea about how to prove it.

At ten, I walked into Blackmore's Jewelers on the Green in Rocky Point Village, the finest jewelry store on the coast, in business for eighty-seven years. A handsome man close to retirement age wearing a well-tailored suit approached me as soon as I entered.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"I hope so. I'm Josie Prescott. I own Prescott's Antiques and Auctions."

"Of course, of course, a pleasure. I'm Morton Blackmore."

We shook. "Wow. I knew you'd been in business for a long time, but I had no idea it was still family run. This has to be some kind of record."

He smiled. "Not really, but when my grandson takes over, then maybe we can talk about setting records. What can I do for you today?"

"Is there somewhere we can talk?"

His eyes narrowed appraisingly, but with a gracious sweep of his hand, he indicated that I should accompany him to the rear. He led me into a private office. He sat behind a mahogany desk, pointed toward a guest chair, and waited for me to speak.

I extracted the onyx fob from the satin jewelry case I'd stored it in, and laid it on the desk. "Am I right that you sold this?"

He glanced at the piece, then at me. "May I?" he asked, before picking it up.

"Please."

"Why do you want to know whether we sold it?" he asked, turning the fob over.

"It belonged to a murder victim and I think knowing who bought it will help the police catch his killer."

Morton looked at me straight on. "That man at the bed and breakfast?"

"Yes."

He slid the fob toward me. "Yes, we sold it. Two weeks ago. It was a birthday present."

"Valerie Lane bought it, right?"

"Yes," he replied.

Ten minutes later, after avoiding answering any of Morton's other questions, I called Detective Brownley.

At Detective Brownley's request, I drove to police headquarters and gave a formal statement. I recounted my conversation with

Mr. Blackmore, and as I reported his acknowledgment that Valerie bought the fob, unexpectedly my voice cracked and my eyes filled with tears. I stopped speaking and took a deep breath, willing the upset to pass. Detective Brownley sat watching me, her expression unchanged.

"Sorry," I said, once I could speak again. "I just can't believe it, you know? I had no idea about what she was going through. Forget that she never said anything . . . she never even hinted anything. She never once revealed her true feelings. It's just so shocking and . . . I don't know . . . you think you know someone, and then you realize that you don't. You don't know anything."

"Most murders involve some measure of deception."

I nodded, thinking about it. "One person might kill to preserve a secret. Another person might kill because someone refused to reveal it."

Detective Brownley nodded, then after a pause, asked, "Anything else about Mr. Blackmore?"

I took another deep breath and pushed my disappointment and shock aside. "I bet he has the receipt," I said.

"How did you know it was Ms. Lane?"

"Well . . . I didn't know . . . not for certain. There were a lot of things. When I walked into the bed and breakfast that day, Valerie was clutching a dressing gown to her chest. I think I interrupted her, that she'd just killed Chet. Her sash was still around his neck, that's why she was holding the dressing gown closed by gripping the fabric." I shook my head. "She panicked—she just wanted to retrieve her sash, scoop up the laptop and wallet, and get out of there. The next day, when I was in the kitchen having tea, Valerie was doing laundry. Watching her toss the sash in made me wonder where it was the day before. She wasn't wearing it. Taken alone, it didn't mean anything, but it got me thinking."

"Why would she have waited until then to wash it?"

I shrugged. "Probably she didn't. I bet this was the second or third time—just in case something didn't wash out the first time around."

Detective Brownley nodded. "What else?"

"Valerie wore a scarf and a turtleneck. It was too warm to be so bundled up! It occurred to me that she might have some scratches she was hiding."

She nodded again. "What made you go to that jeweler in particular?" she asked.

"Blackmore's a wonderful shop. They carry unusual things, very high end. And it's local. Valerie works hard. She wouldn't take the time to traipse to the mall or anything. Plus, you wouldn't find

something like a watch fob at a regular jewelry store."

"But what made you think you'd find it in any jewelry store? It looked like an antique to me."

"The onyx circle sits in a gold ring—it's marked fourteen karat. Most fine antique jewelry is eighteen karat." I shrugged. "I thought it was worth a shot."

She smiled at me, a rare sight for the normally serious detective. "Thanks, Josie."

Before I headed back to Prescott's, I crossed the street and climbed a dune. I stood for several minutes. When I felt more composed, I headed up Ocean Avenue.

My route back to work took me directly past the Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast, and as I drove by, I saw Detective Brownley walking up the front path.

I pulled off to the side of the road a hundred yards away and watched as she knocked on the front door. When Valerie answered, the detective said something and Valerie stepped onto the porch. Detective Brownley spoke again. Valerie replied, her eyes big with dismay. Detective Brownley nodded, then followed Valerie back inside. When they returned to the porch moments later, Valerie had her purse. She locked the door. Then Detective Brownley handcuffed her and led her to the waiting vehicle.

I called Wes and gave him the details, then stopped at the grocery store to pick up the ingredients for my mother's thyme chicken.

Later, I stood at the range, mixing the glaze while Ty leaned against the wall keeping me company, drinking Smuttynose from the bottle.

"Where did they find the laptop and wallet?" he asked.

"In the grocery store dumpster. She double-bagged them and tossed them in."

"Jeez. Why did the police search there?"

"There was nowhere else the laptop and wallet could be. Timing-wise, I mean. I saw Valerie at twelve thirty when she was upstairs, not even dressed. And she got back from shopping at two with about a gazillion grocery bags. It's a twenty-minute drive from the inn to the store. So even if she got dressed in a flash—five or ten minutes—she couldn't have gotten to the store much before one. Wes told me that the butcher recalls her asking him to cut her a certain cut of beef just after one. He remembers specifically because he just got back from lunch. Valerie used her debit card to pay at one thirty-two. She got back to the inn about thirty minutes

later—which means she loaded the van and drove straight back. The timing doesn't allow for many other options."

Ty nodded. "So the disposal had to be at the store or on her route."

"Exactly. And they found them in the dumpster."

"Why did she steal them?"

"I don't think she intended to. She planned on checking them out to see if they contained any references to her. A phone number tucked in his wallet, for instance, or notes that he saved on his computer. But the time got away from her and she decided just to get rid of them."

Ty got another beer from the fridge. "Why did she kill him?"

I peeked over my shoulder at him and smiled impishly. "A perfectly understandable motive—she caught him in bed with another woman."

Ty grinned. "I'll keep that in mind." He shook his head. "You're talking about Shannon?"

"Yeah. I gather from what Valerie has told the police that she thought her romance with Chet was the real deal—a grand passion. She understood that Chet was in a quote-committed-end quote relationship with Dahlia, and that was regrettable, but correctable, but when she learned about Shannon, she went ballistic."

"How did she find out?"

"I don't know. Probably she caught them in the act during their noontime quickie."

"What about Shannon? Didn't she resent the hell out of his screwing around?"

"No. Wes quoted her as saying that Chet was a fun fling—that she was single and having a good time. Shannon said the person she felt sorry for was Dahlia."

"Do you?" Ty asked.

"No. My dad once told me that in job searches, resumés are used to eliminate people—the lowest risk hire is the person who's already succeeded at what you're looking for. I figure the same applies in relationships. If someone screwed around on their last mate, what makes you think they won't do the same to you? Dahlia knew what she was getting."

"That's cold."

"I'm a realist," I said, then turned full around and smiled at him. "A realist who's wildly in love. Come here, big fella, and kiss the cook."

# BLIND SIDE

## PETER SELLERS

It was Tuesday, and that meant humiliation. Our first period in the afternoon was swim. For forty minutes, thirty-five naked boys would plunge through the cold water while our teacher patrolled the deck in gym shoes and tracksuit, whistle around his neck.

Nude swimming had always been the policy at the school, a small and elite institution ostensibly for only the most intelligent boys, with low fees and high standards. Entrance was based on your ability to write a rigorous examination rather than on your father's ability to write a check. Held once a year, on a Saturday morning, the exam was written by hundreds of aspiring geniuses. Few were accepted. My first attempt, for admission in grade seven, was a failure. With hindsight, I should have heeded the augury. Instead, I wrote again two years later and gained acceptance for high school.

Looking back now, it surprises me that no one's parents spoke out against the perversity of forcing their sons to spend a lesson completely naked. Those were the early seventies, however, and our parents were more respectful of authority than we are now. Also, for most of the boys, nudity did not matter. But for me, the sole member of my grade who had not reached puberty, every swim class was an exercise in embarrassment.

Until we all stripped together for the first time, I was unaware that I was alone in what I came to view as my mutation. I tried to be discreet, hands placed strategically, back turned as much as possible, but among so many other naked boys there was nowhere to hide. Immediately, there was giggling, pointing and the first mutterings.

Later the words were spoken aloud and boldly: ugly and hurtful words. Some of them I knew and others I had not heard before, but their intent to injure was clear. They were vicious and unfounded attacks on my sexual preference. The memory of it still makes my stomach clench.

A few boys did have bathing suits, packed for them by dutiful

mothers, but wearing a suit would have caused even more humiliation than exposing my deformity. So, week after week, I endured the torment. Being small, slender, and hairless marked me as a weak and easy target who did not fight back.

**I was not alone in being tortured.**

The worst offenders were two louts named Baker and Harley. They seemed too stupid to have gained entrance fairly. It was only once I was at the school that I came to understand how helpful it was to have had a father or an elder brother attend. Nepotism paved the way for some of my dimmer classmates.

There were others who joined Baker and Harley in the fun, but in a less systematic way. From Chestechenko, Simons, and Crawford there were occasional spontaneous eruptions of brutality. Still more did or said nothing, and their silence made them equally culpable.

At my previous school, I had been a popular student. I was chosen among the first for team sports. I was celebrated for my annual contributions to the school public speaking competition—on crowd-pleasing topics such as vampires, ghosts, and reincarnation. My description of the eruptions of blood from the body of a staked vampire was received with particular enthusiasm by the students if not by the faculty. In my final year, I was runner-up for the school's Citizenship Award, which was voted on by the students.

Frankly, I should have won. To show my commitment to citizenship, I voted for Lynne, the eventual winner. Later, I discovered that she had not reciprocated. She voted for herself. That said everything about whom the prize belonged to.

My plunge from such heights of popularity to a life of ridicule and abuse was shocking. Had I been the kind of student who had always been despised, it might not have mattered. I would have noticed no difference from one school to the next. But that was not my situation, and to find myself abruptly alone and not merely friendless but surrounded by enemies left me bewildered.

The student body at the school was small: seventy boys in each of grades nine through twelve. However, thirty-five of the boys had begun in grade seven, and by the time the rest of us joined, cliques were firmly established. Some new boys, who were friends of incumbent students, were readily accepted. Others, who were larger and more confident, also found immediate favor.

Those less assertive, and with no one to welcome them, fared less well. By nature, I was not a courageous boy. My mother had pointed this out once, defending me against the accusation of a neighbor. "He's not shy," my mother said. "He's timid."

In time, by force of will, I had learned to control this flaw. By the time my grade school days drew to a close, I had made myself, as I have demonstrated, a well-liked boy. The process, however, had taken years spent with many of the same children. I was unprepared for the reality of a new and unforgiving world.

Having been raised not to make a fuss and to get along, it never occurred to me to ask my parents to take me out of the school. That would have necessitated discussing my situation. My father's motto was, "Never complain, never explain," which had rubbed off on me. It was easier to endure.

Mr. Trent taught English and had a glass right eye. He'd had the real one blown out by a land mine during the Second World War. As a result, when he stood facing the class, he could not see the front left desk, closest to the window. This was known as the blind side, and sitting there was always desirable.

On my first day in Mr. Trent's class, he posed a challenge. "If someone had to meet me at a busy train station," he said, "and he'd never seen me before, how would you describe me to him?"

There was silence from the class. There were many things about Mr. Trent that were distinctive. He was short, balding, and wore heavy-framed glasses. His nose was large, red, and oddly shaped. It had been damaged, we learned later, in the same explosion that cost him his eye. Considerable restructuring had been required. It seemed that, much as we would have done so behind his back, no one wanted to be the first to itemize Mr. Trent's odd characteristics face to face.

"Well, come on," he urged.

One boy put up his hand timidly. "You have glasses," he said.

"Good. What else?"

Another shy voice added, "You have a mustache."

"Yes. And?"

Slowly a few more points came out. Mr. Trent's sparse hair was mentioned, as was his crisp military bearing. Guesses were made as to his height and his age. But the well of details dried up quickly.

Mr. Trent looked at us with curious excitement. "Anything else?" he asked, his voice a parade-ground bellow. "Well? Well? What about the eye?" He whipped off his glasses, and taking a pencil in his other hand, he tapped it sharply and repeatedly on his right eyeball. The clicking noise was quite loud and caused more than one of us to squirm in discomfort. He did it again, louder. The room was silent.

"It's glass," he said. "I have a glass eye. Lots of people have mus-

taches, spectacles, and receding hairlines. But not many of us have glass eyes." He said this with pride. "So if you want someone who doesn't know me to recognize me, that's the first thing to mention. Remember that kind of detail in your writing."

It occurred to me to ask if, while waiting to be met, he would stand in the train station tapping his eyeball, but thought better of it.

"I do this every year," Mr. Trent said. "I used to take the eye out and pass it around, but a few years ago a lad threw up and they made me stop." He said this with contempt for both the weakness of that boy and the weakness of the administration.

Mr. Trent is one of the few teachers I remember with fondness. He created in me an excitement for poetry. I can see him still, standing before the class, reading Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer." His eye glittered and he pronounced the words with passionate intensity. To this day, I can hear the crisp *t* and *k* in the poem's final line, "Silent, upon a peak in Darien."

I was not alone in being tortured. There was a small cadre of misfits.

Henry, his face a disaster of pustules, was brilliant and yet so socially inept he seemed brain damaged. In the end, he won a scholarship to MIT and has made a name for himself in the field of pure mathematics.

Kevin and Raymond were more ordinary. Intelligent but nonathletic, their biggest tactical error may have been befriending me. We played bridge together at lunch, with whomever was willing to risk sitting as a fourth.

Then there was Horowitz. He talked a lot about killing. He was obsessed with automatic weapons and explosive devices. He explained in detail what he would do if he could get his hands on some serious military ordnance. Nowadays, he'd be taken out of school and spend his days talking to psychiatrists, but people knew better back then. There had been a photo in the school yearbook showing a blunt-speaking and popular math teacher with the caption, "Sex is like trig. You don't talk about it, you do it." That was how violence was too. Horowitz, because of his bombast, was not the type to follow through.

"Want to see something cool?" he asked me one day at lunch.

"Sure," I said.

He took me to the auditorium. It would be unheard of now, but under the stage there was a rifle range. Theoretically, it was reserved for the cadet corps, but the door wasn't locked so anyone who knew about it could go in.

The rifles stored there had their bolts removed, and there was no ammunition. But everyone knew that the bolts and the bullets were kept in the bottom right-hand drawer of Mr. Trent's desk, and neither the drawer nor his office was ever locked.

The cadets put on uniforms and marched around the parking lot three days a week after school. For more than fifty years, membership in the corps had been mandatory. But in the late sixties when that requirement had been dropped, enrollment plummeted. Not surprisingly, Horowitz was a cadet.

The rifle range was more brightly lit than I had expected. I'm not sure why I should have been surprised. There is little percentage in shooting at targets that you can't see.

Horowitz opened his briefcase, the solid plastic pseudo-businessman kind with two stainless steel latches that was known as a browner bag, and removed the breech and several bullets. He took a rifle and assembled and loaded it. With an enviable casualness, he knelt down and fired three times, in quick succession. Without seeming to aim, he pulverized the heart of the paper target. My ears were ringing. It was so loud I was surprised that the entire school couldn't hear.

"You try," Horowitz said, pinning a new target at the far end of the range and then holding out the weapon.

He showed me how to load it and line up the sights. I have no idea where my first three shots ended up, but they left the target unscathed.

"Do what I do," Horowitz said. "Think of people you hate." It was as close as I ever came to a conversation about how life was at the school.

Mockery was by no means reserved for the students. There were two classics teachers at the school. One, who taught both Latin and Greek, was a wheezing, oily man we called Fat Thomas, or Magnus Porcus Gracus. The other one, my Latin teacher, was an elderly gentleman who had been at the school for many years and was known as Uncle Senility. Old fashioned and doddering, he was also the guidance counselor, but the idea of talking to him about anything personal was unthinkable, even less likely than talking to your parents.

Sometimes he was called Uncle Senility to his face. He began every Latin class with an enthusiastic, "*Salve, discipuli.*" Ocassionally, instead of the expected "*Salve, magister,*" the class would reply, "*Salve,* Uncle Senility." I was never sure if it registered with him or not.

Uncle Senility's apparent lack of awareness helped foster a new

trend that began in my second year at the school. Baker started it, and a few others followed suit. The school building was old, with large, double-hung windows and deep stone ledges. On warm days the windows that ran the length of most classrooms were opened wide. The drapes were drawn back, gathering thickly at each end of the window bank. One afternoon, Baker climbed out onto the window ledge and sat there for Uncle Senility's class, hidden from view by the curtains. There were giggles all round the room, but Uncle must have been used to that, and after asking a couple of times, "What's the cause of this mirth, you fellows?" he got on with his lesson. Baker's prank went undetected.

After that, Baker took to sitting on the ledge quite often. It was easiest to avoid being caught in Uncle Senility's class and also during English, because the spot on the ledge was squarely on Mr. Trent's blind side.

"Where's Wilkinson?" Uncle would ask, naming a boy who had taken his chance on the ledge. "Not here, eh? Well, tomorrow he'll just have to blunder along in his own ignorance." Uncle Senility was full of such expressions. "Come on, Perkins," he'd say, often when the class sat stumped by one of his questions, "pull us out of the weeds." It wasn't always Perkins, but he was a particularly inept Latin scholar and thus the preferred choice, which caused Perkins no end of misery.

When any boy did not know and Uncle was feeling puckish he'd force the student to try again and again in the vain hope that he would stumble upon the answer. "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps," he would exhort.

These sayings, combined with his tendency to have us sing in Latin songs like "All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor" and a ditty that may have been of his own composition called "Listen Said the Pussy Willow," made Uncle Senility a source of boundless amusement.

A few weeks after my visit to the rifle range, I arrived at school late from a dentist appointment. Walking through the parking lot to the side entrance, I saw Baker perched on the second story window ledge outside Mr. Trent's class. Stopping, I gazed up at him, wondering if I had time to run inside, take a rifle and some ammunition, and shoot Baker before the end of class.

Instead, I walked to the doors, directly beneath where Baker sat. He spat. Although I ducked, his saliva hit the back of my neck.

Mr. McIlroy assigned us numerous challenges during swim class. There was the twelve-minute swim, an endurance test where we were graded for how far we could go. This was done either across the pool, with half the class swimming at a time, or lengthwise,

with several boys in each lane. You were graded on the number of laps achieved.

There was the test of treading water for ten minutes at a time, which was easier than swimming. Then there was water polo, an exhausting exercise that gave the larger and stronger boys many chances to elbow you in the face and push your head under with impunity.

The one great gift that the school bestowed on us each year was that we were released early for the summer. While other schools shut down at the end of June, we were free from the beginning of the month.

All summer, I dreaded going back, but I kept my fears to myself. Although I had stopped believing in God long before, I prayed for puberty. But the first wisps, when they finally appeared, were not enough. In September, in an effort to prove that I was not weak and effete, I started riding my bike to school. It took me an hour each way, much of my route along Bloor Street, busy even in those days. It made no difference. No one said anything to me about it, but it must have been noticed. I went out one day after school and my bicycle seat was missing. I looked behind cars and in garbage cans, but it was gone. I rode home standing up.

When I got off the subway the next morning, I saw Baker waiting to cross the street. "How was the ride home?" he asked.

My revenge began with the mouse. It seemed a fitting symbol since I was determined to be timid no more. One day, at lunch, I went into our class common room and found it empty. I had slipped away ahead of the rest of my classmates for a few moments' peace. The room was filthy, as usual, used as it was exclusively by teenaged boys and off-limits to the cleaning staff. Eventually, the headmaster issued an ultimatum that either the room be kept clean or be shut down. A massive cleanup was undertaken, but by then it was too late.

Even by the common room's grim standards, the mouse was something new. It lay in the middle of the floor, dead from unknown causes and, as soon as I saw it, I knew what I had to do. I took one of the discarded pieces of wax paper that lay about and folded it around the small, stiff body, finishing just as the rest of the boys arrived.

For a while, I sat with the bundle in my hand, waiting for one of my enemies to present me with opportunity. No one did right away. They all began eating. Finally, Segal obliged.

I must say that I bore Segal no animosity. He was a benign figure. But his was the only lunch bag available and I did not want to store the mouse in my locker until the following day. When Segal went into the washroom, I slipped the mouse into the bag.

When he came back, Segal reached in and took out a sandwich. He ate it with enthusiasm. I watched him surreptitiously, finding the anticipation hard to control. Reaching into the bag a second time, he drew out the mouse. He looked at the crumpled wax paper and the sloppy folds, so unlike his mother's trim work, and appeared puzzled. Then he unwrapped the paper.

Segal stared down at the mouse for some time, disgust on his face. He rose and went back to the washroom. When he returned, many boys, including me, were gathered around.

"Who could have done that?" I asked boldly, hoping my triumph did not show.

Segal smiled. "It was my brother," he said, as if with approval. "I put some worms in his lunch last week. I knew he'd get me back. But I never thought it'd be this good." The other boys cheered Segal's brother.

One day in German class, Baker threw my textbook out the third floor window. He sat beside me next to the open window, and while Mr. Warfield's back was turned, Baker reached across, took my book, and tossed it out.

There was nothing I could do. I couldn't have stopped him without creating a scene. I couldn't ask to go downstairs to get the book because an explanation would have been demanded. Warfield, or Woofy as he was known, would not have believed it. I could not have asked to go to the washroom and come back with the book because that would have required another explanation. It also would have left my other books and papers unguarded and vulnerable.

I sat through the class hoping that my missing textbook would not be noticed. It was, of course. "I trust you are more diligent in your approach to your other classes," Woofy said, eliciting snickers.

After class I went outside and found my book. It had landed on its spine and, being paperbound, had burst apart. The wind had carried off some of the pages. I gathered up what I could, hoping what remained would see me through the year. Textbooks were expensive. My parents had bought them for me and I could not ask for a replacement. In the end, when it became apparent that too much had been lost, I went to the bookstore and got another copy, slipping it in the front of my trousers and leaving the store as innocently as possible.

⁂

We were playing floor hockey in the gym. We used hockey sticks with their blades sawn off and rings about six inches across, padded with felt, as the puck. You controlled the ring with the tip of your stick.

At one point, I was in the corner with the ring, ready to turn and head for the other team's goal. A boy named Perry was fighting me for possession. He slashed my legs and, in trying to lift my stick, hit my finger sharply. I decided to act. I lifted my stick and let Perry take the ring. He didn't pause to wonder why it was so easy. He took two steps and I ran after him, lowering my shoulder and driving him into the gym wall.

There were few rules in floor hockey, but the one that was sacrosanct was no body checking within three feet of the wall. As soon as Perry's head smacked off the bricks, play stopped. The gym was silent except for Perry's moaning.

Mr. McIlroy pointed at me and shouted, "Go take a shower." It was a relief. I was able to shower privately and without embarrassment. I felt confident that I had made a convincing argument for leaving me alone. It was unfortunate that Perry had been hurt. He was one of the more harmless students, but it couldn't be helped. I had to take every opportunity I could.

On the day my major biology project was due, my father dropped me off at the front door of the school. Usually we both took the subway, but I was carrying the project with me, and it would have been awkward in the crush of the morning commute. He offered to drive me, which was a rare treat. Had he not, I would have gone in one of the school's side doors, as I did every other day.

The project was a large model of a protozoan, made of monofilament, plasticine, toothpicks, and balsa wood, mounted on a board. It was inside a green garbage bag for protection and had to be held flat, like a tray. By my standards, being an indifferent science student, it was an excellent piece of work. My father, who was much more patient than I, had helped me, and I knew a good mark was assured. When I tried to do tasks like that on my own, such as making the occasional plastic model, the results were messy, askew, or broken.

I was walking up the broad steps to the front doors when they opened and Baker came out in company with a gang of boys. Holding my project level before me, I stepped aside to let them pass. As they did, Baker reached out and hit the underside of my project quite hard. It popped out of my grasp, overturned, and

landed on the concrete steps. There was laughter from the group as they passed, but none of them looked back.

The garbage bag made it impossible to see what damage had been done. Picking the project up, I could feel loose and broken pieces through the plastic. I looked toward the road, but my father was not there.

Uncle Senility called the roll. Baker was among the absent. "Not here again," Uncle mused. "Poor Baker will continue to fall deeper into the pit of ignorance." He called the next boy on his list, but I could tell by the glances toward the open window and the bunched curtains that Baker was outside on the ledge.

The thought did not occur to me until class was over and I was gathering up my books. I moved slowly, not finished when the other boys began boiling out into the hall. They were all turned from me, surging through the doorway, full of urgency to be at liberty. Uncle Senility had his back to me, too, wiping down the chalkboard on the far wall. As I passed the curtain behind which Baker sat, I put down my briefcase, turned, placed my hands against the fabric and took a breath.

The curtains rustled and a head peered around cautiously, starting at seeing me so close. "I was just checking if it was okay to come in," Baker whispered.

"That's what I came to tell you," I said, checking again that Uncle Senility was not watching. "You're safe now."

At some point, Mr. McIlroy decided it would be a good idea for us to do what he called "the Alcatraz swim." His story was that, in attempting to escape from the prison, inmates of Alcatraz would try swimming to shore with their ankles bound and their hands tied behind their backs. How prisoners in such a condition would get to the water's edge, let alone swim across the bay, never occurred to us to ask.

The class was split into two groups. The boys in one group had their wrists and ankles bound and were expected, for twelve minutes, to propel themselves up and down the pool with eel-like writhings. Each swimmer had a spotter who followed along on the pool deck, counting each length as it was completed and making sure his swimming partner did not drown. Then the roles were reversed.

When McIlroy assigned partners he did so alphabetically, and so Baker and I were together. I tied my own ankles, but there was no option for my wrists. Baker bound them tightly, but I determined not to wince.

The swim started at the shallow end. We slipped into the water, ducked under, and began wallowing forward, undulating our bodies. Every time your middle went down and your head rose toward the surface, you gulped in as much air as possible before the movement of your body drove your head back under.

It had not been specified, but it was assumed that we were supposed to swim on our fronts. One boy, known as the Major for his dedication to cadets and his short haircut, assumed it would be easier to swim on his back. He did so and outpaced everyone else. McIlroy must have noticed what the Major was doing, but he said nothing until the twelve minutes were up. Then he told the Major that he would have to do it again, the proper way. No one could figure out why McIlroy waited so long.

The water, full of thrashing boys, was riled and choppy. More than once I took in water, spitting it out as best I could before going under again.

Not trusting Baker to pull me out, I ignored the pain in my wrists, the water in my lungs, and the fatigue of my muscles and kept going. Progress was slow but it was consistent. I also kept my own count of how far I had gone, assuming Baker would either lie about the result or not bother keeping track in the first place.

When McIlroy finally blew his whistle, boys knelt on the deck and helped their friends out of the water. I didn't bother waiting for help from Baker. I continued into the shallow end and asked another boy to release my hands.

As a young man, my father had sailed on Great Lakes freighters. He had taught me several effective knots. I tied Baker's wrists more securely than necessary. Like me, he had been wise enough to tie his own ankles. At the whistle, he began to heave himself through the water.

Baker was not a strong swimmer. After only three or four minutes, he began to founder. Every time he raised his head to breathe I could sense desperation that soon escalated to panic. On the crowded deck, I kept pace with him, counting his less and less frequent lengths.

Halfway through the drill, Baker lost the struggle to continue. His feet dropped and he began to thrash in the water. There were so many writhing boys, moving in both directions, that his distress went unnoticed at first by anyone but me. I watched him with interest as his head slid under and bobbed up again. His squirming did little to keep him afloat. After a few seconds, just before Baker squeaked out a terrified cry, I decided it was best if I seemed to be doing something.

Kneeling on the edge of the pool, I reached out for him, but his

skin was slippery and he slid away, further from the side. The other boys had begun to notice and those in the shallow end stopped swimming and stood. Some in deeper water were pulled to the side and held securely by their partners. Baker continued to thrash and bob and wail.

I made a show of leaning out further over the water to grab him. Overbalancing, I toppled into the pool, pushing Baker still further toward the deep end. As I sank, I discreetly grabbed Baker's wrists and pulled him under too. When I resurfaced, Mr. McIlroy was yelling, and there were cries from some of the boys.

Baker was helpless. Mr. McIlroy jumped in with an impressive splash. He grabbed Baker and hauled him to shallow water, lifting him out and placing him on his side on the deck.

Baker retched and a stream of water trickled from his mouth. Mr. McIlroy started to untie his hands. He struggled with the knot. "Who tied this?" he demanded. I did not answer since the knot had nothing to do with Baker's incompetence in the water.

Baker lay gasping and weeping. I stood staring at him, unembarrassed by my nakedness, and smiled. Mr. McIlroy glared at me, eyes filled with anger. Of more importance to me were Baker's eyes, red and frightened.

## 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.

QDCG MDC FCEFTC AWMDCJCB MEACMDCJ EG EGC EL MDC AJCWM MJYWT BWUK, MDCU GCPCJ RGCQ QDCMDCJ MDCU QCJC ME QYMGCKK W XTEEBU KTWNADMCJ EJ W DYTWJYENK QCBBYGA.

—LJWGR J. KMEZRMEG

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 123*

# UNSOLVED

## LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT KESLING

Chicago Police Chief Walt Wright opened the Monday morning briefing. "It may be only an argument over at the Majestic Hotel, but I doubt it. I just got a call from Ralph Rentschall, the manager, who reports a fight there last night."

"What about?" asked Detective Teresa Tracey.

"All he heard was one guest accuse another of cheating at poker, claiming he owed the rest of them $250,000. The other four joined in. When Rentschall threatened to call the police, the fight broke up. To me, that spells a bunch of professional gamblers getting together for a showdown poker game. It could turn nasty."

"So, what else do we know?" asked Detective Hal Hunter.

"According to Rentschall, the six men involved, each with his wife, registered on a different day last week—Sunday through Friday—and from a different city."

"Sounds like a potentially explosive situation," commented Detective Paul Probitt.

Chief Wright continued: "According to the hotel manager, they all meet in the hotel dining room at seven P.M., and after dining the men leave to start the game, which lasts all night. They sleep in during the day, while their wives go shopping. I want you, Hunter, to investigate the men. You, Tracey, make contact with the wives and find out what they know—don't be *too* forward or they'll get suspicious and clam up. And you, Probitt, observe what goes on at their dinner together. Report back at ten P.M. Dismissed!"

That night they reassembled in Chief Wright's office. "What have you learned?" he inquired.

1. "Well," reported Hal Hunter, "the man named Andy arrived here some time after Mr. North and some time before Helene's husband; none of the three is from Seattle or Tulsa. Bart isn't Mr. Quimby, and Claude isn't the man from Seattle. Dan isn't Mr. Riggs, and Earl isn't the man from Texarkana. Fred arrived here some time before Mr. Riggs, who came the day before Helene's husband.

2. Teresa Tracey declared, "Gina isn't the wife from Tulsa (who isn't married to Claude). Helene, Lola, and the wife from Utica arrived on consecutive days, but I didn't learn the sequence. Ida (who isn't Mrs. Moore) is friendly with

the wives from Utica and Wallawalla. Julia (who isn't married to Bart) arrived in town some time before the wife from Valparaiso. And Kathy arrived some time before Mrs. Riggs (who isn't from Texarkana)."

3. Paul Probitt said, "Eavesdropping on their conversations at dinner, I learned that the Moores arrived the day after the couple from Tulsa and some time before Earl and his wife. The Norths (who do not include Bart or Fred) are not from Utica (which isn't Julia's hometown). Mr. O'Hara isn't Bart. The Parks arrived the day before the couple from Tulsa. And the Quimbys do not include either Earl and his wife or the couple from Seattle."

The Chief, who had been taking notes, said, "Keep at it and report back tomorrow at four P.M."

4. On Tuesday afternoon Hal Hunter declared, "Bart is neither Mr. Riggs nor the man from Valparaiso (who isn't married to Kathy). Earl is not the husband of Lola."
5. Teresa Tracey added, "Gina went shopping with Mrs. North and Mrs. Riggs. Julia isn't the wife from Wallawalla (who isn't married to Andy.)"

Chief Wright said, "We'll meet here again tomorrow, same time."

That meeting never took place. At 9:45 Wednesday morning Wright received a frantic phone call from Ralph Rentschall. "Come to the Majestic quick, sir! One of those six men involved in the Sunday night brawl is dead in his room—throat slashed, blood all over! The maid discovered it. She revived the wife and she's now hysterical—the wife, I mean."

The Chief quickly notified his three detectives and all four converged at the murder scene. They roused Bart, the man from Texarkana, and the husbands of Gina and Kathy from their beds. All four pleaded innocent. No bloodstained clothing could be found in their rooms.

Meanwhile, Detective Tracey questioned the wives. One of them said, "I went out jogging earlier. I saw one of the men running pell-mell outta the hotel. I can't recall his name, but he was the one who arrived last Thursday."

Teresa notified Chief Wright, who immediately put out an APB on the wanted man.

*Who murdered whom?*

*The solution will appear in next month's issue.*

# DISCOVERY

## KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

"Over there." Pita Cárdenas waved a hand at the remaining empty spot on the floor of her office. The Federal Express deliveryman rested a hand on top of the stack of boxes on his handcart.

"I don't think it'll fit."

It probably wouldn't. Her office was about the size of the studio apartment she'd had when she went to law school in Albuquerque. She could have had a cubicle with more square footage if she'd taken the job that La Jolla, Webster, and Garcia offered her when she graduated from law school five years before.

But her mother had been dying, and had refused to leave Rio Gordo. So Pita had come back to the town she thought she'd escaped from, put out her shingle, and had gotten a handful of cases, enough to pay the rent on this sorry excuse for an office. If she'd wanted something bigger, she would have had to buy, and even at Rio Gordo's depressed prices, she couldn't afford payments on the most dilapidated building in town.

She stood up. The FedEx guy, who drove here every day from Lubbock, was looking at her with pity. He was trim and tanned, with a deep West Texas accent. If she had been less tired and overwhelmed, she would have flirted with him.

"Let's put this batch in the bathroom," she said and led the way through the rabbit path she'd made between the boxes. The FedEx guy followed, dragging the six boxes on his handtruck and probably chafing at the extra time she was costing him.

She opened the door. He put the boxes inside, tipped an imaginary hat to her, and left. She'd have to crawl over them to get to the toilet, but she'd manage.

Six boxes today, twenty yesterday, thirty the day before. Dwyer, Ralbotten, Seacur and Czolb was burying her in paper.

Of course, she had expected it. She was a solo practitioner in a town whose population probably didn't equal the number of people who worked at DRS&C.

People had told her she was crazy to take this case. But she was crazy like an impoverished attorney. Every other firm in New

Mexico had told her client, Nan Hughes, to settle. The problem was that Nan didn't want to settle. Settling meant losing everything she owned.

Pita took the case and charged Nan two thousand dollars, with more due and owing when (if) the case went to trial. Pita didn't plan on taking the case to trial. At trial, she wouldn't just get creamed, she'd be pureed, sautéed, and recycled.

But she did plan to work for that two grand. She would spend exactly one month filing motions, doing depositions, and listening to offers. She figured once she had actual numbers, she'd be able to convince Nan to take a deal.

If not, she'd resign and wish Nan luck finding a new attorney.

Her actions wouldn't hurt Nan. Nan had a spectacular loser of a case. She was taking on the railroads and two major insurance companies. She had no idea how bad things could get.

Pita would show her. Nan wouldn't exactly be happy with her lot—how could she be, when she'd lost her husband, her business, and her home on the same day?—but she would finally understand how impossible the winning was.

Pita was doing her a favor and making a little money besides.

And what was wrong with that?

At its heart, the case was simple. Ty Hughes tried to beat a train and failed. He survived long enough to leave his wife a voice mail message, which Pita had heard in all its heartbreaking slowness:

"Nan baby, I tried to beat it. I thought I could beat it."

Then his diesel truck engine caught fire with him in it, horribly alive, in the middle of the wreck.

The accident occurred on a long stretch of brown nothingness on the New Mexico side of the Texas–New Mexico border. A major highway ran a half mile parallel to the tracks. On the opposite side of the tracks stood the Hughes ranch and all its outbuildings.

Nan Hughes and the people who worked her spread watched the accident. She didn't answer her cell because she'd left it on the kitchen counter in her panic to get down the dirt road where her husband's cattle truck had been demolished by a fast-moving train.

And not just any train.

This train pulled dozens of oil tankers.

It was a miracle the truck engine fire hadn't spread to the tankers and the entire region hadn't exploded into one great fireball.

Pita had been familiar with the case long before Nan Hughes came to her. For weeks, the news carried stories about dead cattle along the highway, the devastated widow, the ruined ranch, and the angry railroad officials who had choice (and often bleeped)

words about the idiots who tried to race trains.

It didn't matter that the crossing was unmarked. Even if Ty hadn't left that confession on Nan's voice mail (which she had deleted but which the cell company was so thoughtfully able to retrieve), trains in this part of the country were visible for miles in either direction.

The railroads wanted the ranch, the cattle (what was left of them), and millions from the ranch's liability insurance. The liability insurance company was willing to settle for a simple million, and the other law firms had told Nan to sell the ranch and pay the railroads from the proceeds. That way she could live on Ty's life insurance and move away from the site of the disaster.

But Nan kept saying that Ty would haunt her if she gave in. That he had never raced a train in his life. That he knew how far away a train was by its appearance against the horizon—and that he had taught her the same trick.

When Pita gently asked why Ty had confessed to trying to beat the train, Nan had burst into tears.

"Something went wrong," she said. "Maybe he got stuck. Maybe he hadn't looked up. He was in shock. He was dying. He was just trying to talk to me one last time."

Pita could hear any good lawyer tear that argument to shreds, just using Ty's wording. If Ty wanted to talk with her, why hadn't he told her he loved her? Why had he talked about the train?

Pita had gently asked that too. Nan had looked at her from across the desk, her wet cheeks chapped from all the tears she'd shed.

"He knew I saw what happened. He wanted me to know he never would have done that to me on purpose."

In this context, "on purpose" had a lot of different definitions. Ty Hughes probably didn't want his wife to see him die in a train wreck, certainly not in a train wreck he caused. But he had crossed a railroad track with a double-decker cattle truck carrying two hundred head. He had no acceleration, and no maneuverability.

He'd taken a gamble, and he'd lost.

At least, Nan hadn't seen the fire in the cab. The truck had flipped over the train, landing on the highway side of the tracks, and had been impossible to see from the ranch side. Whatever Ty Hughes's last few minutes had looked like, Nan had missed them.

She had only her imagination, her anger at the railroads, and her unshakeable faith in her dead husband.

Those were not enough to win a case of this magnitude.

If someone asked Pita what her case really was (and if this imaginary someone could get her to answer honestly), what she'd say was that she was going to try Ty Hughes before his wife, and show

her how impossible a defense of the man's actions that morning would be in court.

And Pita believed her own powers of persuasion were enough to convince her jury of one to settle.

But the boxes were daunting. In them were bits and pieces of information, reproduced letters and memos that probably showed some kind of railroad duplicity, however minor. A blot on an engineer's record, for example, or an accident at that same crossing twenty years before.

If Pita had the support of a giant law firm like La Jolla, Webster, and Garcia, she might actually delve into that material. Instead, she let it stack up like unread novels in the home of an obsessive compulsive.

The only thing she did do was take out the witness list, which had come in its own envelope as part of court-ordered discovery. The list had the witnesses' names along with their addresses, phone numbers, and the dates of their depositions. DRS&C was so thorough that each witness had a single line notation at the bottom of the cover sheet describing the reason the witness had been deposed in this case.

The list would help Pita in her quest to recreate the accident itself. She had dozens of questions. Had someone inspected the truck to see if it malfunctioned at the time of the accident? Why had Ty stayed in the truck when it was clear that it was going to catch fire? How badly had he been injured? How good was Ty's eyesight? And how come no one helped him before the truck caught fire?

She was going to cover all her bases. All she needed was one argument strong enough to let Nan keep the house.

She was afraid she might not even find that.

DRS&C's categories were pretty straightforward. They had categories for the ranch, the railroad, and the eyewitnesses.

A number of the witnesses belonged to separate lawsuits, started because of the fender benders on the nearby highway. About a dozen cars had damage—some while they were stopped beside the road, and others because they'd been going too fast to stop when the train accident occurred.

Pita started charting the location of the cars as she figured this category out and realized all of them had been in the far inside lane, going east. People who had pulled over to help Ty and the railroad employees had instead been dealing with accidents involving their own cars.

A separate group of accident victims had resolved insurance

claims: their vehicles had been hit or had hit a cow that had escaped from the cattle truck. One poor man had had his SUV gored by an enraged bull.

Cars heading west had had an easier time of things. None had hit each other and a few had stopped. Of those who had stopped, some were listed as 911 callers. One had grabbed a fire extinguisher and eventually tried to put out the truck cab fire. That person had prevented the fire from spreading to the tankers.

But the category that caught Pita's attention was a simple one. Several people on the list had been marked "Witness," with no accompanying explanation.

One had an extra long zip code, and as she entered it into her own computer data base, she realized that the last three digits weren't part of the zip code at all.

They were a previous notation, one that hadn't been deleted.

Originally, this witness had been in the 911 category.

She decided to start with him.

C. P. Williams was a Texas financier of the Houston variety, even though his offices were in Lubbock. He wore cowboy boots, but they were custom made, hand-tooled jobbies that wouldn't last fifteen minutes on a real ranch. He had an oversized silver belt buckle and he wore a bolo tie, but his shiny suit was definitely not off the rack and neither was the silk shirt underneath it. His cufflinks matched his belt buckle and he twisted them as he led Pita into his office.

"I already gave a deposition," he said.

"Before I was on the case," Pita said.

His office was big, with original oil paintings of the Texas Hill Country and a large but not particularly pretty view of downtown Lubbock.

"Can't you just read it?" He slipped behind a custom-made desk. The chair in front was made of hand-tooled leather that made her think of his impractical boots.

She sat down. The leather pattern bit through the thin pants of her best suit.

"I have a few questions of my own." She took out a small tape recorder. "I may have to call you in for a second deposition, but I hope not."

Mostly because she would have to rent space as well as a court reporter in order to conduct that deposition. Right now she simply wanted to see if any testimony was worth the extra cost.

"I don't have that much time. I barely have enough time to see you now." He glanced at his watch for emphasis.

She clicked on the recorder. "Then let's do this quickly. Please state your name and occupation for the record."

He did.

When he finished, she said, "On the morning of the accident—"

"I never saw that damn accident," he said. "I told the other lawyers that."

She was surprised. Why had they talked with him then? She was interviewing blind. So she went with the one fact she knew.

"You called 911. Why?"

"Because of the train," he said.

"What about the train?"

"Damn thing was going twice as fast as it should have been."

For the first time since she'd taken this case, she finally felt a flicker of real interest. "Trains speed?"

"Of course trains speed," he said. "But this one wasn't just speeding. It was going well over a hundred miles an hour."

"You know that because . . . ?"

"I was going seventy. It passed me. I had nothing else to do, so I figured out the rate of passage. Speed limits for trains on that section of track is sixty-five. Most weeks, the trains match me, or drop back just a bit. This one was leaving me in the dust."

She was leaning forward. If the train was speeding—and if she could prove it—then the accident wasn't Ty's fault alone. He wouldn't have been able to judge how fast the train was going. And if it was going twice as fast as usual, it would have reached him two times quicker than he expected.

"So why call 911?" she asked. "What can they do?"

"Not a damn thing," he said. "I just wanted it on record when the train derailed or blew through a crossing or hit some kid on the way to school."

"You could have contacted the railroad or maybe the NTSB," she said. "They could have fined the operators or pulled the engineers off the train."

"I could have," he said. "I didn't want to."

She frowned. "Why not?"

"Because I wanted the record."

And because he repeated that sentence, she felt a slight shiver. "Have you done this before? Clocked trains going too fast, I mean."

"Yeah." He sounded surprised at the question. "So?"

"Do you call 911 on people speeding in cars?"

His eyes narrowed. "No."

"So why do you call on trains?"

"I told you. The potential damage—"

"Did you contact the police after the accident, then?" she asked.

"No. It was already on record. They could find it. That attorney did."

"I wouldn't know how to compute how fast a train was going while I was driving," she said. "I mean, if we were going the same speed or something close, sure. But not an extra thirty miles an hour or more. That's quite a trick."

"Simple math," he said. "You had to do problems like that in school. We all did."

"I suppose," she said. "But it's not something I would think to do. Why did you?"

For the first time, he looked down. He didn't say anything.

"Do you have something against the railroad?" she asked.

His head shot up. "Now you sound like them."

"Them?"

"Those other lawyers."

She started to nod, but made herself stop. "What did they say?"

His lips thinned. "They said that I'm just making stuff up to get the railroad in trouble. They said that I'm pathetic. Me! I outearn half those walking suits. I make money every damn day, and I do it without investing in any land holdings or railroad companies. They have no idea who I am."

Neither did she, really, but she thought she'd humor him.

"You're a good citizen," she said.

"Damn straight."

"Trying to protect other citizens."

"That's right."

"From the railroads."

"They think they can run all over the countryside like they're invulnerable. That train pulling oil tankers, imagine if it had derailed in that accident. You'd've heard the explosion in Rio Gordo."

Probably seen it too. He had a point.

"Tell me," she said. "Is there any way we can prove the train was going that fast?"

"The 911 call," he said.

"Besides the 911 call," she said.

He leaned back as he considered her question. "I'm sure a lot of people saw it. Or you could examine that truck. You know, it's just basic physics. If you vary the speed of an oncoming train in an impact with a similar truck frame, you'll get differing results. I'm sure you can find some experts to testify."

You could find experts to testify on anything. But she didn't say that. She was curious about his expertise, though. He seemed to know a lot about trains.

She asked, "Wouldn't a train derail at that speed when it hit a truck like that?"

"Actually, no. It would be less likely to derail when it was going too fast. That truck was a cattle truck, right? If the train hit the cattle car and not the cab, then the train would've treated that truck like tissue. Most cattle cars are made of aluminum. At over a hundred miles per hour, the train would have gone through it like paper."

Interesting. She would check that.

"One last question, Mr. Williams. When did the railroad fire you?"

He blinked at her, stunned. She had caught him. That's why DRS&C's attorneys had called him pathetic. Because he had a reason for his train obsession.

A bad reason.

"That was a long time ago," he whispered.

But she still might be able to use him if he had some kind of expertise. If his old job really did require that he clock trains by sight alone.

"What did you do for them?"

He coughed, then had the grace to finally meet her gaze. "I was a security guard at the station here in Lubbock."

Security guard. Not an engineer, not anyone with special training. Just a guy with a phony badge and a gun.

"That's when you learned to clock trains," she said.

He smiled. "You have to do something to pass the time."

She bit back her frustration. For a few minutes, he'd given her some hope. But all she had was a fired security guard with a grudge.

She wrapped up the interview as politely as she could, and headed into the bright Texas sunshine.

And allowed herself one small moment to wish that C. P. Williams had been a real witness, one that could have opened this case wide.

Then she sighed, and went back to preparing her case for her jury of one.

Most everyone else in the witness category on DRS&C's list was either a rubbernecker or someone who had made a false 911 call. Pita had had no idea how many people reported a crime or an accident *after* seeing coverage of it on television, but she was starting to learn.

She was also learning why the police didn't fine or arrest these people. Most of them were certifiably crazy.

Pita was beginning to think the list was worthless. Then she interviewed Earl Jessup Jr.

Jessup was a contractor who had been on his way to Lubbock to pick up a friend from the airport when he'd seen the accident.

He'd pulled over, and because he was so well known in Rio Gordo, someone had remembered he was there.

When Pita arrived at his immaculate house in one of Rio Gordo's failed housing developments, she promised herself she wouldn't interview any more witnesses. Then Jessup pulled the door open. He smiled in recognition. So did she.

She had talked with him in the hospital cafeteria during her mother's final surgery. He'd been there for his brother, who'd been in a horrendous accident, and who had somehow managed to survive.

They hadn't exchanged names.

He was a small man with brown hair in need of a good trim. His house smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and aftershave. The living room had been modified—lowered furniture and wide paths cut through what had once been wall-to-wall carpet.

"Your brother moved in with you, huh?" she asked.

"He needed somebody," Jessup said with a finality that closed the subject.

He led her into the kitchen. On the right side of the room, the cabinets had been pulled from the walls. A dishwasher peeked out of the debris. On the left were frames for lowered countertops. Only the sink, the stove, and the refrigerator remained intact, like survivors in a war zone.

He pulled a chair out for her at the kitchen table. The table was shorter than regulation height. An ashtray sat near the end of the table, but no chair. That had to be where his brother usually parked.

Pita pulled out her tape recorder and a notebook. She explained again why she was there, and asked Jessup to state some information for the record. She implied, as she had with all the others, that this informal conversation was as good as being under oath.

Jessup smiled as she went through her spiel. He seemed to know that his words would have no real bearing on the case unless he was giving a formal deposition.

"I didn't see the accident," he said. "I got there after."

He'd missed the fender benders and the first wave of the injured cows. He'd pulled up just as the train stopped. He'd been the one to organize the scene. He'd sent two men east and two men west to slow traffic until the sheriff arrived.

He'd made sure people in the various accidents exchanged insurance information, and he got the folks who'd suffered minor bumps and bruises to the side of the road. He directed a couple of teenagers to keep an eye on the injured animals and make sure none of them made for the road again.

Then he'd headed down the embankment toward the overturned truck.

"It wasn't on fire yet?"

"No," he said. "I have no idea how it got on fire."

She frowned. "It overturned. It was leaking diesel and the engine was on."

"So the fancy Dallas lawyers tell me," he said.

"You don't believe them?"

"First thing any good driver does after an accident is shut off his engine."

"Maybe," she said. "If he's not in shock. Or seriously injured. Or both."

"Ty had enough presence of mind to make that phone call." Everyone in Rio Gordo knew about that call. Some even cursed it, thinking Nan could own the railroads if Ty hadn't picked up his cell. "He would've shut off his engine."

Pita wasn't so sure.

"Besides, he wasn't in the cab."

That caught her attention. "How do you know?"

"I saw him. He was sitting on some debris halfway up the road. That's why I was in no great hurry to get down there. He'd gotten himself out; there wasn't much I could do until the ambulance arrived."

Jessup had a construction worker's knowledge of injuries. He knew how to treat bruises and he knew what to do for trauma. He'd talked with her about that in the cafeteria, when he'd told her how helpless he'd felt coming on his brother's car wrapped around a utility pole. He hadn't been able to get his brother out of the car—the ambulance crew later used the jaws of life—and he was afraid his brother would bleed out right there.

"But you went to help Ty anyway," Pita said.

Jessup got up, walked to the stove, and lifted up the coffee pot. He'd been brewing the old-fashioned way, in a percolator, probably because he didn't have any counter space.

"Want some?" he asked.

"Please," she said, thinking it might get him to talk.

He pulled two mugs out of the dishwasher, then set them on top of the stove. "I thought he was going to be fine."

"You're not a doctor. You don't know." She wasn't acting like a lawyer now. She was acting like a friend, and she knew it.

He grabbed the pot and poured coffee into both mugs. Then he brought them to the table.

"I did know," he said. "I knew there was trouble, and I left."

"Sounds like you did a lot before you left," she said, trying to move him past this. She remembered long talks about his guilt over his brother's accident. "Organizing the people, making sure

Ty was okay. Seems to me that you did more than most."

He shook his head.

"What else could you have done?" she asked.

"I could've gone down there and helped him," he said. "If nothing else, I could've defended him against those men with guns."

Pita went cold. Men with guns. She hadn't heard about men with guns.

"Who had guns?" she asked.

He gave her a self-deprecating smile, apparently realizing how dramatic he had sounded. "Everyone has guns. This is the Texas–New Mexico border."

He'd said too much, and he clearly wanted to backtrack. She wouldn't let him.

"Not everyone uses them at the scene of an accident," she said.

"If they had been smart, they might have. That bull was mighty scary."

"Who had guns?" she asked.

He sighed, clearly knowing she wouldn't back down. "The engineers. They carried their rifles out of the train."

She raised her eyebrows, not sure what to say.

He seemed to think she didn't believe him, so he went on. "I figured they were carrying the guns to shoot any livestock that got in their way. Made me want my gun. I'd been thinking about the accident, not about a bunch of injured animals that weighed eight times what I did."

"Why did you leave?" she asked.

"It was a judgment call," he said. "I was watching those engineers walk. With purpose."

As she listened to Jessup recount the story, she realized the purpose had nothing to do with cattle. These men carried their rifles like they intended to use them. They weren't looking at the carnage. After they'd finished inspecting the train for damage, they didn't look at the train either.

Instead, they headed for Ty. "That's when I decided not to stay. I thought Ty was going to be fine."

He paused. She waited, knowing if she pushed him, he might not say any more.

Jessup ran a hand through his hair. "I knew that in situations like this tempers get out of hand. I couldn't be the voice of reason. I might even get some of the blame."

He wrapped his hands around his coffee mug. He hadn't touched the liquid.

"Besides," he said, "I could see Ty's cowboys. They were riding around the train and heading toward the loose cattle near the

highway. So if things got ugly, they could help him. I headed back up the embankment, went to my truck, and drove on to Lubbock."

"Then I don't understand why this is bothering you," she said. "You did as much as you could, then you left it to others, the ones who needed to handle the problem."

"Yeah," he said softly. "I tell myself that."

"But?"

He tilted his head, as if shaking some thoughts loose. "But a couple of things don't make sense. Like why did Ty go back into the cab of that truck? And how come no one smelled the diesel? Wouldn't it bother them so close to the oil tankers?"

She waited, watching him. He shrugged.

"And then there's the nightmares."

"Nightmares?" she asked.

"I get into my truck, and as I slam the door, I hear a gunshot. It's half a second behind the sound of the door slamming, but it's clear."

"Did you really hear that?" she asked.

"I like to think that if I did, I would've gone back. But I didn't. I just drove away, like nothing had happened. And a friend of mine died."

He didn't say anything else. She took another sip of her coffee, careful not to set the mug too close to her recorder.

"No one else reported gunshots," she said.

He nodded.

"No one else saw Ty outside that cab," she said.

"He was in a gully. I was the only one who went down the embankment. You couldn't see him from the road."

"And the truck? Could you see it?"

He shook his head.

"What do you think happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, "and it's driving me insane."

It bothered her, too, but not in quite the same way.

She found Jessup in DRS&C's list of 911 nutcases. He'd been buried among the crazies, just like important information was probably hidden in the boxes that littered her office floor.

No one else had seen the angry engineers or Ty out of the truck, but no one could quite figure out how he'd made that cell phone call either. If he'd been sitting on some debris outside the cab, that made more sense that calling from inside, while bleeding, with the engine running and diesel dripping.

But Jessup was right. It raised some disturbing questions.

They bothered her, enough so that she called Nan on her cell

phone during the drive back to her office.

"Do you have a copy of the autopsy report for Ty?" Pita asked.

"There was no autopsy," Nan said. "It's pretty clear how he died."

Pita sighed. "What about the truck? What happened to it?"

"Last I saw, it was in Digger's Salvage Yard."

Pita pulled into the salvage yard and parked near a dented Toyota. Digger was a good ol' boy who salvaged parts, and when he couldn't, he used a crusher to demolish the vehicles into metal for scrap.

But he still had the cab of that truck—insurance wouldn't release it until the case was settled.

For the first time, Pita looked at the cab herself, but she couldn't see anything except charred metal, a steel frame, and a ruined interior. She wasn't an expert, and she needed one.

It took only a moment to call an old friend in Albuquerque who knew a good freelance forensic examiner. The examiner wanted five hundred dollars plus expenses to travel to Rio Gordo and look at the truck.

Pita hesitated. She could have—and should have—called Nan for the expense money. But the examiner's presence would raise Nan's hopes. And right now, Pita couldn't do that. She was trusting a man she'd met late night at the hospital, a man who talked her through her mother's last illness, a man she couldn't quite get enough distance from to examine his veracity.

She needed more than Jessup's nightmares and speculations. She needed something that might pass for proof.

"I can't tell you when it got there," said the examiner, Walter Shepard. He was a slender man with intense eyes. He wore a plaid shirt despite the heat and tan trousers that had pilled from too many washings.

He was sitting in Pita's office. She had moved some boxes aside so that the path into the office was wider. She'd also found a chair that had been buried since the case began.

He pushed some photographs onto her desk. The photographs were close-ups of the truck's cab. He'd thoughtfully drawn an arrow next to the tiny hole in the door on the driver's side.

"It's definitely a bullet hole. It's too smooth to be anything else," he said. "And there's another in the seat. I was able to recover part of a bullet."

He shifted the photos so that she could see a shattered metal fragment.

"The problem is I can't tell you anything else, except that the bullet holes predate the fire. I can't tell you how long they were there or how they got there. They could be real old. Or brand-new. I can't tell."

"That's all right." A bullet hole, along with Jessup's testimony, was enough to cast doubt on everything. She felt like she could go to DRS&C and ask for a settlement.

She wasn't even regretting that she hadn't worked on contingency. This case was proving easier than she had thought it would be.

"I know you asked me to look for evidence of shooting or a fight," Shepard said, "but I wouldn't be doing my job if I let it go at that. The anomaly here isn't the bullets. It's the fire itself."

She looked up from the photos, surprised. Shepard wasn't watching her. He was still studying the photographs. He put a finger on one of them.

"The diesel leaked. There's runoff along the tank and a drip pattern that trails to the passenger side of the cab."

The cab had landed on its passenger side.

"But the fire started here." He was touching the photo of the interior of the cab. He pushed his finger against the image of the ruined seat. "See how the flames spread upwards. You can see the burn pattern. And fuel fed it. It burned around something—probably the body—so it looks to me like someone poured fuel onto the body itself and lit it on fire. I didn't find a match, but I found the remains of a Bic lighter on the floor of the cab. It melted, but it's not burned the way everything else is. I think it was tossed in after the fire started."

Pita was having trouble wrapping her mind around what he was saying. "You're saying someone deliberately started the fire? So close to oil tankers?"

"I think that someone knew the truck wouldn't explode. The fire was pretty contained."

"Some people from the highway had a fire extinguisher in their car. It was too late to save Ty."

"You'll want your examiner to look at the body again," Shepard said. "I have a hunch you'll find that your client's husband was dead before he burned, not after."

"Based on this pattern."

"A man doesn't sit calmly and let himself burn to death," Shepard said. "He was able to make a phone call. He was conscious. He would have tried to get out of that cab. He didn't."

Pita was shaking. If this was true, then this case went way beyond a simple accident. If this was true, then those engineers

shot Ty and tried to cover it up.

Ballsy, considering how close to the road they had been.

The other drivers had been preoccupied with their own accidents and the injured cows and stopping traffic. No one except Jessup had even tried to come down the embankment.

And the engineers, who drove the route a lot, would have known how hard that truck was to see from the road. They would have figured that the burning cab would get put out once someone saw the smoke. No wonder they'd lit the body. They didn't want to risk catching the cab on fire, and leaving the bullet-ridden corpse untouched.

"You're sure?" Pita asked.

"Positive." Shepard gathered the photos. "If I were you, I'd take this to the state police. You don't have an accident here. You have cold-blooded murder."

The next few weeks became a blur. DRS&C dropped the suit, becoming the friendliest big law firm that Pita had ever known. Which made her wonder when they'd realized that the engineers had committed murder.

Either way, it didn't matter. DRS&C was willing to work with her to do whatever it took to "make Mrs. Hughes happy."

Nan wouldn't be happy until her husband's killers were brought to justice. She snapped into action the moment the state coroner confirmed Shepard's hunches. Ty had been shot in the skull before he died, and then his body had been burned to cover up the crime.

If Nan hadn't worked so hard and believed in her husband so much, no one would have known.

The story came out slowly. The train had been speeding when Ty crossed the tracks. Williams's estimate of more than a hundred miles per hour was probably correct—enough for the railroads to have liability right there.

But the engineers, both frightened by the accident itself and terrified for their jobs, had walked the length of the train to Ty's overturned truck and, finding him alive and relatively unhurt, let their anger explode.

They'd threatened him with the loss of everything if he didn't confess that he had failed to beat the train. He'd made the call to satisfy them. But it hadn't worked. Somehow—neither man was going to admit how (not even more than a year later at sentencing)—one of the rifles had gone off, killing him. Then they'd stuffed him in the cab—whose ignition was off—poured some diesel from the spill on him, and lit him on fire.

They watched him burn for a few minutes before going up the

embankment to see if anyone had a fire extinguisher in his car. Fortunately, someone did. Otherwise, they planned to have someone drive them the two miles to the engine for the train's fire extinguishers.

The engineers were eventually convicted, Nan got to keep her ranch and her husband's reputation, and the railroads kept trying to settle.

But Pita insisted that Nan hire an attorney who specialized in cases against big companies. Pita helped with the hire, finding someone with a great reputation who wasn't afraid of a thousand boxes of evidence and, more importantly, would work on contingency.

"You sure you don't want it?" Nan had asked, maybe two dozen times.

And each time, Pita had said, "Positive. The case is too big for me."

Although it wasn't. She could have gone to La Jolla, Webster, and Garcia as a rainmaker, someone who brought in a huge case and made millions for the company.

But she didn't.

Because this case had taught her a few things.

She had learned that she hated big cases with lots and lots of evidence.

She'd learned that she really didn't care about the money. (Although the ten thousand dollar bonus that Nan had paid her—a bonus Pita hadn't asked for—had come in very handy.)

And she learned how valuable it was to know the people of her town. If she hadn't spent all those evenings in the cafeteria with Jessup, she wouldn't have trusted his story, and she never would have hired the forensic examiner.

Her mom had been right, all those years ago. Rio Gordo wasn't a bad place. Yeah, it was impoverished. Yeah, it was filled with dust, and didn't have a good night life or a great university.

But it did have some pretty spectacular people.

People who congratulated Pita for the next year on her success in the Hughes case. People who now came to her to do their wills or their prenups. People who asked her advice on the smallest legal matters and believed her when she gave them an unvarnished opinion.

Her biggest case had helped her discover her calling: She was a small-town attorney who cared more about the people around her than the money their cases could bring in.

She wouldn't be rich.

But she would be happy.

And that was more than enough.

# SOB SISTER

## A FOUR HORSEMEN STORY

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

Arabella Lindauer was the highest-paid sob sister on the staff of *The Detroit Times*. Her boss, William Randolph Hearst, had said that if you assigned Arabella to a fire with nothing worse than a singed dog for human interest five minutes before deadline, she'd pound out a story that would draw tears from a stone. Her five-part series on the Lindbergh kidnapping had failed to win a Pulitzer, but Walter Winchell had choked up while quoting from it on the air (which she said was better).

A self-described spinster (although she had no shortage of suitors), she never left home or the office in anything other than her uniform: pillbox hat, print dress, chunky-heeled shoes, and of course white cotton gloves. She bought these by the box and seldom wore a pair more than once; red lipstick gravitated to them no matter how careful the wearer and didn't wash out. She carried clutch purses with just enough room for her pencil and pad, a roll of nickels for the telephone, her compact and rouge, and the keys to her Hudson on a ring attached to a set of brass knuckles.

For a time, she'd been seen about town in the company of Lieutenant Max Zagreb of the Detroit Racket Squad, but when they'd exhausted all the ballrooms and picture shows and sat down to talk, they discovered that they lived at cross purposes. It was his job to jail predators with bullets and hers to free them with adjectives. They parted on grounds of self-preservation, but not with finality. When the two-burner range, the radio, and the post-nasal drip of the faucet in the apartment kitchen surrendered their charm, one would call the other and they would go out for Clark Gable and a Coney Island. A palpable lack of a social life was the one thing they had in common.

This was a matter of career alienation, not unattractiveness. She was a handsome woman of thirty, with a trim waist and an abundance of auburn hair, he slightly older, whipsaw lean, large in the forehead—the sign of a thinker—and had a lazy smile like Dan

Ron Chironna

Duryea. One knew them only briefly before realizing that his eyes didn't always smile when his mouth did, and that she spoke the way she wrote, with the main subject on top and all the other details following in descending order of importance, in the shape of an inverted pyramid. Satellites from outside their solar system didn't stay long in their orbit.

On the day the marines landed on Guadalcanal, Arabella and Zagreb went to see *Mrs. Miniver* at the Broadway-Capitol, with a Betty Boop cartoon and newsreel footage of the Japanese in New Guinea, and lingered over coffee in the J. L. Hudson's cafeteria while waiting for their hamburgers to digest. Zagreb was first to break the comfortable post-prandial silence.

"I ought to call in. Some Four-F shirkers might celebrate this Guadalcanal business by busting up a beergarden."

"You've got uniforms for that." She slid a Lucky between her lips.

He snapped his Zippo under it. "Most of them are in Pearl and the North Atlantic. We all have to make do, isn't that the line?"

"The only line I know is the one girls draw up the back of their legs to cover up the fact someone's using their nylons for a parachute."

"That never makes sense to me. How do you show you're helping the war effort by pretending you're not?"

"Nothing about this war makes sense. We've got Hitlers right here."

"You better watch who you say that to." He kept his voice light, but his gaze swept the nearly deserted room for junior J. Edgar Hoovers, gray men in pinstripes with notebooks.

"I'm talking about that snake Frankie Orr."

"What'd he do, sell you a bum set of tires?"

"He can make a million off the black market for all I care. I interviewed a G.I. on leave from the Aleutians who said he helped set fire to a thousand gallons of gasoline just to de-ice a runway. Rationing's a joke."

"When's the piece come out? I'll read it."

"You already did, if you saw yesterday's paper, but you didn't see that bit. The old man blue-pencils everything that might remind people he was an isolationist before December seventh. The rest was columns of sludge about the G.I.'s tearful reunion with his teenage bride. They'd been separated a total of six weeks when he got sent home with a nasty case of frostbite."

"Well, that's your specialty." He lit a Chesterfield.

"I can do that in my sleep. I've gotten all I can out of kittens and car crashes and one-legged prom queens. I want to quit making

people reach for a Kleenex and make them look for a stamp instead, to write their congressman. Frankie's made more widows locally than Tojo."

"The war's young. Give Tojo a chance."

"I want to write about him."

"Who, Tojo?"

"Don't play dumb, Zag. You know who I mean."

"So write about him. Who's stopping you?"

"He is. I can't even get in to see him at that restaurant where he hangs out, a public place. But you can."

"You want I should ask him for an interview?" He put some Yugo Yid into it. He'd forgotten how much she amused him when she wasn't being exasperating.

"You're planning to raid him soon. Take me along."

He'd forgotten, too, how thin the line was between amusement and exasperation. "Who told you that?"

"My hairdresser. She's dating a member of your squad."

"Which one?" When she shook her head, he said, "There are only four of us. I'm not dating a hairdresser, Canal's saving himself for an Old Country girl, and Burke talks nookie like Cesar Romero speaks Spanish: No hairdressers recently. That leaves McReary. By the time that little mick takes off his hat and shows his bald head, it's too late. He's already charmed you half into the sack. It's McReary, isn't it?"

"I'm not saying, but don't blame him. Women are smart and dumb, same as men. This one isn't dumb. She's spent enough time with him to know when he's strapping himself down for a rough ride."

"Busting Four-effers' heads on Woodward isn't a pleasure cruise."

"You don't spend days planning those raids."

He shook his head. "If that's true, I couldn't take the chance. If you got hurt, the commissioner would have my head. He's wanted it ever since he took the job."

"I can take care of myself."

"Then again, you might get one of us hurt. I'm short a dozen men as it is."

"For old times' sake," she said.

"Sorry. It's this job or storming some beach. Damn sand gets in everything."

She said something uncomplimentary, dropped her cigarette butt into her cup, and left. He pushed the cup out of his line of sight while he finished his Chesterfield and his coffee. That brown floating debris could put him off nicotine and caffeine at the same time.

⁂

McReary was in his twenties, fair and freckled, and self-conscious about his bald head, a souvenir of scarlet fever, or one of those other diseases that stalked children between wars. The rest of the squad called him Baldy only when they were sore at him. Zagreb, on the rare occasions the young man had his hat off, thought he looked sleek and predatory, like a hood ornament.

He found Mac at his desk, tapping out a report with two fingers, his snapbrim tipped forward to shield his eyes from the glare of his gooseneck lamp. He struck a wrong key when the lieutenant spun a chair and straddled it backwards to face him. All his confidence in his abilities evaporated during close contact with the commander of the Four Horsemen, as the racket squad was known in the newspapers.

"Anything?" Zagreb jerked a thumb at the loudspeaker mounted on the wall. It was connected directly with dispatch.

"Not a peep, L.T. For us, anyway," McReary added.

"Some criminal genius busted a window in the A & P after closing and made off with a dozen cans of peas," reported Officer Burke. "Went right past a display of Maxwell House to get to 'em. Canned peas ain't rationed."

"That's because it's unpatriotic to poison the troops." Sergeant Canal, seated on one massive ham on a windowsill, exhausted cigar smoke out over Beaubien. The rest of the squad had petitioned him never to fire up one of his four-for-a-quarter specials without ventillation handy. Zagreb's second-in-command was a big man, as light on his feet as Oliver Hardy, but with muscle instead of fat. "Me, I'd go for the freezer."

"That's because you can carry out a side of beef under each arm." Burke, who was determined never to be second-in-command of anything, was big also, but not by Canal's standards. He'd made up for the disparity by cultivating a mossy growth of black hair that stuck out of his cuffs and grew above his collar, where it blended with his round-the-clock shadow.

"I could manage six, seven capons," McReary said. "I'm wiry." He grinned nervously, aware of Zagreb's close attention.

The lieutenant addressed the others without taking his eyes off the young officer. "Why don't you two boys get some air?"

The two big men exited without comment. Every man on the detail knew Zagreb seldom disciplined a member in front of the others. This course of action was both diplomatic and practical: All four were armed.

"How's your sex life, Mac?"

McReary blushed, surprised. "Okay, I guess." It would never have occurred to him to ask, *How's yours?*

"I went out with a lady barber a couple of times. She talked the thing to death in the end. They sure can gab up a storm."

"Agnes."

There was now no trace of color in the young man's face.

"Agnes, that's her name? Seems to me a blade like you can do better than an Agnes."

"I didn't tell her a damn thing, Zag, just that I'm a cop. She saw the gun."

"She'd know that anyway. We're good copy, we make the front page whenever there's nothing doing overseas. How'd she find out about Express?"

Sound travels across empty space, and with most of the desks in the squad room vacant because of the war and a skeleton police force riddled with paid informants, the Horsemen had followed the lead of the U.S. military by assigning code names to their activities. On the street, Frankie Orr was known as "the Conductor," for an old murder aboard a streetcar. Operation Express was in place to break up his black market organization.

"I never said a word."

Zagreb held his gaze six inches from McReary's face. "Rationing's a war priority. They shoot you for treason."

The officer's freckles stood out. The rest of his face had faded to invisibility.

"Some women can read a man," Zagreb said. "If you can't learn to keep your nerves under your vest, you've got to at least stay away from gossips. The *Times* has it."

"Holy smoke!"

After a moment he sat back, breaking the spell. "It's all right, the reporter's a friend of mine. But just until this one's in the can, why don't you go to the pictures alone? Nobody cares what you do at home after you've been to see Betty Grable."

"Okay, L.T." Relieved, McReary tipped back his hat and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "L.T.? Would you really have me shot?"

"Hell, no. Rationing's FDR's baby. It's just a job." He stood and looked down at the young man. "I'd shoot you myself."

When he came to Detroit at the height of the booze wars, Francis Xavier Oro had been touted as one of the new breed, applying modern business methods to the rackets, which mean quieter murders and a fairer system of graft. He'd expunged the Sicilian from his name and loud suits and silk shirts from his wardrobe, and expanded his activities to embrace gambling, drugs, labor unions, and other difficult-to-obtain goods and services after

liquor resumed flowing legally. When America entered the war and the OPA restricted the traffic in meat, eggs, butter, gasoline, and automobile tires, Frankie Orr had absorbed the wartime black market into his territory without a single assassination. In Grosse Pointe, where Detroit auto money was put up in barrels to mellow, a porterhouse steak on the table or a set of new whitewalls in the garage became as much a symbol of status as a case of scotch served during Prohibition.

He procured his inventory exactly as he had in earlier days, through hijacking, bribery, and midnight deliveries from Canada by way of Windsor Tunnel, the Ambassador Bridge, and boat landings in the city of Monroe and a flea-speck lake community just north of the last, named Detroit Beach.

On a crickety, mosquito-thick evening in August 1942, Officer Burke shoved the foot-feed to the firewall of the two-year-old Chrysler Royal, muttering curses like Popeye and twisting the wheel this way and that to keep the tires from snatching in the sand that had drifted across the highway from the beach. He'd disliked the heavy sedan from the day it was issued but was the only member of the squad who could get the best out of it.

"Take it easy, Burksie." Sergeant Canal gripped the ceiling strap in the back seat and took the cigar out of his mouth to scowl at the spot where he'd bitten through the wrapping. "They don't make new brakes for cars no more, just tanks and airplanes."

"What are you beefing about? I ain't touched the brakes since Dearborn."

"Once in twenty miles won't hurt," said Zagreb, seated beside him in front.

Burke took the hint and let up on the accelerator.

He passed the turning, switched off the lights, and coasted to a stop on the gravel apron in front of a bait-and-tackle shop that had been boarded up since the Bank Holiday. The four got out and gathered at the trunk, where the lieutenant handed out flak jackets and heavy artillery: a sawed-off shotgun for McReary, a Thompson for Canal, and a flare pistol for himself. Squat-barreled police .38s rode on their belts.

McReary watched the sergeant fitting a fifty-round drum to the machine gun. "Just once I'd like the Tommy."

Canal grinned in the trunk light. "Not till you pack on the pork, junior. When this starts to spit, it'll jerk you around like a turd in a twister."

"Who you calling a turd, you big piece of—"

Zagreb whistled sharply between his teeth. "Save something for the enemy."

They walked down to the beach, Burke cursing at the sand he shipped in over the tops of his wingtips. Between them and the spot where boats landed loomed a canvas-shrouded bandshell, once host to the Casa Loma and Les Brown orchestras but now a place for winos to shelter and teen couples to grope. Farther out, an ancient dock, landlocked by a receding waterline, decrepitated under a shoeheel moon. McReary took his large-caliber, short-range weapon into its cover along with Burke, while Zagreb and Canal ducked under the canvas of the bandshell, where the sergeant used his jackknife on the rotted fabric to create observation posts. This made a V-shaped firing perimeter with the landing in the middle and the two men under the dock closest to the action.

Canal sat with his back against a timber, cradling the Thompson in his lap. "What if they check out this place?"

"It's a bandstand. Play 'em a concert on that fiddle." Zagreb remained standing.

"It ain't like the Conductor to take a chance with the Feds and the Mounties both at once. This ain't the dry time, when it was only against the law on this side."

"He's not shipping from Canada. He's following the shore up from Toledo. He knows there are guardsmen at the state line."

"His snitches are better than ours. I hope yours wasn't pulling your leg."

"He better not have. He's looking at three to five on a granny warrant if Frankie comes by land instead of by sea."

"Frankie coming along, you think?"

"Nah. He's probably polishing off a mess of spaghetti at Roma's."

"What is it, meat or tires?"

"One or the other. He only deals gasoline when he's strapped. One stray round during a hijack and he's out some men he can't spare. General MacArthur's got all the best."

"Right now I'd settle for two or three more of our own, second best or no."

"Can't risk it. You might have noticed that what we got left to draw on isn't USDA choice. Department's calling back cops it dismissed for grafting."

"They're the ones should be drafted. If this foreign business drags on, I wouldn't give a Confederate nickel for what we end up with." The sergeant chewed on his cold cigar.

"Maybe you should enlist and finish it quick."

Canal smacked the deck of the bandshell. "What, and give up music?"

The night wore on. The wind freshened off Lake Erie, blowing away the mosquitoes and carrying a snatch of studio laughter from a radio program. It could have come all the way from the Canadian side.

In a little while the ground trembled beneath a heavy piece of machinery shifting gears down the highway. The big man gathered his legs under him, tightening his grip on the submachine gun.

"Keep your pants on. Could be a bread truck." But the lieutenant forgot his craving for a Chesterfield.

The diesel rumble increased, so that by the time the vehicle slowed to make the turn the two detectives felt it in their testicles. Canal rose and they crept to the opening he'd made in the canvas facing the highway, taking turns peering through it. A rounded radiator grille appeared in the moonlight; two slits of electric light winked on briefly from blackout headlamps, locating the twin tracks that led to the shoreline. The divided windshield of the cab was dark, with not so much as a dashboard bulb to illuminate the occupant or occupants. Behind it, sliding into line as it followed, the trailer cut a square blank out of the scatter of lighted windows belonging to what remained of the beach community on the other side of the pavement. The truck was painted dull black from stem to stern. Powerful compressors wheezed whenever the accelerator was released.

"Refrigerator truck," Zagreb said.

Canal said, "Hot damn. I'm throwing a barbeque Saturday."

The truck backed around until the end of the trailer was pointed toward the lake. Air brakes whooshed and the two men climbed down from the cab. The one from the passenger's side started toward the bandshell, training the beam of a flash on the ground to avoid turning an ankle on a chunk of driftwood or a broken beer bottle. The light reflecting off the sand outlined the square profile of a .45 pistol in his other hand.

As the man drew near, Canal stepped back from the opening facing the lake and raised the Thompson to his hip. Zagreb thumbed back the hammer on his revolver, only then realizing he'd drawn it.

The man with the pistol was ten feet away when the driver called out. He stopped walking, hesitated, then turned and trotted back toward the truck. The two men inside the canvas relaxed. Zagreb took the .38 off cock.

The chugging of marine engines reached them then, laboring against the offshore current. That would be the reason for the driver's summons. The word from the underworld was Frankie Orr had bought a decomissioned World War I minesweeper and

refurbished it for cargo. When the frosty moonlight limned the sharp, Dick Tracy nose of the prow, the lieutenant stuck his revolver under his flak jacket and tugged out the flare pistol.

The chugging slowed. A thousand-candlepower spot slammed on aboard ship and swept its steely shaft across the beach. Zagreb and Canal withdrew farther into the shadows.

The shaft made two more passes and stopped—whether to identify the truck or something suspicious inside the structure where the detectives crouched, it was impossible to tell. Neither man breathed.

Abruptly the light went out, leaving behind green and purple blossoms to spoil their night vision. They hadn't been spotted.

The light had illuminated a pier jutting twenty feet beyond dry land, an apparition before, now revealed as new construction, the first there in many a year. As the craft approached, the pitch of the engines changed, reversing themselves. They stopped, but the ship continued under its own momentum. It ghosted alongside the pier, guided with gestures from human silhouettes visible above the railing. Water splashed; an anchor released. The ship yawed against the pull of the cable and stopped short of beaching itself. Water slapped its hull.

Two of the silhouettes clambered over the railing and leaped to the pier, landing with a double thump. More maritime business ensued as they caught a pair of lines cast over the side by a third silhouette, pulled them taut, and maneuvered the pliable craft into position. They tied them to rings attached to posts.

A hatch lowered, creating a ramp. The man on deck vanished, to reappear (Canal and Zagreb guessed) among two others walking down the ramp with stout boxes hoisted to their shoulders.

"I was expecting sides of beef and pork." Canal sounded disappointed.

"Smaller cuts, probably. Chops and tenderloins." But Zagreb was troubled. Something was missing, but he didn't know what.

When the sergeant took a step toward the opening, he put a hand on his arm. "Let 'em finish loading. It's a sin to let fresh meat spoil while our boys are eating K-rations."

"I hope Burke can hold his water that long."

"Mac'll keep him tame. That's half the reason I put him on this detail. I learned it from an old trainer who tied up a goat to make his racehorse quit kicking down the stall."

"You tell Mac he's a goat?"

"Nope. He's too good with that shotgun."

Zagreb was only half listening to himself. His own crack about meat spoiling had told him what was missing. A boatload of per-

ishables ought to be spilling vapor into the air, expelled by blocks of ice in the hold. There was no sign of it, or of the inhaling and exhaling of modern refrigeration aboard ship.

Fighting a sinking sensation, he waited until the doors were shut and latched, then stuck his pistol through the opening in the canvas and raised it to a forty-five degree angle. "Get ready to blast." He fired a rocket high over the beach.

"I'm still blind in my right ear." Canal rotated a thick finger inside it rapidly.

McReary said, "Try cutting loose with a twelve-gauge under a dock."

"Shut up, both of you."

They fell silent before the lieutenant's rebuke. The flare he'd shot off still lit the beach, a miniature sun in a white sky. The men they'd arrested sat leaning forward on the sand, each with a wrist shackled to an ankle, a Four Horsemen specialty that effectively discouraged flight. There were eight, with the truck driver, his partner, the men who had helped with the loading, and the two armed guards, who had dropped their guns and surrendered when Canal and McReary had fired warnings close enough to kick sand onto them. The man with the .45, thinking himself stealthy, had earned a clubbing with Burke's service revolver when he'd drawn it at close range. He sat listless, with a hand holding a possible skull fracture. The ship's captain and what remained of his crew had slipped through the snare by reversing engines and putting out to sea, unmindful of bullets thudding against the hull.

A half-dozen boxes lay split open on the beach where the detectives had dumped them, their contents scattered across the sand: Paperbound copies of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, *Cæsar's Conquests*, *Treasure Island*, and the works of William Shakespeare; servicemen's editions of properties long in public domain. A thorough inspection of the cargo that had been transferred from the minesweeper to the truck would discover not so much as a pork chop, or anything else that remotely resembled contraband, while the reefers inside the trailer huffed and puffed in chortled contempt.

Canal put an end to that with a short burst from his Thompson that struck sparks off metal and released a hiss of ammonia and liquid oxygen into the air.

"That's coming out of your salary," Zagreb snarled. "Ammunition's rationed just like everything else."

"Everything except books." The sergeant emptied his drum at

the heaps of books, shattering them into bits of paper that were blown shoreward by the wind from Canada. "Put them on my tab."

Commissioner John Witherspoon was a sour sphincter of a man who parted his hair in the middle and smeared it to both sides with two swipes of a butter knife. He stood behind his slab of desk at 1300 Beaubien, Detroit Police Headquarters, with his hands clasped behind him Napoleon fashion and glared through Coke-bottle spectacles at the Four Horsemen standing in his office. "What've we got to hold them on?"

"Sullivan rap," Zagreb said. "Two of them, anyway, the trucker's partner and one of the loaders. The goons standing guard had permits for their weapons. Frankie got them private detective licenses under Mayor Bowles and renewed them every year like clockwork."

The man behind the desk measured out a bitter expression appropriate to the first mayor of a major North American city ever to have been recalled on grounds of corruption. "Orr had a contract to supply editions of classic literature to servicemen overseas, straight from the War Department. He set up a printing press in Sandusky and offered them at a few pennies above cost. A front, naturally, but legitimate. Who told you he was shipping anything else?"

"Confidential source. He's been reliable in the past."

"That leaves us with only one possibility. How many were aware a raid was planned?"

"Nobody outside the squad, but none of us spilled anything."

Faced with the lieutenant's calm, Witherspoon shifted his gaze to the report on his desk. The commissioner was a career politician and a coward who feared and despised the street cops under his command.

"Well, someone made a serious mistake. It may be years before we have another opportunity to put Orr out of business. Meanwhile, I'm reassigning the Racket Squad to riot control."

"That's a uniform detail!" Burke snapped. This drew a sharp look from Zagreb, who claimed the privilege of being the one who spoke in that office without having been addressed directly.

Witherspoon said, "The uniforms can use assistance. The defense plants pay the same wages to Negroes and white southerners, which doesn't always sit well with the sons of the Confederacy. Security's tight on the assembly line, but tensions boil over in the saloons between shifts. Perhaps managing a roomful of drunken bigots is not beyond your abilities."

Back in the squad room, Burke spat on the linoleum floor. "We need to invite him along on beergarden detail some election year, see do his abilities stand up to a bunch of rednecks pumped up on Rebel Yell."

"Save something for the enemy." Zagreb's oft-repeated advice lacked conviction. The adrenaline comedown after a stakeout always left him exhausted, but the bitter results of last night had wrung him out like a bar rag. He slumped into the nearest swivel chair.

McReary approached, holding out his gold shield and .38. "Thanks for not throwing me to the dogs, L.T. Maybe I can make myself useful in the Pacific, if no one trusts me with the invasion plans for Tokyo."

"Oh, put them away. No one else here can hit anything with a shotgun at range."

"I'm the one stuck us on dipso duty."

The lieutenant tipped back his head to look him in the eye. He was too wiped out to raise a hand to push back his hat. "You think you're the only cop in the city got a sucker punch from a dame? Brother, you're not even the only one in this conversation."

Max Zagreb didn't see Arabella Lindauer again until after her new series had run its course. *The Confessions of Frankie Orr: Notorious Racketeer Tells All* had appeared in *The Detroit Times* throughout the end of the summer and into early fall, by which time the Four Horsemen weren't the only ones battling their way back from Square One: The Allies were encountering heavy resistance in North Africa, the Philippines, and Stalingrad.

He was drinking a beer between sets at the Cozy Corner when she came in on the arm of a vapid-faced corporal in Class A uniform and found a table far enough from the dance floor for talk and a quiet drink. When the band returned, they got up to dance to a Tommy Dorsey tune, but when the next started to the thundering beat of a jitterbug she shook her head and led her disappointed escort back to their table. Zagreb checked his Wittenauer several times, and when the soldier left to make curfew he carried a fresh beer over and took the vacant seat.

Arabella, tapping a Lucky on the back of a pigskin case, raised her eyebrows and smiled. "The war's destroyed the proprieties, I see. Gentlemen used to wait for an invitation."

"All's fair, I'm told." He lit her up, then himself. "'Racketeer Tells All,' my fanny. Frankie didn't give you the dope on anything the statute of limitations didn't run out on under Herbert Hoover.

He's personally responsible for four murders I know of. We're still totting up the score on the ones he catered out."

"Modern-day crimes bore readers: hoarding ration stamps, big bellies in brown shirts at bund rallies. They prefer touring car chases and choppers and bathtub gin. Circulation's up. The old man wants to put me on police beat. First female reporter in the city to ride in a prowl car. Without handcuffs, that is."

"Congratulations. No more one-legged prom queens."

"I turned him down. I'm holding out for a government assignment."

He raised his glass in a toast and drank. "Read any good books lately? Servicemen's editions?"

"I was wondering how long it would take you to get around to that. I didn't give him anything but an educated guess. You wouldn't provide details or even confirm there was going to be a raid at all. The rumor was enough to get me into that private room of his at Roma's. The rest was horse trading."

"Mac's hairdresser friend was just a gossip. She was too dumb to know better. You're nobody's idea of dumb."

"No one got hurt. You didn't even get demoted."

"I've been demoted. I didn't mind it too much. Frankie suckered us with that refrigerator truck, just to set the hook deep. I minded that." He smoked. "How many do you think he's hurt since you gave him his get-out-of-jail-free card?"

"Now you sound like one of those Home Front do-gooders. Why don't you donate a coffee pot to the aluminum drive? Give up your morning brew to help build a battleship?"

He put out his cigarette. "The last time we discussed Frankie you called him a snake. Whacking him with a stick was part of the reason you wanted to write about him. When push came to shove you volunteered to be his authorized biographer."

"This isn't about Frankie," she said. "It's about the big-time crimebuster trusting a woman and getting burned."

"Or not trusting her. If I'd agreed to let you ride along on that raid, you'd have sat on it till it hatched, or risk losing the scoop. Don't tell me you didn't think I got what was coming to me when it went bust."

"Listen to you: Robert Taylor in his own movie. The world doesn't spin around you."

He put money on the table and rose. "Buy yourself a bottle of bubbly and enjoy it while you can. Just because Frankie makes good on his debts doesn't mean he likes it. Right now the Feds are too busy chasing Fifth Column saboteurs to worry about an old bootlegger, but as soon as this war turns our way, all those headlines will

hang on him like a bucket of rocks. A grand jury will want to talk to you."

"I don't know anything that isn't already public record."

"The grand jury won't know that. By that time Frankie may not be able to remember everything that passed between you. You've got a reputation now for wheedling out information during weak moments. He's famous for not taking chances. He didn't with the National Guard at the Ohio state border and he won't with a sob sister."

She stubbed out her lipstick-stained Lucky and smiled up at him under her pillbox hat at its fashionable angle. "I'll buy that champagne and save it to share with you when we kick Hitler's butt."

She didn't make it to V-E Day. After a trial period covering the capitol in Lansing, she drew a national assignment, to report on President Roosevelt's fourth inauguration in March 1945. Her private plane went down in a wooded area in Maryland fifty miles north of the District of Columbia, killing her, a *Times* photographer, and the pilot; a leaky fuel line, investigators decided. She'd been subpoenaed to testify before a grand jury investigating the wartime black market when she got back.

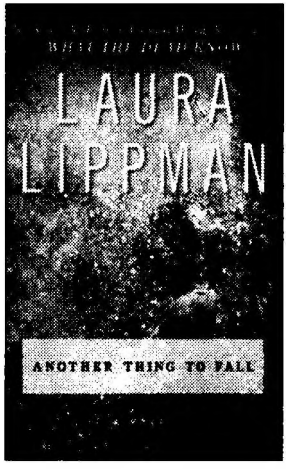
Loved the story? Share your thoughts in The Readers Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

# Booked & Printed

## ROBERT C. HAHN

In October, mystery and crime writers from across the country will gather in Baltimore for the annual convention known as Bouchercon. While Baltimore of late has been the inspiration for the popular television show *The Wire*, nearby Washington, D.C., and the suburbs around it, are also rife with criminal inspiration.

This month's column looks at mysteries that find the region a capital location for crime. Laura Lippman's Tess Monaghan series is set in Baltimore, Frederick Ramsay's Sheriff Ike Schwartz patrols a college town in suburban Virginia, and Ellen Crosby's wine country mysteries are set in rural Virginia.




Laura Lippman is by far the most established of the three with ten Tess Monaghan novels to her credit, including Anthony and Shamus award winner *In Big Trouble* (1999), as well as stand-alone novels such as *Every Secret Thing* (2004) and short stories in several anthologies. The list of awards she has won includes all the other big names as well: Edgar, Agatha, Barry, and Nero Wolfe.

Like Lippman herself, Tess started out as a newspaper reporter in *Baltimore Blues* (1997), stumbling into her first case and more or less stumbling through it as well. As Lippman wryly notes on her own web site, it was Tess's first case and her investigative skills did improve.

Tess lands in her latest case, in ANOTHER THING TO FALL (Morrow, $24.95), by falling out of her scull while rowing the Patapsco River. The wake that dumps her in the water also strands her among the television crew shooting a scene for a promising new series, called *Mann of Steel*, set in Baltimore.

The series, about a present day steelworker knocked back to 19th century Baltimore, features Johnny Tampa, a former teen star now gone somewhat to pot. His co-star is young actress Selene

Waites, playing the part of famous Baltimore belle Betsy Patterson. But Waites unexpectedly became a hot property when she received a Golden Globe nomination for a film, and she has now become a problem child—willful, spoiled, and uncontrollable.

The production has many problems but Tess's unlooked for arrival seems to offer a solution to one of the biggest facing executive producer Flip Tumulty. He hires Tess to babysit Selene when she is not on the set—a job that proves embarrassingly difficult. When problems escalate from glitches to murder, Tess has a larger role to play to catch a killer.

Lippman is married to TV producer David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, and she displays an insider's detailed knowledge of the process of scripting and shooting a television series that adds considerably to the enjoyment of her latest mystery.

In addition to writing whodunits, Baltimore native Frederick Ramsay has taught at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and has been an Episcopal priest.

Ramsay introduced Sheriff Ike Schwartz in 2004's *Artscape*, where the former federal agent took up residence in quiet Picketsville, VA, expecting to encounter nothing more serious than the occasional drunken spree or domestic dispute. Instead he had to deal with a major art theft at local Callend College. He also had to deal with college president Ruth Harris, an encounter that begins on rocky grounds and grows from grudging respect to budding romance.

Ramsay has given himself plenty of engaging conflicts to explore and develop in his four-book series. Ike is a bit of an anomaly as a highly trained lawman in a provincial setting. And he's Jewish in a community where that is a rarity. At Callend College the gulf between town and the gown is considerable, though both the community and the college have more than their share of memorable characters—drawn by Ramsay with a delightful combination of affection and insight.

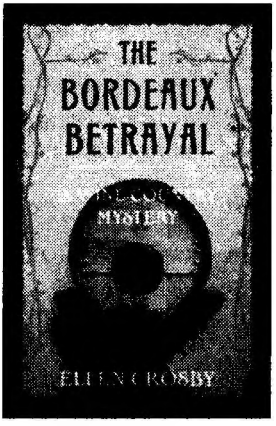
In STRANGER ROOM (Poisoned Pen Press, $24.95) Schwartz and Ramsay have hit their stride. Jonathan Lydell IV, scion of one of Picketsville's oldest and proudest families, has restored the family home—including the "stranger room," a room separate from the rest of the house (for privacy) and designed to be rented out to passing travelers.

When Lydell's lodger, out-of-towner Anton Grotz, is found murdered in the stranger room with the door locked from the inside, Sheriff Schwartz is faced with a real puzzler. More puzzling still is

the similarity to another murder that took place in the same stranger room in 1864 and has become part of the area's legend.

This good locked room puzzle is augmented by a slew of thorny relationships: aristocratic Lydell's relations with the plebes; the romance of Schwartz and Harris—frowned on by her staff and his constituents; and a potential shotgun marriage between Ruth's Callend College (an all-female school) and nearby Carter Union College, an all-male institution. Ramsay's sympathetic and credible handling of a diverse set of characters makes this series most enjoyable.

Ellen Crosby's Wine Country mysteries, *The Merlot Murders* (2006), *The Chardonnay Charade* (2007), and the latest, THE BORDEAUX BETRAYAL (Scribner, $25), are set at the Montgomery Estate Vineyards in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.




Filled with an insider's knowledge of wines and the wine industry, the novel also makes good use of American history. Crosby skillfully weaves the fate of a French wine bought by Thomas Jefferson on behalf of George Washington with the travels and travails that bring a surviving bottle of Bordeaux from the Margaux vineyard to a charity auction being held by Lucie Montgomery at her estate.

The Washington wine, donated by Jack Greenfield, owner of Jeroboam's Fine Wines in nearby Middleburg, promises not only to be the highlight of the auction, but also to bring it national attention. The bottle attracts Valerie Beauvais, author of a book on Jefferson's European travels; Ryan Worth, wine critic for the Washington Tribune; and beautiful Nicole Martin, representing unknown but wealthy buyers.

A murder, questions about the wine's provenance, vandalism on Lucie's estate, a gaggle of opponents of the annual "Goose Creek Hunt" (a traditional charity fox hunt that is more of a chase than a hunt), and Lucie's volatile relationships with her winemaker Quinn Santori and her neighbor, Mick Dunne, help fuel this mystery.

Crosby has concocted a rare vintage that offers many subtle flavors of romance, scandal, passion, and violence. Add Lucie Montgomery to the growing list of women whose unusual occupations open the doors to murderous adventures.

# THE WARCOOMBE WITCH

## JAMES LINCOLN WARREN

I was last Wednesday Night at a Tavern in the City, among a Set of Men who call themselves the Lawyer's Club. You must know, Sir, this Club consists only of Attorneys. . . . They are so conscious that their Discourses ought to be kept secret, that they are very cautious of admitting any Person who is not of their Profession.... —*The Spectator,* No. 372, May 6, 1712

Wednesday, April y^e^ 15, 1750
Theobald's Row, London.

Attended the Club, much merry carousing with some very fine Oporto Wine. Sack, Brandy, & Ale also flowing. Th^os^ Larkins proposed a new Member, his Guest, one Jos: Ambury of Gray's Inn, aged perhaps fourty Years, stout and florid, cloathed à la Mode, scarlet sattin Coat & Breeches and estimable Perriwig, much admir'd. Must make Enquiration as to the Name of his Peruquier.

Right Hon. Sam^l^ Thrawley set up as Judge, pulling a Rug off the Floor and setting same about his Shoulders in the lieu of Robes, Sir Ed^m^ Clevere standing for the Crown, and Mr. Temperance Easton full in his Cups thund'ring for the Defence, at which Larkins took the pet and a Quarrel almost not averted, but Easton yielded at last & said he should be Bailiff instead. Clear'd a space for the Dock, using a topsy versy Wash-Tub, and stood Ambury there, his face shiv'ring with Alarums & Terrors, not misdoubting us all fit for Bedlam.

"Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye! All rise!" shouts Easton, not very steady on his Feet, stumbling and nearly landing on his Buttocks. "This Court of Oyer and Terminer of the Lawyer's Club be now in Session, D—n me for a poxy Whoreson if it an't. The Right Most Dishonourable"—much Cachinnation amongst the Fellow-

ship at this fine Wit—"aye, Dishounorable, D—n his black Eyes, Judge Sam Bl—dy Thrawley, presiding."

Easton bow'd and then sat down directly, not arising from his Bow first, putting his Head 'twixt his Knees, methinks aswoon with a Surfeit of Drink. Not another Whimper from him for the nonce.

"An it please My Lord," says Sir Ed$^{m}$, "the Prisoner is accus'd of Treason Against Humanity, to wit that he doth conspire with divers unsavoury Fellows by committing the insalubrious & insidious Practice of Law, yea verily, as G-d is my Witness and Jesu my Saviour, that he himself is one of that vicious Band, an Initiate of that unholy Rite, videlicet, a Lawyer at the Bar."

Much thumping on the Tables by those assembl'd and Cries of Shame! Shame!

Larkins arose, ope'd his Mouth, more thumping and Cries of Sit down, D—n ye, Sit down! At which Larkins makes his Leg like a French dancing Master, afterward settling on his Chair.

"What say you, Mr. Ambury?" bellows Thrawley. Somewhere procur'd him a black Kerchief, and it already a-perch his Head. "Be you Guilty, or Not Guilty?"

Ambury stuttering. "I—I—"

"I pronounce you Guilty!" shouts Thrawley, striking his Tankard agin the Table, Ale leaping forth and everywhere frothing as the Tide at Dover. Havock ensuing.

"M'Lord," cries Larkins leaping up from his Seat. Such Din as Caesar must have heard at Philippi. "M'Lord, prithee, what about the Jury?"

"D—n'd inconvenient," says he. "But very Well. Gentlemen of the Jury, have you reached a Verdict?"

Vesuvius erupts. Pompeii and Herculaneum Lost. Expostulations: Guilty! Guilty! sounding like Artillery.

Thrawley bangs his Tankard, it now quite empty, calling Order. When the Noise sufficiently abated, announces, "Mr. Joseph Ambury, you have been found Guilty of the Heinous and Unnatural Condition of being an Attorney-at-Law. Have ye anything to say before I pronounce Sentence?"

Ambury again stuttering. "I—I—"

"My Lord," Larkins pleading. "He hath not yet recounted an Adventure."

Hearty thumping from All present. Hear him! Hear him!

Thrawley nods. "Mr. Ambury, before ye can be accepted as One of our Number, you must recount an Adventure at the Bar worthy of our Company. Ye may be seated. G-d's Balls, Larkins, get this poor Man a Drink."

Ambury at Table among us at last, jovial and thirsty. Many Calls for his Adventure.

"An Adventure? Zooks but I have one. I once litigated the Trial of a Witch, at the Devonshire Assizes," says he, jolly as you might please & grinning like a Halfwit.

The Moment before Creation was never so quiet as the Club on hearing that.

Yet Somnus now beckons with sweet Caress, it being nigh Three of the Clock. First the Necessary-stool, & thence to Bed.

Sunday, April y$^{e}$ 19, 1750
Theobald's Row, London.

Attended Mattins, suff'ring Torture from the Head-ache & my Belly still much unsettled from th'immodest Bibulation of Wine erstwhiles at Black's, but nevertheless took the Eucharist with Christian Humility & good Faith & sang the Hymns. Penelope wroth as Satan & raucous as a Legion of Rooks on the Wing, descrying me filthy Drunkard, digusting Debauch, foul Sot, Vile Inebriate, Blockhead, Ninny, & unworthy Husband. The Servants Stygian silent & still.

Retreated to the Library, thus making good Escape, to record Mr. Ambury, his Speech concerning the Witch Trial, this Wednesday past.

To continue:

"But Mr. Ambury," Thrawley says, "there hasn't been a Trial for Witchcraft in England these two score Year, stap me. Not in this enlighten'd Age. And ye be far too young."

"Fie, don't flatter me so, thank 'e. 'Twas not so long ago as that: the Summer of the year Seventeen hundred & thirty-six," Ambury replies.

"I have not heard of this Trial," says Sir Ed$^{m}$.

"Nor I," confessed I.

"Aye, and there is Reason for it," says Ambury, "which I shall endeavour to explain, if you will be but patient."

Mr. Ambury began by telling us that far from being concern'd with criminous Acts, his peculiar Practice in the Law generally concerned Property & Chattels, &c., and having attained some modest Renown in these Matters in the West, his Services there not infrequently in Demand.

"There had arisen, over the course of many Years," saith he, "a Dispute over the Borders between the Estates of two Gentlemen of Devonshire, in the bleak and forbidding Exmoor, which, coming

to a Head, was scheduled to be litigated, and not for the first Time, at the Summer Assizes in Exeter. This Dispute was of a deeply personal Nature, where Victory would satisfy Pride without other Advantage, for the Land was scarcely capable of supporting fruitful Tillage. This was a Litigation fuelled only by the profound Loathing each Gentleman felt in the depth of his Soul for the Other's, an eternal Struggle, the Wrestlings of an Hercules versus an Antæus—in short, a veritable Sinecure for a Lawyer, that Species of Case that Dreams are made on.

"The Litigants we may call Squire George V. and Sir Hugo B., but out of Respect for their Families—"

"And to avoid Prosecution for Slander, I don't misdoubt," mutters someone, methinks Easton, recover'd from his Sopor.

"—I shall withhold their Surnames. Now, I was to stand for Squire George, whilst my Learned Colleague, Mr. Sneare of Lincoln's Inn—" ("Aha!" exclaims Tom Larkins, "a Scoundrel!") "—was to represent Sir Hugo.

"A Village straddled a rude Road dividing their Estates—with Half of the Village on Squire George's Land, as it were, whilst the other Half lay on Sir Hugo's. The Village is called Warcoombe, and was at the very Centre of the Combat.

"On the Edge of this Hamlet, on the Squire's side, there lived an ancient Crone named Jane Thornwold, who had some local Infamy as a Cunning-woman. She dwelt alone, except for a Family of tame Crowes, a nastie grey tabbie Cat, and an abominable brindled Mastiff, in a decrepit Hovel, that had during the previous Century been a fine Cottage, but was now blackened with Soot and Age, and had long since fallen into Ruin.

"Her History was that in the Days of Charles II she had been a magnificent Beauty, tall as a Yew, with billowing black Hair like an April Thundercloud, and shining Eyes that verily flashed with Lightning," Ambury told us, with a fine Ear for Poesy. "It was said she had caught the Eye of no less a Voluptuary than the Earl of Rochester himself—or mayhaps bewitched him, for even then, she was said to possess uncanny Powers."

"Errant Nonsense, sirrah. Plain Ignorance and country Superstition," scoffs Sir Ed$^{m.}$ "A handsome Wench needs not Magick to entrance her a lusty Buck, what? And Rochester as notorious a Rake-hell as ever was."

"And yet she was known from her Youth to visit the Moor of a moonless Night, gathering Herbs wherewith to concoct subtle Philtres and love Charms, to be sold to those local Womenfolk uncertain in the Affections of their Husbands or Beaux, and also for other less salubrious Enchantments. It was said she was seen

comporting with a dark Stranger in the Mist, handsome as Apollo, sometimes manifested in the guise of a black long-toothed Tyke, taken for none other than Old Nick himself, and that she verily danced with him to the eldritch Musick of croaking Toads, until encroaching Dawn banished her Infernal Lover from the Earth," says Ambury. "This, at least, was her weird Reputation 'mongst her Neighbours."

"Why, didn't you already say the accused Witch had such a Dog?" asks Thrawley. "A living Dog, a real Dog?"

"Indeed she had, and little Sympathy did it provide her, for it was such a ferocious Beast that it suffer'd no Person so much as to touch it, but its Mistress. Such Brutes are not welcome in that Valley, Mr. Thrawley. You see, there is a local Legend recounting that Sir Hugo's Family suffer'd under a Curse, the Consequence of a Rape committed by Sir Hugo's great grandfather, who was himself named Hugo, during the Great Rebellion. The Form of this Curse was a spectral Hound, the Appearance of which is said to presage the Death of a Member of Sir Hugo's Family."

Sir Ed$^{m}$: "And now infernal Curs, ancestral Curses, and dancing D—ls! 'Twill be Changelings, Piskies, and Fairies anon."

"I will get to the Evidence of Magick presently, sir. But to return to Jane Thornwold and her Circumstances: as I mentioned, Squire George was her Landlord, but he rarely so much as acknowledged her Existence, could he avoid same, her Tenancy having been guaranteed by his own Father, in return for a Nosegay rent, paid every Spring, which Obligation she assiduously discharged."

"And I'll wager that's not all the old Spark got from her," mutters Easton. "She being a Beauty, hey? Flowers for Rent, forsooth." A Snort.

"As to that, neither do I care," says Ambury, him somewhat haughty, "it having no Relevance to subsequent Events: the Point I was making is that in no wise had Squire George any Interest in Jane Thornwold's Livelihood, of which, as Testimony reveal'd, the greatest Part consisted of Remuneration for such Items as aforementioned, viz., Philtres and love Charms and suchlike. Therefore, in no Manner whatsoever could he be held liable for her Deeds.

"I am happy to Report that in the suit of Law between the Squire and the Baronet, I prevail'd, I might perhaps say triumph'd utterly, in the Squire's Interest, and Sir Hugo's Claims were thoroughly dash'd and utterly confounded, for that Year at the least. But whilst this Result was very pleasant to me and my Client, in the Sequel it had a less salutary Effect upon the Temper of Sir Hugo, who, in a fit of enormous Pique, publicly imputed that

Squire George purposely and habitually persecuted Sir Hugo's Warcoombe Tenants—through the Necromantical Agency of Squire George's Tenant, this same cunning Woman Jane Thornwold. Which Asseveration was most ridiculous, but, as you might expect, nevertheless goaded Squire George into bringing Accusations of Slander agin Sir Hugo.

"Never one to mutely suffer such a Salvo, Sir Hugo therewith directly charg'd Jane Thornwold with practising Witchcraft, in Accordance with the Witchcraft Act of 1604. It was his Contention that should Jane be proved a Witch, Sir Hugo should not himself be guilty of Slander, for to tolerate a Witch to live violates Scripture, and as Squire George had tolerated her, this was tantamount to encouraging Witchcraft."

"Vile Sophistry of the most convoluted," says Sir Ed$^{m.}$, frowning.

"The worthy Judge must have been nigh apoplectic at such Pettifoggery," quoth Larkins.

"Indeed he was, and such an Obloquy as he deliver'd from the Bench I have never heard, but Sir Hugo, being of a most superstitious Constitution, insisted on his Rights," said Ambury. "For there was a Rumour, whether true or no I cannot say, to the Effect that the Curse of the Spectral Hound heretofore mention'd, had been laid upon his family by one of Jane Thornwold's Progenitors in the female line, either her Mother or else her Granddam—the mystical Art having been passed down from Mother to Daughter over the Generations, you understand. No, no—Sir Hugo would ne'er be gainsaid.

"And so His Lordship had no Choice, but to hear the Case. However, such was the Power of His Lordship's Invection condemning the Propriety of such a Trial, that Mr. Sneare declin'd to prosecute, being fearful of further Damage to his already battered Reputation, having been soundly trounc'd earlier in the Sessions by me. In the mean whiles, as you might expect, Squire George beseech'd me to deliver the Hag, as it was a capital Crime and should she be found Guilty, she must hang. There was great Danger."

"Fiddlesticks, Sir. Why the Defence must have been as easy as licking a Plate," says Sir Ed$^{m.}$, "there being no competent Adversary in the Proceedings."

Ambury: "But she would not forswear being a Witch, Sir."

"Then she was only to be kept from testifying."

"Her unpleasant and garrulous Character is unaccounted for by your Reckoning, Sir. She could not be silenced."

"But surely no Jury would pay Heed to the wild Ravings of a crazy old Woman."

"The Jury was hostile, Sir—as Sir Hugo had not been idle in Exeter. He had become a Friend to every Gentleman, hail and well-met, hearty and generous—and free with his Purse, especially in Ale-houses. And Devonshire, Sir, is not Cambridge, where Science and Reason circumscribe the Passions. He thus ensured himself of a sympathetic Jury."

"How is such Interference with the Course of Justice to be borne?" cries Larkins. "The man's a Rascal through and through."

Ambury: "Such are the Customs in those rude Parts. I fear, also, that he had learnt much from Squire George's example in the preceding Trial."

Sir Ed[m] snorts and says: "Very well. Then what Defence did you present?"

"You misunderstand, Sir Edmund. I did not defend. Contra, I prosecuted."

Were it silent when Ambury first announc'd his Adventure, 'twas nothing to the sudden Hush then, Stillness like unto Death, made more dramatick by succeeding Uproar, all Bears and Bulldogs.

Finally Thrawley by much bellowing and prodigal Gesticulation restores a Semblance of Calm and Rectitude, and he says, choaking with Passion, "D—n it, man, you don't mean to say that you prosecuted the poor old Bat?"

"The Evidence, alas, was overwhelming," Ambury replies with a small cruel Smile, "even out of her own Mouth. Villagers severally testified that they had been caused to vomit Pins and Needles after incurring her Ire, and produc'd crude Dolls she had purposed for Curses and Maledictions, stuff'd with Herbs, the crack'd Bones of Wrens and Blackbirds, and the unwholesome Dust of decrepit Gravestones, and the Witnesses related divers Afflictions occasioned thereby, exhibiting such Boils and Sores and scabrous Rashes as she had severally inflicted upon 'em. And also the Cows of any who had offended her yielded not Milk, but a pale, thin and unwholesome Liquor, until such Time as she received Redress for their Offenses."

"Squire George must have been much enrag'd," says Thrawley. "Did he not ask you to deliver the Crone, not put her Neck in the Noose?"

"Of the Squire, I have for the present Nothing to say," says Ambury, now openly smiling, eyes gleaming like the very D—l, "but we now come to the Crux of the Matter. These Events transpir'd at Midsummer. The most difficult Task in the Trial was one of timing, for it was imperative that the Jury deliver their Verdict on Saturday morning, but that His Lordship not pronounce Sentence until Monday."

"Thus providing you with the entire Week-end—but to what Purpose?" asks Easton.

"Why, the Fact of it being the Week-end was entirely coincidental," Ambury says. "Surely you must guess the true Reason for the Delay."

"I observe that you have not told us the Verdict," says Sir Ed$^{m.}$, methinks somewhat sullen, "but it takes no Genius to divine that you did not prevail, for had there been a Conviction, we should all of us have learnt of it—such a Circumstance would have been justly Infamous, as we inhabit a Rational Age, where the Light of Reason guides our every Action. Therefore the Judge's Sentence could not have been in it—for I have just prov'd that there was no Sentence. Tell us therefore somewhat of the Defence, and how you were defeated."

"But you are mistaken," says Ambury. "She was found Guilty, as I had always designed."

Blast and D—nation and Hell-fire. Penelope has found me. Never was wise Socrates tormented so by shrewish Xanthippe, nor proud Jason by foul Harpy. More anon.

Tuesday, April y$^{e}$ 21, 1750
Theobald's Row, London.

Penelope ill. Braked violently mid-morning this Day and last, losing all her Breakfast, but not, at least, regorging Needles and Pins. Methinks it due to too many Oysters, for which she has recently developed a great Craving. Rebuked Bessie her Maid for calling all Men blind Fools and vain Idiots, especially Husbands. Would dismiss the Trull, but P will not hear it, calling her Godsend and Angel, and when I broached this Intention, P said most waspish, "But did you not long ago tell me that the Truth is a Defence?" and forbade it.

D—n it All to Hell!

Summon'd the Chymist, who after having examin'd my Wife told me such Things pass, and dos'd her with Ginger, and then gaz'd upon me, amus'd as if I some snotty Brat. But for now Peace reigneth.

Ambury, his Story cont'd:

"And how could she be found guilty?" demands Sir Ed$^{m.}$, "How on such Evidence? The Vomiting of Pins and Needles has long been known as a Species of Fraud, even by so credulous a Daemonologer as King James himself. And Dolls, I ask you, Dolls, D—n me! Are we to ascribe evil Powers to mere Dolls on the

Words of a Madwoman or a bevy of feculent Villeins? And have not Cows failed to provide Milk when they had no Grass? Did I not hear you claim that the Ground was not fecund in those parts? Or do you say that you yourself believed her in League with Lucifer?"

"It matter'd not one whit what I believ'd, Sir Edmund," says Ambury. "'Twas a matter of the Law, which I have sworn to uphold, as have we all."

"But how could you have agreed to prosecute such a perfidious Charge," says Thrawley, "knowing, as you must have done, that the Law was itself about to change, concerning the Prosecution of Witchcraft?"

Much Noise.

"At last, at last—" Ambury says, but the Din too great, finally he jumps up on the Wash-tub, attempting to pacificate th'Assembly with his arms, after which somewhat Quiet repris'd.

"At last, someone hath put his Finger upon the relevant fact," Ambury says. "For I told ye Jane Thornwold had been charged under the Witchcraft Act of 1604—but this was the Year 1736! Furthermore, it was Midsummer of the year 1736, as I have also inform'd ye."

"I have no Idea what the D—l he is talking about," Easton says to me, and yawns. "Wake me when 'tis over."

"What he is talking about is the Witchcraft Act of 1735," says Thrawley, "in which the Penalty for practicing Witchcraft was chang'd from Death, to Imprisonment for one Year without Benefit of Bail or Mainprize, and also to be plac'd in the Pillory for an Hour once ev'ry Quarter during the Sentence, and also to surrender a Surety to the Court in Guarantee of good Behaviour. It took effect in the Year '36."

"In the Summer of the Year '36," Ambury points out. "I must not let Jane Thornwold be tried under the new Statute—she would never have surviv'd the Bridewell, let alone the Contempt of the Publick in the Pillory, and I had been charg'd with delivering her."

"I cannot see that having her convicted to hang is the more merciful," says Sir Ed$^{m.}$.

"That is why the timing was so critical—she must be convicted on Saturday, June y$^{e}$ 23, for the new Law was to take effect the next Day, y$^{e}$ 24, which, being the Sabbath, precluded the Court from being in Session," Ambury says. "Then on Monday, y$^{e}$ 25, all that needs be done is to present a Motion for Habeas Corpus."

"G-d's Teeth, but I do not follow, Ambury. What was to prevent his Lordship from simply imposing the lesser Penalty, she being found guilty?" asks Larkins.

"Precisely because she was guilty, Lark," says Ambury. "According to the Act of 1604, following the original Act of 1541, 'twas a Felony to practice Conjuration, Witchcraft, Enchantment or Sorcery; or to consume any Person in his Body, Members or Goods; or to provoke any Person to unlawful Love; or for the Despight of Christ, or Lucre of Money, to pull down any Cross; or to declare where Goods stolen be.

"But the Act of 1735 outlawed the *Pretense* of practicing Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, or Conjuration, and furthermore forbade any Prosecution, Suit, or Proceeding, against any Person or Persons for Witchcraft, Sorcery, &c., or the charging another with any such Offence, in any Court whatsoever in Great Britain. Do you now see?"

"I'm not certain," says Larkins.

"Jane Thornwold was convicted of Witchcraft on Saturday, but on Sunday that were no Crime—only the Pretense of same was so defined. And she could not be prosecuted for pretending to be a Witch under the new Law, because the Court had already established that she was an Actual Witch, and no Pretender."

"And so she must be set free by the Laws of England!" Sir Ed$^{m.}$ cries. "Capital, I must say! Jolly good."

"Which she was, that very Monday," Ambury replies.

"Monstrous clever and most instructive, Mr. Ambury," Thrawley says. "And so Squire George must have been very pleased."

"He was pleased that I had gotten his Tenant off, less so with later Consequences, but as I pointed out, those were his Instructions, and I followed them explicitly to the Letter."

"He was not happy, then? But why not?"

"Because it were more difficult for him to Proceed with his Suit for Slander agin Sir Hugo, which should have been as easy as kiss my Hand had she been acquitted. For even though Jane Thornwold be now free, yet she had been found to be a Witch by an English Court, which as I mention'd, was Sir Hugo's entire Purpose. But I, of course, was quite satisfied."

"Of course you were, being a Champion of Justice," says Sir Ed$^{m.}$.

"Not for that Reason, Sir Edmund—but for the Reason, that to Prevail in his Suit, Squire George requir'd the Services of a clever Attorney, viz., my Self—but that is a Story for another Evening."

And so more Wine.

☠☠☠

Wednesday, April y^e^ 22, 1750
Theobald's Row, London.

Care not a Fig for the Club tonight, D—n them for mere Puppies—Am fill'd with Amaze and Joy!—Penelope is with Child!

My Dear! My Darling! My Beloved! My Sweet Heart! How could I ever have thought her Shrew, or Virago, or Harpy, or Nag? Now is All explain'd! How shall I e'er repent of my Thoughtlessness—how shall I put Right so much which I made Wrong?

But am I to be blam'd for my Blindness? For I am dazzled by her Beauty, her soft Voice, her gentle Manner, her Terpsichorean Grace.

She is my Goddess!

I am quite bewitched.

EXPLICIT.

# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

*Photo by Myrna J. Yancey*

## Bent and Venting

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

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**The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.**

# NO. 40 BASIN STREET

## O'Neil De Noux

**Tuesday, 1 November 1887**

A mulatto holding an empty water jug with her head wrapped in a red tignon raced down the steps of the white mansion, stumbled past New Orleans foot patrolmen Concannon and Dugas, and ran screaming into the street. Dugas looked back at the mansion's front door as a white woman with rumpled blond hair and wearing a bright blue satin kimono came out and shouted, "Murder! Oh, my God, Murder!"

Jacques Dugas, his heart suddenly stammering, lifted his police whistle and let out a piercing screech, which echoed against the mansions along Basin Street.

"Put that away, laddie." Concannon patted his rookie partner on the back and added, "Let's see what's amiss first."

Concannon, who stood a good four inches shorter than Dugas's six feet, led the way up the stairs. Both coppers wore sky blue bowlers, matching sky blue shirts with silver star-and-crescent badges pinned to their chests, and navy blue pants. Concannon was sixty, a few weeks from retirement, his hair long since turned gray. Clean-shaven, Concannon's face was craggy and his green eyes not near as sharp as when he was Dugas's age—twenty-two. Dugas was lean and light on his feet with dark brown eyes and dark brown hair parted down the center. He wore a neatly trimmed mustache in an attempt to look older. The blond woman at the top of the stairs was tall, nearly six feet, and babbled as the cops arrived at the doorway. She bounced in place, pointing inside.

Dugas knew this was a brothel, like all the mansions along Basin, but it was the first time he'd been inside one. Basin Street was once the finest residential thoroughfare in New Orleans, built up by the Americans while the Mediterraneans—the French and Spanish, and later the Sicilians—occupied the old Creole Vieux Carrê. After the Civil War, in the chaos of reconstruction, brothels

Tim Foley

replaced the displaced rebel sympathizers, and the decent residents of Basin Street quickly moved across Canal Street into the Faubourg Ste. Marie.

Past the heavy oak front door, ornately carved and embellished with a thick pane of cut glass, Dugas followed Concannon up a huge spiral staircase to where four sobbing women stood. Their faces were streaked and smudged with the previous evening's paint, and each wore semi-sheer undergarments that hid little of their abundant endowments. Dugas tried not to stare as he passed, turning left to trail Concannon into a large bedroom. He stopped in the doorway.

A redheaded woman lay belly-up, sprawled across a huge four-post bed, her head dangling over the side. She was a small woman, her white chemise ripped, wicked gashes sliced into her pallid flesh. A sea of bright red blood glistened on the hardwood floor beneath the bed. There were at least six dozen yellow roses in vases around the room. Dugas felt his breakfast rising in his throat and fought to keep it down in the pungent atmosphere of blood and roses.

A head rose from the far side of the bed, taking the cops by surprise. It was a young woman in a white nightgown. Her long dark hair hung straight and her large blue eyes blinked at them before she reached over and began rubbing the dead woman's foot.

"What are you up to, lass?" Concannon moved to the bed.

"Rubbing the life back into her." She began crying. "I chafe the hands . . . and feet, the ankles and wrists."

Shaking his head, Concannon went around and lifted the young woman by her shoulders. "That'll do her no good now." He checked the victim's pulse, turned, and looked at Dugas. He guided the young woman to Dugas and told him, "Keep everyone outta the room. I'll fetch a doctor."

Dugas braced himself in the doorway as the young woman told Concannon, "There's a doctor upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"He's with . . . he's upstairs."

Another of the women led the way up the staircase as the wailing women began shuffling down the stairs to the first floor. Dugas caught another scent, perfume from the young woman standing next to him in her nightgown. She turned her eyes to him and wiped tears from them.

"Did you see what happened?"

She shook her head. "I was in my room. In the attic."

Dugas nodded to the body. "Who was she?"

"Kate. Madame Kate Jones. She owns this house." The young

woman put her hand on Dugas's arm. "You'll know her as Crimson Kate."

*Crimson Kate.* Dugas had heard the name many times before. The most infamous madam on Basin Street, it was rumored Crimson Kate's tenderloins were the most notorious in the nation. The madam traveled the world to secure her "female boarders," as they were listed in the New Orleans City Directory.

"What's your name?"

"Marie Adams. I'm a housekeeper." The blue eyes grew narrow. "I'm too thin to be a whore, although some have propositioned for me." A nervous quiver came to her lips, which were full and as sensual as those painted in bright red.

"My name's Dugas. Jacques Dugas."

Her eyes seemed to soften momentarily, then she looked back into the room and made the sign of the cross. "This is All Saint's Day. She passed on All Saint's Day." Her voice broke. "Would that be good sign? Would she pass easier into heaven?"

Dugas shrugged.

A tear rolled down her cheek. "Whores can go to heaven. Father O'Reilly told me so himself. At St. Anthony's."

A whimpering sound turned Dugas back to the room. He reached for his revolver, but hesitated, carefully stepping into the room. A rustling noise turned him to where the snout of a black and tan dog protruded from under the bed, followed by the dog's whimper.

Dugas took his hand from his revolver and went down on his haunches. The dog, still whimpering, crawled toward him.

"An eyewitness," Dugas said. "If only you could talk."

The sound of footsteps turned him back to the doorway. A tall man in his undershirt, black pants held up by suspenders, came into the room with a black doctor's bag. The dog barked and scurried back under the bed.

"Did I hear a dog?" Concannon asked when he stepped in. The doctor was already examining the deceased.

"Under the bed," Dugas explained. "If only he could talk." He noticed one of the painted women standing beyond the doorway. Her abundant breasts nearly exposed, she brazenly puffed on a cigarette and slowly winked at Dugas, who tried his best to keep from blushing. Marie Adams was no longer outside the room.

Concannon leaned close to Dugas. "Dr. Veasey here was just checking on one of the ladies upstairs."

Dugas whispered, "Did he hear or see anything?"

Concannon shook his head. "Of the murder, he says no. What else he saw or heard is not the prerogative of the police." He patted

Dugas's shoulder again. "Wait here, laddie, while I summon the rank and the bulls."

Not the prerogative of the police. None of the mansions here were under police control, thought Dugas. Coppers walked the streets to keep the violence down, but what went on in the Basin Street houses of pleasure was not their business. It all seemed to work well, rowdies who went beyond the bounds inside the houses were quickly and quietly dealt with, usually waking up in nearby Congo Square with a headache, sans money and watches and whatever valuables they were foolish enough to bring along. Gentlemen were welcomed, of course—doctors, lawyers, city officials, and police rank. Dugas had heard that a gentleman, upon first visiting Crimson Kate's must present credentials of identification and credit. Randy youngsters rarely made it through the door.

Murder, on the other hand, was quite infrequent.

Dugas looked around the room. It was lavishly decorated with two thick sofas, a delicate-looking armoire, and a huge mirror with a gilt frame above the mantel. French lace hung from the mosquito bar above the bed. New-fashioned window screens adorned each window. An elegant gold clock on the marble mantle ticked nine A.M. Dugas noted nothing was overturned in the room. The violence had been confined to the bed.

Light footsteps turned Dugas around. Marie was back, a look of consternation on her face. She moved to Dugas like a furtive mouse. "Monsieur, I must tell you our man Fancy is in the kitchen with blood on his hands and arms. They are attending him."

Dugas looked back at the doctor. "I'm closing the door, sir. No one is to enter except the police. Do you mind waiting while I attend to an urgent matter?"

"Not at all." The doctor yawned.

Marie led the way down the staircase. Dugas had to squeeze through the ladies whose different perfumes were so strong they caused him to sneeze. One brazen hussy pinched Dugas on the backside as he passed.

"His name is Fancy?" Dugas asked as they rushed through a front parlor filled with stuffed sofas in brocade, thick Persian rugs, and dark velvet drapes.

Marie nodded without looking back. As they passed through a dining room, Dugas nearly paused. They circled a mahogany table that could sit twenty. Two huge crystal chandeliers above; atop the table, flowers floated in bowls of water.

Stopping before the next doorway, Marie pointed through it. "He's in the kitchen."

Dugas went straight in and found the mulatto woman with the red tignon around her head. She was sitting at a kitchen table, dressing the wounds of a smallish, light-skinned mulatto man. His eyes saucered when he saw Dugas and trembled as the woman wiped blood from gashes on both arms. Tears welled in the man's eyes.

The mulatto woman scolded him to keep still, then noticed Dugas in the doorway, leaned back in her chair, and said, in French, "Don't hurt him. He's slow in the brain. He didn't mean no harm."

Dugas's hand moved back to his revolver, but he didn't pull it as he stepped into the kitchen, which smelled of grease and cooked eggs. He asked the smallish man his name.

"Francois," said the man. "Francois Laval. They calls me Fancy because I tickle the ivories." Laval spoke in excited French, stood all of five two, couldn't have weighed more than one-thirty. His chocolate brown eyes were large, even when they weren't ovaled, his black hair close cropped. He was shirtless and wore tight-fitting tan slacks that were blood splattered.

"What happened to your arms?" Dugas asked.

The tears were back and Laval began crying.

Dugas didn't realize Marie had left him until she stepped back into the doorway with Concannon and two detectives. Dugas recognized the lead bull, Detective Lieutenant James Gray, who also stood six feet tall, weighing in at two hundred twenty pounds at least, with light brown hair and a full beard.

"What's all this?" Gray demanded.

Dugas explained, still watching Laval as the man's face stiffened, expecting the inevitable. Gray asked Laval his version of what happened.

"I got cut," Laval said in wavering French. Dugas translated.

"What happened to the weapon?"

"Weapon?" Laval asked in French. So frightened, the man nearly collapsed.

An angry Gray asked, "You speak English?"

Laval managed to nod. "A leetle."

"Was it a knife? Razor?" Gray towered over the small man, who looked to his feet.

Laval whispered the word, "Knife."

The second bull edged Dugas back into the dining room with Concannon. Marie took Dugas's sleeve and asked, "Did he do it?"

Dugas shrugged just as the second bull leaned out and said, "You two go outside and handle the crowd. Put what you saw and heard in a report for us before your day ends."

Concannon led Dugas outside. While the veteran sat on the stoop with his report book, writing down their observations, Dugas guarded the front steps of Crimson Kate's mansion, No. 40 Basin Street. He was surprised by the size of the crowd, which filled the street and the banquettes on either side. Most were women, most with painted faces, some wearing little, if anything. Dugas spotted a gentleman in a top hat ease out of an establishment across the street and pretend to be a passerby.

The sun beat down on Dugas and the breathless, humid air was thick as steam from a boiling pot. Awfully hot for November, which happened often in New Orleans. Dugas climbed up the stoop a few steps to try to catch some air. Concannon came down with Marie, who now wore a light blue dress and carried two glasses of iced tea.

"You're a bonnie lass," said Concannon as he took one glass, letting Marie pass the other to Dugas.

Concannon sat, notebook in hand, and told Dugas to repeat what the man in the kitchen had said to him. Dugas recited it verbatim and added his observations in the room, how it was not messed in any way.

"Which proves?" asked the veteran cop.

"There was no struggle."

Concannon shrugged and added it to the notes, as angry voices turned Dugas around to see three reporters shoving their way to the front of the crowd. Each one wore a derby with a press card stuck in the headband, each carried a reporter's notepad and pointed his pencil and shouted questions at Dugas and Concannon.

"Is it really Crimson Kate?"

"Was she butchered?"

"How many are dead in there?"

Dugas spotted a large man shoving through the crowd right behind the reporters. When he got close he yelled, "I must get through!"

The reporters turned in time for him to shove past them. The sandy-haired man stood about six four, weighing at least three hundred pounds. He wore an expensive gray suit, a yellow rose in his lapel.

Marie leaned next to Dugas's ear as the man extracted himself from the crowd and started up the stoop. "It's Monsieur Pierre. He's Crimson Kate's man."

Dugas stepped in front of the man, who had to stop short and almost tumbled into him.

"No one goes inside," Dugas said.

The big man looked at Dugas and wheezed, "I am . . . Pierre Troisville . . . and I—" He raised a bloody hand to wipe the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his suit. Dugas took a step back as the man raised his other hand, equally bloody.

"I—I—" Troisville wavered, reached for the railing, missed it, and fell straight back on the three reporters, flattening them. Marie ran inside for the doctor. It took the reporters a good minute to extricate themselves from beneath Troisville. One snapping up at Dugas, "Ya coulda helped!"

Marie came out with Dr. Veasey, now clad in a suit, who checked on Troisville, reviving him with smelling salts and getting the man up and into the mansion with help from two more bulls who'd just arrived. Dugas and Concannon were left to finish their iced teas.

At noon, the coroner arrived with two assistants carrying a gurney.

Marie brought refills some time later, but the policemen went without lunch that day, that infamous day when the biggest murder of the year visited Basin Street, filling it with a crowd that went for blocks. Dugas spotted vendors selling vittles at the far end of the crowd.

At two o'clock one of the bulls came out with a paper bag and showed its contents to the reporters, whose number had grown to thirteen. He showed them a bloody bowie knife found in the murder room. The knife had a nine-inch blade. Shrieks from the women in the crowd echoed along the street when he lifted the knife from the bag.

Marie pulled Dugas aside and told him it was Crimson Kate's knife. "She got it after the other murder."

"What other murder?"

"Happened before I came here," Marie explained. "Maybe ten year ago. Two men got in a fight inside and one was killed. The police gave Madam Kate the knife as a souvenir. She kept it under her pillow."

Long after the coroner's men took Crimson Kate's body out the back of the mansion, away from the crowd, three bulls escorted Francois "Fancy" Laval into a police paddy wagon that had worked its way through the crowd to the front of the place. The noise level rose as the wagon pulled away. People shouted obscenities, some threw rocks, tomatoes, and onions at the wagon.

When Lieutenant Gray emerged with Pierre Troisville, whose hands were heavily bandaged, Gray dismissed Concannon but surprised Dugas by saying, "You come along with me. And bring your report."

Concannon passed the report to Dugas and patted his shoulder. "Go along now. You'll probably learn somethin'. I'm too old to learn anything."

Marie gave Dugas a lingering stare as he departed.

Across Canal Street, near the corner of South Basin and Common Streets, hovered the hulking brick Central Police Station. Dugas followed the detectives to the Detective Bureau on the second floor and waited in the squad room while Lieutenant Gray and his men put Laval and Troisville in separate interrogation rooms.

"Take a seat," Gray said as he came back out. "Coffee?"

"Sure."

He led Dugas to a small table at the rear of the room where a coffeepot sat on a black iron stove. "We'll let them sweat a while in the rooms," Gray added, as he poured thick coffee into mugs, then led Dugas to his desk near the center of the squad room. The lieutenant kicked his feet up on his dark wooden desk and yawned.

"Well, Officer Dugas," Gray said. "We've good news and bad news on this caper. The good news—we got the killer. The bad news—we got two men accusing each other so we don't know exactly who killed the infamous Crimson Kate."

Dugas sat forward in his chair.

"I need you to talk with this Fancy Laval fella," Gray went on. "He speaks better French than English and since you're the lone Frenchie around here."

Dugas nodded and dug his notepad from his pocket, along with a pencil. "What did Laval say?"

Gray smirked. "Says he saw Troisville rush from Kate's room and tried to stop him from leaving. Troisville cut him and got away. Troisville says he found Laval standing over the body with the bowie knife in hand. He tried to stop the mulatto, claiming Laval was all bug-eyed and crazy. They fought furiously, as he put it, and Laval cut him and got away. Troisville said he tried to follow Laval out the back of the mansion but went dizzy, stumbled out the back door, and passed out. He then stumbled around to the front where he found you and your partner."

Dugas jotted furious notes, didn't look up as he asked, "Where was the knife found?"

He looked up and a glint came to Gray's eyes. "Back porch."

Dugas nodded as he wrote. "Troisville says they fought. Where?"

"Bedroom."

The young patrolman looked up from his notes. "But there was

no sign of a struggle in the bedroom. No blood dripped in the hall. Did you find any blood leading to the back porch?"

"Nope. We found blood on the porch and in the back yard."

Dugas furrowed his brows. "Then Laval's story sounds more credible, does it not?"

"Ha!" Gray slapped his knee. "My thoughts exactly. I heard you were a smart fella." He glanced over his shoulder. "Smarter than many of me boys up here, but don't mention it to them. We Irish don't like to be reminded that sometimes we're not the brightest bush in the forest." Gray chuckled at his own joke, leaned back and added, "There was a dog in the room. We took it downstairs and it licked Laval's hand and wanted to bite off Troisville's fingers. Not scientific, but maybe the dog was telling us something."

Fancy Laval's eyes were red and he looked ashen, his skin a gray pallor. Dugas handed him a mug of coffee and sat across from him at the small table in the tiny room, little more than a closet with a lone, high window on the wall away from the door.

Dugas asked in French if the man was in pain. Laval shrugged. Dugas placed several NOPD official statement forms on the table and said he needed to take a formal statement.

"You read English?"

Laval nodded and the statement began, all spoken in French, all written down by Dugas in English. Laval's story was simple and precise. He was passing at the bottom of the stairs and a "blood-curling" scream drew him up to Madame's room. He found Monsieur Pierre Troisville rushing from the room. They collided, at which time Troisville produced a large knife and struck at Laval, cutting his left arm but not badly. Laval fell back into Madame's room, saw her on the bed. He pursued Troisville, who was not as nimble afoot and caught him on the back porch, where Troisville slashed his other arm. Laval still managed to grab Troisville, and he struggled for the knife with the big man, cutting Troisville, who dropped the knife. Troisville kicked Laval and got away. Laval fell back into the mansion and tried to go up to check on Madame Kate, but did not make it past the kitchen, where he stopped to stem the flow of blood from his arms. And that was where Dugas had found him.

"Do you know why Monsieur Troisville would hurt Madame Kate?"

"They argued," explained Laval, "and often fought."

"Is there anything you wish to add or take away from your statement?"

Laval said no.

Dugas passed the statement to Laval to review, then sign. The man's hand shook as he signed the statement. Looking up at Dugas, he asked, "Do you believe what I say?"

"Yes. And more importantly, I think the lieutenant believes you."

Dugas led Laval out into the squad room and they both sat in chairs in front of the lieutenant's desk. Laval's leg quivered as he sat, and his fingers moved slowly back and forth as if he were playing a piano.

"Why did the woman with the tignon say you were slow in the brain?"

Laval looked at his feet. "The gentlemens talk down to me all the time, so I plays the part." Laval gave Dugas a sharp look with a hint of a smirk. "The dimwitted darkie. What they expect." Then the eyes ovaled and began to glisten. "Madame Kate never treated me that way. She knew I'm smart." He looked at his feet again.

Several bulls came into the squad room, ignoring Dugas and Laval as they moved to their desks, their voices bouncing off the walls. One smoked a stogie that reeked. Laval crinkled his nose as the man passed.

"You said you 'tickle the ivories,'" Dugas said.

"Yessir. Ragtime. I get the joint a jumpin'." A slight smile came to the mulatto's face. "They can't keep still." He lifted his injured arms and let his finger fly. "It's like I'm pulling their strings like a puppet master. And they all smile." The man's English was suddenly clearer, not uncommon for Mediterraneans to hide behind their language when dealing with cops.

Dugas was about to ask about Marie Adams when Lieutenant Gray and one of his bulls came out of the other interrogation room and headed straight for them. Gray's serious face changed as he approached and winked at Dugas and announced, "Bastard copped out. He just admitted everything."

Laval began crying, hands rising to cover his face.

"Why'd he do it?" Dugas asked.

Gray plopped into his chair. "Says she attacked him with the knife. It was her knife. Says Crimson Kate had an hellacious temper. Not surprisingly, she was Irish."

"We gave Kate that knife," said Dugas.

"We did *what?*"

"Apparently there was a murder at No. 40 Basin Street ten years ago. Two men fighting. We gave Kate the knife after."

Gray looked at the ceiling. "I think I remember the case. My captain handled it." Gray smirked. "He kept it quiet. The killer was related to the mayor or some alderman."

He nodded to Laval, who was wiping his face with a handkerchief now. "He give you a good statement?"

Dugas passed the statement to Gray, who glanced at it and told Laval, "We'll get you back home. Don't leave town. We're going to need you to testify in court. Understand?"

*"Oui."*

Gray looked at Dugas. "Want to come to the postmortem in the morning? I'll clear it with your captain."

"Yessir."

"Good. You might learn something."

That night, as Dugas tried to fall asleep, he kept seeing Marie Adams's face. Those blue eyes stared back at him as he traced the sleek lines of her face, the long straight hair, the full lips. He imagined running his hand along the side of her face, gently kissing those lips, pulling her close. There was something alluring about Marie, a hint of innocence in a place where innocence was a rarity. He envisioned her as vulnerable, and imagined rescuing her. From what, he had no idea. Yet he knew this woman was not vulnerable. She was strong, with a will to survive.

He wanted to know Marie Adams but felt he never would. What could he offer her? Living with him in the small Creole cottage he shared with his elderly aunt? Could any woman who'd seen what she'd seen, the dancing, the nightlife, could a woman like that be content to live in a tiny house in the small neighborhood of Faubourg Marigny?

It took a while for sleep to come, and when it did, it was a fitful sleep, interrupted by dreams of a bloody knife, of women screaming. Then just before waking, he dreamt of sitting together with Marie beneath an oak at the city's first modern park, Tivoli Gardens. Gentlemen in top hats and women in the finest dresses walked the Tivoli promenade, while others meandered in small boats along Bayou St. John. Marie had her eyes closed, her head tilted back with the sunlight on her face, giving it a soft, warm glow. Dugas moved his face close to her and they softly kissed.

Dugas woke to a stammering heart and sat upright in bed. The gray dawn light filtered through the small window over his bed. He lay back, hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and reached for that vision again.

**Wednesday, 2 November 1887**

On All Saint's Day, Catholics celebrated the saints, known and unknown, according to Pope Urban IV, who formalized the commemoration in the thirteenth century. In New Orleans, people

flocked to the aboveground cemeteries, the little cities of the dead, to clean and decorate the family tombs with garlands and bouquets as they visited the deceased.

On the day after, All Soul's Day, Catholics filled the churches to pray for the souls of the departed who had not atoned for past transgressions before passing to the afterlife. Those souls were debarred from the beatific vision and lingered in purgatory as they were slowly cleansed until pristine enough to ascend into heaven. The faithful on Earth could help them by prayers and charitable deeds, and especially by the sacrifice of Mass, which was what drew Dugas's aunt, along with most of the women of the Faubourg Marigny, to Annunciation Church early Wednesday morning.

Dugas was drawn to another ritual—the postmortem exam of Crimson Kate. Lieutenant Gray was already at the morgue and stepped forward when the coroner began his examination of the cadaver. Four newspapermen were in the room, clustered in a far corner, each with a notepad in hand. Dugas, who had two cups of coffee and chicory that morning, felt the coffee churning in his belly as he fought through the acidic odor of chemicals and the stench of rancid blood and fetid human flesh.

Dr. LeMonnier, Orleans Parish coroner, a tall, thin man with thick glasses, black hair parted down the center, and a goatee, spoke to his assistant, a goulish-looking bald man with skin as pale as the body of Kate lying on the autopsy table. As the doctor took scalpel to the body, Dugas pressed back against the wall. He had never seen a human dissected before, but Lieutenant Gray seemed undisturbed by the process, hovering at the coroner's shoulder.

Dugas looked at Kate's face, white and flaccid in death, eyes partially opened. He'd heard that in death a face could be masked in a grimace or a frozen scream, but doubted that now. The dead were incapable of any emotion, any expression. They found eleven stab wounds on Kate's body, three fatal, punctures of the lung, heart, and the large blood vessels leading from the heart. It sickened Dugas to see this pretty woman, an object of so many men's longing and daydreams, as he'd dreamed of Marie, so cruelly extinguished and now so callously eviscerated.

"You're to come with me tomorrow morning," Gray explained as he led Dugas out of the morgue. "She's to be laid out at her mansion first and the funeral at three o'clock."

"Do I stand guard over the coffin?"

"No. I want you and me bulls to mingle in the crowd. Find out whatever you can about this Troisville and his relationship with Kate. I feel it was tumultuous and we canno' let a slick defense lawyer twist the story around sos Kate's the aggressor."

Dugas knew what that meant. Louisiana law, based on the Code Napoleon, clearly stated the aggressor cannot claim self-defense. If Troisville could claim Kate attacked him with her knife, he might get off. If, however, Troisville was the aggressor, as Dugas was certain, and there was a pattern to his aggression, the police needed to know that.

"Fancy Laval says they argued often, even fought," he told Gray as they returned to the Central Police Station on a streetcar. Gray put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Exactly. Wear your uniform tomorrow. You're not a bull yet, but you're thinking like one."

That evening, over a thick bowl of shrimp bisque, Dugas's aunt scolded him for not going to Mass. "You should be ashamed of yourself for not praying for your mama and papa."

He went to church as six o'clock mass ended and sat in the hot, stuffy church, the strong scent of incense pervading the atmosphere. He said ten "Our Fathers" and lost count of the "Hail Marys," but had trouble not seeing Kate's disemboweled body when he closed his eyes.

That night he tried falling asleep with a vision of Marie, but instead his mind floated between two dreams. The first was of a girl named Minonette who used to live down Mandeville Street. Bright green eyes and light brown hair, Minonette was but a teen, a few years older than Dugas. He'd been smitten with her, it had hurt to watch her and not touch her hand or run his fingers through her long hair or kiss her. Then she moved away.

The second dream was of a storm raging in dark waters, of a ship tossed on the high waves, of masts snapping and sails flailing, of people screaming as the ship lurched and was capsized by a tremendous wave that drew the ship and its terrified passengers, including Dugas's parents, into the murky depths of the Gulf of Mexico.

Dugas woke with a start. It took a long time getting back to sleep.

**Thursday, 3 November 1887**

Dugas wore his newest uniform, neatly pressed by his aunt, the light blue shirt crisp and starched, the pants with a sharp crease. He'd gotten up early to spit-shine his shoes, and he avoided dirtying them on the way to Crimson Kate's mansion. The crowd outside was even bigger than the day of the murder. Dugas had to push his way through, almost losing his bowler twice before arriving at the steps where Concannon stood with three other coppers, keeping the crowd away from the door, including a pushy host of newspapermen at the front.

"Well, laddie, the lieutenant said to send you in."

"Inside?"

Lieutenant Gray was just inside the doorway with two of his bulls. He nodded to Dugas and spoke in a low voice. "Kate's will indicated only essential police. Quite specific about her funeral, in the event of her demise. Only women can view her body. We have to stay back here out of the way."

The parlor was filled with about forty women. Dugas spotted the open coffin against the far wall, but couldn't see inside.

"Why no men?" Dugas asked. "Seems odd."

One of the bulls snarled, "Laddie, we're standing with forty sporting women in the fanciest brothel in town and you're talkin' odd?"

Gray shook his head. "Isn't odd at all, when you think of it. She didn't want any man remembering her like this." The door opened behind Dugas and two reporters eased in. Gray held up his hand and told them, "This is as far as you go."

"We can't see the body up close?"

"No. And you got five minutes."

The newspapermen began writing furious notes as Gray explained to his men, "Kate said newsmen could come in, two at a time. And like us, they must remain in the foyer."

The strong smell of cut flowers, especially roses, filled Dugas's nostrils. Overpowering, combining with the scents of strong perfumes, they almost made Dugas's eyes water as he gazed into the parlor. The looking glasses were all covered with white silk, not linen, as was the custom. The room was filled with flowers in huge bouquets.

"The will," Gray continued softly. "This house and property are valued at ninety thousand dollars. Left to Crimson Kate's sister, Clara Kilcooley." Gray nodded to a tall blond woman dressed in all black. Dugas recognized her as the six-foot woman who'd come out of the mansion shouting, "Murder!"

"Kate's maiden name was Katherine Kilcooley," said Gray. "Married a man named Jones for a short while. She's as Irish as they come. We come." This brought a huff from one of the bulls. Gray ignored him. "All in all, Crimson Kate was worth well over three hundred thousand in properties, owning two more houses along Basin, nearly fifty thousand dollars in jewelry, and a hundred thousand dollars in cash in nearly every bank in town."

"Ill-gotten gains," said one of the bulls with a sardonic smile.

"The wealth of pleasure," Gray went on with a smirk, "or is it the pleasure of wealth?"

Dugas barely recognized Marie Adams as she moved from the gathering of women straight for him. She looked angelic in a white satin dress, hair pinned up on each side with pearl bar-

rettes, delicate white baby's breath decorating her dark hair, those large blue eyes staring at Dugas as she approached. A hint of rouge adorned her cheeks, just a hint, a light brushing of red lipstick on those full lips, Marie looked older and yet still young and so damn pretty. Dugas felt his heart stammering as he realized why she wore white.

For a long, breathless moment, he knew he would never walk in the park with this girl, never hold hands at a soda fountain, never sip root beer floats or vanilla phosphates. Never run his hands along the side of her pretty face, or kiss her, or feel her silky hair in bed next to him. The crowd at the cemetery would see her dressed like this, the men who came to gawk at the burial of so famous a madam. Marie Adams was to be offered to the highest bidder. The acid in Dugas's stomach churned as Marie stepped up and smiled at him.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" she asked.

He shook his head and stared into her eyes, into the blue orbs that shined back at him. He tried to smile but it wouldn't come. Her eyes were telling him something, but his heart's stammering blotted it out.

A piano started up. Beethovan's *Moonlight Sonata* softly echoing off the thick draperies and the voices died away. Several of the women turned and Dugas saw Fancy Laval at the piano. Dressed in all black, his head bent down, Fancy tickled the ivories to perfection.

When Dugas looked back, Marie was gone.

Later, after the coffin was nailed shut, six pallbearers, all black men, including Fancy, slid the casket of Kate Kilcooley Jones into a black carriage and lined up behind the carriage to follow it over to and up Canal Street, passing the fine homes all the way to the cemetery. No priest would bless the coffin, but a Lutheran minister did and walked behind the pallbearers, just in front of Lieutenant Gray, his bulls, Dugas, Concannon, and the other coppers.

Only the bold came out on their porches to watch the procession, men mostly. Many likely clients of Basin Street. Dugas watched window curtains move as some peeked out at the passing procession in its three mile trek up Canal. Dugas looked over his shoulder and saw the crowd growing. Kids skipping along the banquettes beside the crowd. People waved from the streetcars passing on the neutral ground in the center of the widest main street in America.

By the time they turned up Metairie Road for the cemetery, Dugas saw that the procession ran a good six to eight blocks. Incredible. A host of carriages had pulled in behind the walkers,

each carriage decorated with flowers.

Gray eased over to Dugas and said, "Only in New Orleans."

How many times had Dugas heard that expression?

Gray positioned them well at Metairie Cemetery, near a stone sepulchre with steps where they could see over the gathering at the simple cement crypt where Crimson Kate was to be buried. The pallbearers drew the casket from the hearse and carried it to the crypt, slowly sliding it inside before stepping away to allow the multitude to pass before the tomb was sealed. The minister's voice was too low for Dugas to hear, but the crying from the women nearest the tomb echoed off the crypts.

The sun was hot on Dugas's head and he looked up at the bright sky, billowy clouds overhead. When he looked back down, Marie Adams was facing him at the rear of the gathered women. Her eyes blurred with tears, she smiled at him, lower lip quivering, then turned back to her sisters.

Gray edged closer, bumping against Dugas as he said, "Pretty lass." He let out a sigh. "Too bad, however."

Dugas nodded, looked away and spotted a young pickpocket using a razor to neatly slice the coat pocket of a heavyset dandy at the rear of the crowd and lift a wallet. Moving their way, the brazen pickpocket, who stood about five-five, weighed maybe a hundred pounds, pretended he didn't see the coppers. Dugas could have easily stepped out and tripped him. But seeing the heavyset dandy twirling the edge of his mustache as he leered at the women, Dugas did nothing. The pickpocket slipped into the crowd and disappeared.

As the service ended and the people began to leave, Gray led the coppers into the crowd to talk with the women about the stormy relationship of Crimson Kate and the man who'd killed her. Dugas found the woman with the red tignon right away and discovered she was called Callie.

Oh, yes, they fought often. Sometimes blows were exchanged. Who started the fights? Both. Did Troisville beat up Crimson Kate? Yes and she beat him up too, but his punches were stronger. On two occasions Kate needed medical attention. Dr. Veasey again. Callie was nervous and in a hurry to join Clara, Kate's sister, and the others before they returned to Basin Street.

Dugas went to advise Lieutenant Gray what he'd learned when he spotted Marie talking with a portly man. As he drew near he realized it was the man the pickpocket had clipped.

"Of course, darling," the man was saying as Dugas eased up behind him, "but you have the most marvelous eyes, Caribbean blue, like the waters along the Florida Straits."

Marie blushed and tried backing away but the man grabbed her wrist and said, "Don't be so reticent to converse, my little flower."

Dugas stepped around him and said, "Miss Adams, I would like to have a word with you."

The man dropped Marie's hand and stepped back, a smile on his face, although the look in his eyes belied his anger.

"I am conversing with the young lady," he said.

"Not anymore." Dugas stared down into the man's beady eyes.

"I'll have you know I'm—" The man caught himself.

"Sir?"

"I—I—" the man flustered and tugged at his tailored jacket.

"What you are, sir, is a man with a missing pocket." Dugas pointed to the man's coat pocket.

"My God. I've been burgled!"

"You mean robbed." Dugas raised his notepad. "I'll be happy to file a report for you. I'll need your name and address."

The man, steaming now, glared around at the thinning crowd and snarled, "No. Nothing in writing." He stormed off.

Marie had a mischievous gleam in her eyes when Dugas looked back at her. Those blue eyes were bright with excitement. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were jealous," she said.

Dugas said nothing, but gave her eyes a lingering look.

"You can't be jealous." She patted his chest. "It isn't allowed in any establishment on Basin Street." She pirouetted to leave and he had to call out to her to ask about Crimson Kate and Troisville.

Backing away, she added, "Later. Come speak with me later."

Dugas never got the chance. When he told Lieutenant Gray the information from Callie, Gray said he and his bulls would discreetly interview Marie Adams and the other girls of No. 40 Basin Street.

**Friday, 4 November 1887**

Cold weather blew into New Orleans, where autumn rarely visited. The heat of summer would vanish in a day, replaced by a miserable wet cold, which caused Dugas and Concannon to don navy blue jackets as they walked their usual beat along Basin Street, from Canal all the way to Esplanade Avenue and back through the edge of the French Quarter, stopping for lunch at Thelma's Café on Rampart Street.

"This weather will cool things off on Basin Street," said Concannon as they settled at a corner table with bowls of filé gumbo.

Dugas removed his jacket in the warmth of the café, amid the strong scents of spicy gumbos and cooked cabbage, an odd mixture.

Both smells had to compete with the beer served in generous amounts at the bar.

"I'm thinking about me retirement," Concannon said. "Visiting the old country. See me uncles in Coleraine and Ballycastle, just across the Mull of Kintyre from Scotland."

Dugas nodded as he ate the rich gumbo.

Concannon laughed. "You are still thinkin' about the bonnie lass? The one with the pretty blue eyes."

Dugas tried to stare his partner down but knew Concannon could see the truth in his eyes.

"A losing proposition," said Concannon. "There's no such thing as an old whore on Basin Street."

"What do you mean by that?"

Concannon stopped his spoon midway to his mouth, obviously because of the sharpness of Dugas's voice.

"Tis' a harsh life, lad. You know that. And don't be thinkin' of savin' them. I told you I tried that meself."

Dugas looked at the dark wall for a long moment, then went back to his gumbo. Concannon went on about his retirement and Dugas remembered the story Concannon told him on his first day walking Basin Street. She was young, like Marie, with dark red hair and fiery green eyes, according to Concannon. He snatched her from a house near the end of the line, married her, and put her up in a place in the French Quarter, only she went back to Basin Street. For years, Concannon would see her, resting out on the front porch of bigger houses as she became better at her trade, then he saw her no more. Never asked about her. Never wanted to know.

On their way back along Basin Street, Dugas tried not to stare at Crimson Kate's, but he did glance. Concannon waited until they were past before chuckling, "You are acting like you're in an Irish ballad."

That drew a wan smile from Dugas who'd complained many times when Concannon took him into an Irish tavern where tenors would sing syrupy songs of lost love. How many times had Dugas told Concannon he would yank out his hair if he had to listen to the sad tale of the lass from Killarney, taken so young by the angels, or the even sadder tale of the sailor from Cork and his bonnie lass who was swept into the sea as she waited on the rocks of Donegal Bay for him to return to her?

**Thursday, 24 November 1887**

The weather moderated the following week and by Thanksgiving there was no need for jackets.

The accused murderer captured the attention of the voracious

press, who concentrated on the stormy relationship between Crimson Kate and Pierre Troisville. Investigating their pasts, the men of the Fourth Estate outdid one another as they slowly painted the madam as a monstrously vile villain who used young women to prey upon rich men, who were defenseless in warding off the charms of so many willing sirens.

Troisville was a pillar of society before his debasement. Son of a church deacon who died at Shiloh, Troisville's mother still lived in a small uptown cottage. Troisville attended Jesuit Boy's School before receiving a theology degree from St. Ignatius College in Chicago. He became a brother, Society of Jesus, teaching for five years before meeting Crimson Kate at a carnival ball. Smitten by the lovely madam, Troisville gave up everything for her. Only the French-language newspaper *L'Abeille* pointed out that Troisville's lucrative business ventures in real estate was funded primarily by his winnings at gambling and shylocking.

By Christmas the cold was back, and a chilling wind ripped across the country straight from Canada, blowing over Lake Pontchartrain, dropping the temperatures into the thirties. Combined with the ever-present high humidity, it chilled the bones of men and women living in subtropical New Orleans.

Avery Concannon retired at the end of the year, little more than two weeks before the trial of the decade began in Orleans Parish Criminal Court. Although Jacques Dugas passed No. 40 Basin Street at least six times a day, checking the sporting women out on the front porch when the weather occasionally moderated, he never saw Marie Adams.

**Monday, 16 January 1888**

According to the three English language newspapers Dugas usually read, along with the French *L'Abeille*, the first carnival ball that year had been quite a success, the masque ball of Twelfth Night Revelers at the French Opera House ushering in the Mardi Gras season on January sixth. The great tragedienne Clara Morris concluded a most successful run at the St. Charles Theatre, while Modjeska stirred theatergoers in *Camille* with Maurice Barrymore as Armand. Such national luminaries had to share journalistic attention with the two most talked-about New Orleanians of the new year—Crimson Kate and Pierre Troisville.

The crescendo culminated with lavish cartoons adorning the front pages, Troisville depicted as a studious man with horn-rimmed glasses, dropping a book to reach a hand out toward a scantily clad Crimson Kate; Troisville strolling down Basin Street while Crimson Kate sticks a naked leg out to trip him; and the most salacious, a

half-page depiction of No. 40 Basin Street engulfed in the fires of Hades as it draws men and women into the fiery pit.

Captain Gray held up that particular front page to Dugas as he arrived outside the courtroom on the day of the trial. Gray smirked. "Came out yesterday morning and last night No. 40 had a line outside waiting turn."

Marie stood at the rear of the group of women waiting by the courtroom door. She turned to Dugas as he approached, a sad smile coming to her face. In a sky-blue dress, two matching blue ribbons in her long hair pinned back on the sides with blue barrettes, her face was not painted, only a hint of red lipstick on those full lips. She was the same . . . no . . . her eyes had changed. The youthful gleam of anticipation, of innocence, was replaced by a knowing maturity. She was such a beautiful woman, Dugas felt his heart pounding as he stopped two feet from her.

"Why, monsieur, you still take a girl's breath away in your crisp uniform."

Dugas just stared into her eyes. He hoped his eyes were saying what he could not, that at an elemental level their eyes were speaking, but the moment ended with a bustling of the crowd behind him.

Pierre Troisville, resplendent in all white, was led by attorney Alfred Gastinel in a light blue seersucker suit, a most distinguished criminal attorney, according to the *Louisiana Gazette.* They breezed through the gathered and strolled into the courtroom. Gray led the police contingent, three of his bulls as well as Dugas, to the right side of the courtroom, while Marie and the women went to sit on the left side of the room, which became immediately crowded.

District Attorney Ellis Finney, short and heavyset, with a full stock of silver hair, wore a light gray suit and red tie. Judge Roman addressed the jury of twelve men, which had been impaneled the previous day, warning them of the salacious information forthcoming in this case and advising them to quit reading the newspapers and forget what they'd read. As if that would work.

The first witness was the Orleans Parish coroner, Dr. LeMonnier, who described the wounds on Kate's body. He examined the bowie knife, confirming it as the probable murder weapon.

Dugas was the second called to the stand. He searched the audience and found Marie in the second row.

After stating his name and rank, his deep voice echoing through the hushed courtroom, Dugas told what he'd seen upon arriving at No. 40 Basin Street, describing the scene in minute detail.

"The deceased lay on her back," Dugas began, "across her four-

post bed, her head hanging over the side. Her nightclothes were ripped and gashes were visible on her body." He described the sea of blood glistening on the hardwood floor beneath the bed.

"The rest of the room," Dugas was quick to add at the end of the description, "was not disturbed."

Finney brought sheets of paper to Dugas and asked him to identify them. It was Fancy Laval's statement. Dugas was asked to read it aloud and did, giving the court Laval's claim to have heard a "blood-curling" scream, which drew him to Madame's room. Finding Monsieur Pierre Troisville rushing from the room, they collided, at which time Troisville produced a large knife and cut Laval's left arm. Laval saw the victim on her bed, pursued Troisville, and caught him on the back porch, where Troisville slashed his other arm. Laval struggled for the knife with the big man, cutting Troisville, who dropped the knife, kicked Laval and got away. Laval tried to go up to check on Madame Kate, but did not make it past the kitchen, where he stopped to stem the flow of blood from his arms.

Dugas finished reading and added, "And that was where I found him."

Finney was finished with him.

Alfred Gastinel, tugging down his suit vest as he rose, began his cross-examination with, "So you took no statement from Mr. Troisville, is that correct?"

"He spoke to me."

Gastinel was surprised.

"Did he make a statement to you?"

"He said he was Pierre Troisville. That was just before he fell."

"Fell?"

"On the steps outside No. 40 Basin Street. Shortly before noon. He pushed his way through the crowd, raised a bloody hand, and said he was Pierre Troisville."

"And what did you do?"

"I watched him faint, fall back on top of some reporters."

Snickers echoed in the courtroom. Judge Roman lifted his gavel but didn't bang it as silence returned.

"But you did speak with Francois Laval on the day in question."

Dugas said nothing and Gastinel quickly turned it into a question.

"Yes," Dugas answered.

Gastinel took in a breath and said, "I tender the witness."

Dismissed but instructed not to leave the courtroom, Dugas went back to sit with the coppers as Lieutenant Gray took the witness stand. His direct testimony was concise. Gastinel tried to chip away at Troisville's confession, but Gray could not be moved

from stating—he faced the jury when he spoke—how Troisville lied, first accusing Laval, then suddenly confessing and only as what seemed an afterthought, claiming self defense.

Gastinel seemed exasperated and gave up as the district attorney continued with his case, illustrating with witnesses and documents how Pierre Troisville profited financially from his association with the victim, and yes, how they argued and how he beat Kate, causing severe injuries.

The verdict seemed assured, thought Dugas, as the third day of trial began, but that was before Alfred Gastinel wove his intricate web of confusion, portraying Pierre Troisville as a dedicated Jesuit brother seduced into a life of debauchery by the infamous Crimson Kate. Troisville's frail mother took the stand, followed by a Jesuit priest and the auxiliary bishop of New Orleans, who attested to Troisville's character as an educator, bemoaning his fall into sin. Troisville was a good-natured good fellow without a temper. Apparently the city's new archbishop Francis Janssens didn't know Troisville, for which Dugas felt certain the city's top cleric was grateful.

When Auxiliary Bishop Pency described Crimson Kate as a spawn of Lucifer, the D.A. objected twice. "Kate's father was a deacon at Trinity Lutheran Church in New York City for the last twenty years of his life."

"I meant that in a spiritual sense," Pency explained, to which Judge Roman gently reminded the cleric this was a court of law and no place for speculation as to the works of Lucifer.

The next witness was Guido Pizini, owner of Pizini's Restaurant of Rampart Street, who testified of two incidents involving Kate and Troisville. On both occasions Kate was drunk, and attacked Troisville after hours of quarreling.

"*Si*," said the Italian, "she was always the *aggressore*."

Aggressor. As if Gastinel hadn't suggested that word to Pizini.

Three further witnesses came forward to paint stories of Crimson Kate's violent temper. Finally, on Friday, Gastinel brought the trial to its climax by putting the defendant on the stand. Through tears, Pierre Troisville told of his tortured life, of his dedication to holy mother the church to his falling into sin with a most irresistible seductress. He tried, oh how he tried, to resist, but the flesh was weak.

Troisville told of the fateful morning, of Kate's tantrum, accusing him of keeping another woman, a quadroon of all things, in a shanty in Treme. When he denied the accusation, Kate came at him with the bowie knife she kept under her pillow. Troisville broke down twice, but managed to get through his story.

District Attorney Feeney went on the attack immediately on cross-examination, getting Troisville to admit to lying to Lieutenant Gray, admit his gambling and shylocking, and tell how he'd managed to amass sixty-two thousand dollars in three banks in the short years since his fall into sin. Troisville should have been on the stage, thought Dugas, as the man admitted his failings and seemed almost sympathetic, until Feeney asked about one Mollie Johnson.

Troisville became pale and evasive.

Feeney held up papers. "According to police records, you were arrested for the rape of Mollie Johnson last year, is that not so?"

Gastinel immediately objected and the judge took the attorneys into his chambers.

Dugas, sitting in back of the courtroom, sought out Marie's attention, but she didn't look around. Francois Laval did in his position behind the women of No. 40 Basin Street. His eyes met Dugas's and he shook his head.

Lieutenant Gray also shook his head. "It'll come to nothing, this Mollie Johnson incident."

"Why not?"

"She died of typhus shortly after, and the coppers who worked the case are no longer around to testify. Feeney just wanted to get it in front of the jury."

Feeney succeeded, only to have Judge Roman instruct the jury to disregard the information, since it could not be substantiated. Dugas hoped the jury had seen the guilt on Troisville's face.

**Monday, 23 January 1888**

Closing arguments commenced at ten A.M., with D.A. Feeney painstakingly laying out the facts of the case, telling the jury it must "disregard emotions, disregard sympathy and stick to the facts of the case."

"Pierre Troisville stabbed Kate Kilcooley Jones to death." He pointed out the disparity in their sizes, Kate a thin woman of one hundred and ten pounds and Troisville, six feet, four inches tall and weighing two hundred eighty pounds. "He was more than twice her size." Feeney pointed out the depth of the wounds in Kate's body, the huge bowie knife sunk to the hilt.

"Where is the self-defense in eleven stab wounds? If he slashed her once or twice, as he did Francois Laval, who stands five feet, two inches and weighs one hundred and thirty pounds, if he was able to escape Laval by slashing the man, why not with Kate? Why not? Because he murdered her with malice and unimaginable force." Feeney moved to the prosecution's table and picked up

Kate's chemise, held it up for the jury to see the rips and the blackish bloodstains.

"This was a frenzied attack. A most vicious murder!"

Gastinel chose to smokescreen the law, reading from the criminal code the definition of murder, justifiable homicide, excusable homicide, and self-defense. He laid out Troisville's life for them again and culminated with a simple statement, "If you truly believe Pierre Troisville killed Kate, then where was the malice, where was the premeditation? The district attorney keeps screaming murder when he should be begging you to find a lesser degree of homicide, while I simply ask what would you do in Troisville's place? This is a case of self-defense, not just for a man's life, but for the life, the sacred soul of our city, lest we all are pulled into the pit of sin that is Basin Street."

Feeney had the last word with the jury, as custom, but his rehashing of the prosecution's case lacked fire. Dugas sought out Marie again in the hall after the jury was sent to deliberate, but the women rushed off for lunch. Gray led the coppers to a nearby tavern They'd just finished eating when a bailiff came in and announced the jury had returned.

The courtroom was crowded, walls lined with standing people. Dugas watched the jury file in, held his breath as the verdict was read. It took a full second to register and the crowd gasped in unison.

"Not guilty."

Troisville, who'd been standing, collapsed into his chair. The sound of rushing feet as the newsmen scrambled out of the room was soon drowned out by the sobbing of women. Gray put a hand on Dugas's shoulder as both men stood.

"Justice isn't just blind," Gray said. "She's deaf, dumb, and downright insane sometimes." He led the way out with his bulls. Dugas did not follow. He waited as the curious eased out, watching the women of Basin Street, finally spotting Marie standing next to Kate's sister. Marie turned his way as he crept up the aisle against the throng.

Her face was streaked with tears, her eyes shimmered at him.

A quick movement caught Dugas's attention as a figure lunged at Troisville, now coming down the aisle. Francois Laval sank a large kitchen knife into Troisville's heart before anyone could move. Troisville looked down at the knife, quivered, and fell flat on his back.

The crowd separated, but Laval did not move. Screams bounced off the hard walls. Dugas stepped quickly up the open aisle and took Laval's arm. It was only after he'd manacled Laval's hands behind the man's back did the piano player seem to notice Dugas.

Ashen-faced, Laval looked at Dugas for a long moment before he said, "I loved her more than my life."

**Tuesday, 31 January 1888**

Although the hoopla surrounding the trial died down in the following week, business along Basin Street increased dramatically, as Basin became one of the first streets to get electric streetlights. The brothels glowed inside with radiant luster, echoing with vibrant music and raucous laughter from dusk to the gray dawn.

Dugas and his new partner, Lenny Lonegan, a burly man with a handlebar mustache and an Irish temper that solved many of the problems the duo encountered now on the evening watch, saw a dramatic increase of foot traffic along the street.

It wasn't long before rumors of apparitions echoed through the taverns as tales were told of gentlemen running from No. 40 Basin Street, most partially clothed, babbling about seeing Crimson Kate in her bloody white chemise. Some of the men were never the same, as the stories went.

Dugas thought of Marie often, wanting to pause at Kate's mansion and inquire of her, but that wasn't done on Basin Street. He hoped to see her out on the steps, but the fine ladies of No. 40 Basin Street rarely sat on the steps, as the ones at the end of Basin, showing their wares to attract customers. He thought of paying for an afternoon with Marie, taking her to dinner, strolling with her through the Quarter, but that would be more than three months' salary.

Sometimes at night, he thought of Marie's eyes and the fine lines of her face. But slowly the image faded, replaced by dreams of Kate gliding across her bedroom floor in her bloody chemise, arms outstretched to him. He hoped her ghost was haunting her mansion, embedding icy fear in the hearts of the men who came for the pleasures of the flesh.

**Monday, 27 February 1888**

Someone was out on the steps at one A.M. Dugas crossed Basin Street to No. 40 and saw it was Callie in her red tignon, her legs pulled up to her chest, her face buried in a kerchief as she cried. Lonegan huffed impatiently as Dugas went up to sit next to Callie.

"What is it?" he asked.

She looked at him, shook her head, and cried into the kerchief. He put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Callie. It's Officer Dugas. What's the matter?"

The door opened and Dugas looked up to see Dr. Veasey step

out with his bag. The doctor adjusted his derby as Dugas stood and asked, "What is it, doctor?"

Veasey seemed to notice Dugas for the first time. He took in a deep breath and said, "The word will get out soon enough. We must quarantine this place."

"Why?"

Veasey leaned closer and said, "Influenza."

**Monday, 5 March 1888**

They buried Marie Adams and two other girls from No. 40 Basin Street on Lundi Gras, the day before Mardi Gras. Jacques Dugas, in a new black suit, stood behind the mourners, up on the steps of a nearby sepulchre as the coffins were slid into the oven tombs next to Crimson Kate's.

It was a bright, crisp morning with billowy clouds in the brilliant blue sky whose color wasn't half as pretty as Marie's eyes. Black birds squawking in the background. Dugas imagined they protested the death of such beauty. He'd kept himself in check through the funeral, even while alone the previous evening after he'd learned of her death. But standing in the bright sunlight, he felt a tear roll down his face, felt his heart beating louder and louder.

It wasn't the short life of Marie Adams that drew the tears. It was for what might have been.

Mysterious meetings and readerly rendezvous are available in The Readers' Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

# SUICIDE BLONDE

## BRIAN THORNTON

Eddie opened his front door in response to my knock. "Murph!" he exclaimed. "Thank God!"

I took off my hat as I pushed past him and looked around the one-bedroom that my boss rented in Eddie's name. As soon as I crossed the threshold, I caught the overly sweet "day after" scent a guy gives off when he's processing alcohol out of his system. Living in Vegas, it's a smell you get used to pretty fast.

Eddie's home bore any number of the hallmarks of bachelorhood: Piles of laundry flung carelessly about, dirty dishes everywhere except in the sink. The view and the smell combined to leave a distinct impression of the place, and of the man who lived there. *My client.*

Now he faced me across about four feet, skin more pale than usual, eyes popping out of his moon face. The guy I was supposed to have in court at ten o'clock sharp this coming morning had a three A.M. shadow that contrasted all the more starkly with his ashen skin. His green sharkskin suit looked slept in. His breath made me long for a pack of Sen-Sen or BlackJack. The room was frigid the way places in the desert get only with air-conditioning, yet his skin glistened with perspiration.

"I hope I didn't wake you," he said.

"I fell asleep in front of the TV with Jack Paar, and you know it."

If he'd had a tail, he'd have tucked it between his legs. "Sorry."

"Yeah," I said. Then again. "Yeah . . . you wanted me, you got me. What's this all about?"

"She's next door," he said.

"Who?"

"My neighbor. She's next door. She's dead."

I whistled low and soft. I'd been on retainer with the outfit for a little over four years. In that time I'd represented its interests in front of the Nevada Gaming Commission and at Las Vegas City Council meetings countless times. The fact that Howard Rappaport had tapped me to represent him personally just a

year or so previously had initially seemed a testament to my upward mobility within the organization. Then Howard had explained that his real concern was his brother Eddie.

In the thirteen months since Howard Rappaport set me the task of cleaning up after his older brother, I'd kept Eddie Rappaport out of jail, which was no mean feat, considering. I'd run up a mountain of legal fees and Howard had paid them all. I'd settled Eddie's bar tab, and I'd paid his bookies off, but I hadn't had any dealings with corpses. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

He headed for his kitchen. "I need a drink."

I caught up to him just as he opened one of his cabinets. I slammed it shut. He barely got his hand out of the way. "Did you have anything to do with your neighbor getting dead, Eddie?"

He turned around, mouth open, his face a study in long-lost nerve. "I dunno."

"I'm your lawyer," I said. "What you tell me is privileged. If you had something to do with this, or even if you just know something and don't want to say, now is the time to tell me." Eddie avoided my gaze for answer. I made a point of getting between him and his liquor. "Black out?"

He nodded.

I leaned against his kitchen counter, rubbing the back of my neck. "You're in a real spot."

He looked over my shoulder at his cupboard. "I know. And me with the court thing coming up. Howard's gonna flip. What am I gonna do?"

"Don't start that again," I said. "Let me think a moment." I took him by the elbow, led him back into the living room, pointed to his couch, and told him to grow roots there till I decided what could be done about his situation.

Howard would want to know about this. The question was how much would he want to know, and how much of this would he just want me to handle. Couple that with the question of how much my own safety, to say nothing of my license to practice law in the state of Nevada, dictated I should know, and it shaped up to be one knotty problem.

I paced while turning this over and over in my head. When I realized that I had been pacing, I stopped and looked over at Eddie. He sat there and fidgeted, his eyes on me. I sat in the armchair across from him. "How did she die?"

"I don't know."

"What do you know?"

"You want everything?"

"No," I said, unable to keep the disgust out of my voice. "I don't *want* everything, but I'd probably better have it, if I'm gonna decide what to do next."

"Okay." That put him more at ease, and he leaned backward on the couch.

"I came home from the Sands tonight about seven. Dropped a bundle on a pony I heard about over at Santa Anita, so I wasn't in a very good mood."

"I'm sure Howard won't be either, once you put the touch on him again for walking around money."

Eddie winced. "No doubt."

He sat there looking down at his expensive Italian shoes.

"Go on."

"When I walked up my steps, she was standing in her doorway in this slinky little nothing, and a satin-type robe to boot. We said hello, and she asked me in for a drink."

"She did this a lot?"

He shook his head. "This is the first time I ever saw her full-on up close. Never said more than 'hello' as we passed each other going opposite ways, and even that was more like seeing her out of the corner of the eye."

"And she just invited you in out of the blue."

"Yeah, said she could use some company."

"So you licked your lips and went right in."

Eddie didn't say anything to that, just looked longingly past me at the cupboard where he kept his courage.

"This woman have a name?"

"Told me to call her Brenda."

"Did she tell you anything else about herself?"

He screwed up his face like he was thinking. "She told me she was from Georgia. Had this little accent and everything, which is funny."

"Why is that funny?"

"Because when she moved in last month, I saw her around, you know, like I said, to say hello and all that. So I asked the super about her, and he told me he didn't know much aside from the fact that she was fresh off the bus from Minneapolis."

"And yet she had a Southern accent."

"Yeah, funny, huh?"

"Hilarious." I decided it would be better to get him up and moving around, so I said, "Is she still next door?"

"Yeah, I did just what you told me to. I ain't been back in there."

I stood, pulled on a pair of gloves I'd brought from my car, and retrieved my hat. "Let's go take a look."

He didn't want to go. I couldn't really say as I blamed him. Didn't matter what either of us wanted. There was no way I was going to talk to his brother, my boss, without making sure all the angles were covered. Howard paid me to be thorough.

Eddie had left the door unlocked, so we just went in. The living room was tastefully appointed in lots of the pale pastel colors favored by people who thought they should decorate their interiors to mirror the desert exteriors.

"Where is she?"

"Bedroom."

The glacial blast coming from the air conditioner had kept the smell down so far. Without it, out there in the Nevada Desert, she'd most likely have been pretty ripe. She was dressed in the short robe Eddie had described earlier, lying faceup, arms crossed and legs stretched out along her bed. I couldn't tell how long she'd been dead, but rigor had set in. I brushed her long blond hair away from her swollen face. She had a bluish tinge to her, and her mouth was open. I didn't see any blood.

I checked the rest of the exposed portions of her body for puncture wounds of any sort and found nothing. An impulse I couldn't explain made me take another long look at her face.

There was something in that bloated countenance, something about it, like I'd seen her before. Of course, in my line of work, with all of the people cycling in and out of Vegas, I'd felt that way a lot. So I didn't think too much of it.

What I did think about was whether or not Eddie had offed her, or whether he could be made to look right for the part, regardless of his level of actual involvement. After all, whole political careers are made from nailing guys like Eddie in order to get to guys like Howard, and my client had a very important date coming up with a certain grand jury in just a few hours.

So I began to make a close examination of "Brenda's" corpse: her robe, her naked body underneath it, her hair, her open mouth, beneath her crossed arms, and inside her clenched fists. I had to make sure that I'd taken the proper precautions before I made my next move.

Prying her arms apart and her fingers open proved difficult. I didn't know much about rigor mortis, but as stiff as she was, this gal had to have been dead a while longer than Eddie's story made it sound.

A couple of minutes of grunting and straining got her right hand open. Nothing. I started in on her left. I had her pinkie and ring fingers pried loose when I heard and felt something drop out from between them. It rolled off the bed and landed with a metallic

clatter on the Formica floor, then rattled around a bit before coming to a stop.

I picked it up and examined it. A ring. I'd seen it before too. On Eddie Rappaport's left pinkie. I began to sweat. My hand shook as I folded the ring into my handkerchief and placed it in my jacket pocket.

I closed the bedroom door and gave the rest of the place the once-over. I didn't mention what I'd found to Eddie, who followed me around the way a dog does when he knows you're about to feed him. The bathroom was clean and Spartan, lacking the usual feminine touches, except for some perfume. This Brenda had a fridge full of food, and the kitchen table still had the dinner dishes on it.

"What did you touch in here?"

"Well, my dishes, obviously."

I turned toward him where he stood out in the living room. "What else?"

He put on a thoughtful face. I was thankful that he'd had some time to sober up, otherwise this could have been a lot worse. "The phone when I called you. Doorknobs, kitchen table, end table out here."

I moved into the living room and kept poking around, trying to cover how unsettled I was. My gloves made for swift going, as I didn't have to concern myself with fingerprints whenever I needed to touch anything. While I did this Eddie filled me in on what he remembered of the rest of the evening.

According to him, the two of them had that first drink together, then another, and a third. Then she asked him to stay for dinner. By this time well on his way to dead-drunk and hoping to dine on something more than steak and potatoes, my boss's ne'er-do-well brother naturally agreed.

I wasn't being very fair to Eddie, though. Even stone cold sober he probably wouldn't have smelled anything fishy about an attractive woman going from barely saying hello in passing to throwing herself at him in the course of a single evening.

After dinner they moved to the couch. The last thing Eddie remembered was agreeing to an eighth (or was it a ninth?) drink between kisses. Some time later he woke in the dark, still on the couch. Wondering how long he'd been out, he started stumbling around looking for Brenda and calling her name. When he found her, he telephoned me.

"Think very carefully on this next one, Eddie," I said, as I looked around the living room for the woman's purse. "Were you ever in her bedroom before you found her in there dead?"

He pondered that one for a moment, then shook his head. "No."

I stopped looking long enough to ask him if he remembered whether this Brenda had a purse. He didn't recall her having one.

"Why?"

I spread my arms wide to take in the entire room. "Do you see a single photograph in this apartment?"

He looked around him, as if noticing for the first time that there were framed prints of landscapes on the walls, but that was it. Not a photograph in sight.

"I hadn't noticed."

I went into the kitchen and got a hand towel. Walking back into the living room, I tossed it to him. "Get busy wiping down everything you touched. If you're not sure, wipe it down. Guess there's no more putting it off. I'm gonna take a walk and call Howard."

He blanched. "Jesus. Does he have to know everything?"

I shrugged. "That's the way I work, and you know it. Howard pays me, and that's that."

"Oh, yeah, I know, I know, Murph." He started talking fast again, like he had on the phone, and when I'd first walked into his apartment. "It's just that, well, ya see, did you know that Howard's my kid brother? I'm the oldest."

I didn't have time for where I thought this was headed, so I went to leave. That's when he took hold of my arm and started to say something. I looked from his sweating face to my jacket sleeve and back to his face. He quickly let loose of his hold on me, but continued, "Okay, okay, take it easy. I'm just saying that it ain't right when a kid brother has to look out for the older one. It's supposed to be the other way around, ya know what I mean?"

"Yeah, Eddie," I said as I headed for the door. "I know what you mean."

"I've never been to Howard's house. I wasn't invited to the wedding. Never even met his new wife. I know what I am, and I know what that makes me . . ." He trailed off.

I didn't give him a chance to follow that train any further. "Just make sure you've got all of your prints taken care of before I get back."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I dunno. An hour. If I'm going to be longer, I'll call your place, so get your prints taken care of and get the hell out of here and wait for me to either come back or call. Get me?"

He nodded rapidly, several times. "I get you."

"One more thing, Eddie." I turned and looked at him again as I opened the door. "No booze while I'm out."

I thought he was going to argue with me. He took one look at my face and subsided. I wondered how plastered he'd be by the time I got done reporting in to Howard.

"Cripes, what a mess," I muttered as I descended the stairs.

I pulled my '62 Continental into a filling station on the corner of Eastern and Desert Inn, and used the pay phone there to call Howard's house. His new wife answered on the third ring. I said hello and asked for her husband, referring to him as "Mr. Rappaport." Howard and I stood on ceremony when others were around to witness it.

"Who may I say is calling?" Sleep made her Chicago accent thicker.

"Tell him it's Murphy."

"Is this important? What time is it? He's not in bed. I'd have to find him . . ." I heard rustling on the other end of the line. "Is this important?" she said again.

I assured her it was. She huffed and put the handset down. After a few moments, I faintly made out her calling for him.

Eventually he came to the phone and without greeting me said, "What is it, Murphy?"

"I can't sleep. Meet me for a drink?"

He didn't hesitate. "Sure. The Four Queens okay with you?"

"Twenty minutes?"

"Done," he said, and hung up.

Because the Hoover boys had started tapping phones left and right since the big fuss at Apalachin a few years back, Howard and I had a system we used when we needed to see each other outside of the normal routine. If one of us suggested we meet at the Four Queens, we met at Caesar's. If the California, then we'd go to the Aladdin, and so on. We also agreed to double our intended elapsed time till we met, so when I said twenty minutes, that meant I'd be there in ten. We figured he'd have a permanent tail anyway, but it was fun messing with the Feds, regardless.

The Strip flashed and winked and beckoned to me off in the distance down Desert Inn as I drove to Caesar's. It never ceased to amaze me what a difference the combination of black desert night, millions of lights, and all that wattage from the Hoover Dam made, because Las Vegas looked so small and ugly and shabby in the daytime. She used the night and all those bright lights like an over-age working girl uses a dimly lit cocktail lounge and a heavy coat of makeup to ply her trade.

Howard liked Caesar's. We didn't do any of the regular business there, and Howard liked that too. Most of all, Howard liked the

way the place was always hopping in the months since Sinatra took that angry walk across the street from the Sands and offered to move his act to Caesar's. Howard didn't really care to rub elbows with the Chairman and his pack, he just liked talking in places where the type of noise generated by their mere presence could cover our conversations.

I found Howard at a table in the back of the lounge when I walked in. He had already ordered for both of us, and the drinks arrived when I did. Howard tipped the waitress and I knew we wouldn't see her at the table again unless he made eye contact and motioned her over. That was how he worked. I dropped my hat on the seat next to me as I sat down across from him.

His hatchet face betrayed nothing as he said, "How bad?"

"A mess," I said.

"An ongoing problem, or a new headache?"

"It's your brother."

The angular lines of his face changed position for the first time. "What now?"

"I found this," I said as I unwrapped Eddie's pinkie ring from my handkerchief, "grasped in the hand of a dead girl that Eddie spent the evening with." I handed it to him.

"Drunk?"

I nodded. "Reeked of it when I got there just before three."

"Can this be fixed without me knowing anything else?"

"I don't know," I said. "After all, this is your brother. And then there's his testimony with the grand jury . . ."

"Okay, give it to me," he said brusquely. I did.

He sat impassively while I laid it out for him, facts only. Howard had an abiding aversion for knowing such particulars as names or locations. He thought that the less he knew about the "who" and the "how," the easier it would be at a later date to convincingly deny that he knew anything about the "what," the "when," and the "where," either.

So I forewent giving the girl's name, and began with Eddie's telephone call, going on from there. I also mentioned that the body I'd found was in full rigor, which threw off the timetable of Eddie's recollection of events. I wrapped up with my leaving him there to get rid of his prints while I filled my boss in on the situation.

When I had finished, Howard said, "Did you mention the ring to Eddie?"

I shook my head.

"Did he say anything about losing it?"

I shook my head again.

"Not even when you told him to give the place the once-over before leaving?"

"No, he didn't talk about it at all."

My boss sat staring at the ring for a few moments, rolling it back and forth from hand to hand. Eventually he pocketed it, and said, "It's a good thing I was home when you called."

"And up," I said coolly. I didn't ask why. If he wanted me to know, I'd know. Idle curiosity is not healthy in my line of work.

"The people from L.A. and Philly," he said. "You know these East Coast guys, they love doing this sort of thing at night. Ran late. We broke for dinner around three. I'd just gotten home when you called. In fact," he looked at his watch, "I'm due back over at the Sahara in half an hour."

I took a drink of my Boodles and tonic. "So no home cookin' tonight."

He almost laughed. "Hey, I'm a newlywed. Carolyn wants to know when you're coming over for dinner, by the way."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

Ordinarily, Howard Rappaport was the most decisive man I knew. That decisiveness was one of the reasons I liked working for him. If the current situation had involved anyone other than his brother, Howard wouldn't have volunteered anything about what was going on with either his new bride, or our associates from California and the East Coast.

He would have just told me what he wanted done, and I'd have done it. But this involved Howard's Achilles heel, his brother Eddie. So instead, we talked about his happy home while he tried to figure out our next move.

"Sure I do," he said. "Carolyn knows me, she knows what I do for a living. She wants to know all the boys who work for me too. She liked meeting you at the wedding."

"She didn't sound too happy to hear from me when I called."

"Her sister just moved out here, and she's been calling Carolyn a lot lately, always late at night. She probably thought that's who you were when you called."

"Sister's been annoying her, huh?"

"Yeah. They don't get along too well."

"That's too bad."

"You're telling me. Her sister's something straight out of the gutter. I can't believe they're even related. Carolyn can't stand her. Thinks she's trash."

For a fleeting moment I wondered whether Howard saw a parallel between his own situation with his brother and the one he was talking about between his wife and her sister. If he didn't see

it, it was because he didn't want to. Howard Rappaport didn't get where he'd gotten by being a stupe.

He sat silent for a moment, lost in thought. Then he roused himself, winked at me, and said, "And I think she was expecting a different sort of wake-up call, pally."

I let that go, allowing the silence to prod him toward some sort of decision. People walked past us nonstop. We drank for a bit. Howard lit a cigarette.

"Have we got a pocket cop we pay enough to trust with something like this?" he finally asked.

I thought for a minute. "Depends on what you want. If you're thinking of covering up, then having one of our cops call it in to Metro, maybe.

"If you're thinking of dumping the body and hoping no one from back home in Minneapolis, or Georgia, or wherever the girl's from files a missing person report on her, sure. The Valley of Fire is full of places where we could get rid of her."

He took a deep drag off his Camel. "Which is it?"

"Which is what?"

"Minneapolis or Georgia?"

"If you ask your brother, Georgia. If you ask the super, Minneapolis."

"That answers the question. Carolyn's from Minneapolis, you know." Yep, he was a newlywed, all right. Everything could always be brought back around to the new bride if we talked about it long enough.

"Really. I thought it was Chicago." He was the boss. I needed a decision, and I'd tried to let him talk his way to one, but in the end, he was the boss. If he wanted to make conversation, no one was going to find my fingerprints in the blonde's apartment.

"Midwest. They all sound the same." He got quiet again for a minute or so, then his features hardened, and he said, "I need you to get ahold of a homicide dick we can trust. Have we still got the double set of negatives of the photos we used to turn Brannigan?"

We had good, clear shots of Ed Brannigan's wife checking into the Silver Legacy up in Reno with one of Metro's police commissioners. "Yeah," I said.

Howard's cigarette had burned down almost to his fingers. "Good. Pay him double what we usually kick in his direction. Offer him one of those sets. Have him help you with the girl's apartment. He's to call it in, say he got an anonymous tip from a concerned citizen, but not before we get Eddie on a train someplace."

"Do you want him to know that Eddie's involved? And what will I tell the judge in court to—this morning?" I thought I knew

the answer to both questions, but like I said, Howard pays me to be thorough.

He noticed the smoking butt in his hand and stubbed it out. "No, of course not. Tell him that we're involved because of the proximity to Eddie's place, but that's it, and we just want to make sure the story gets told right.

"As for the judge, you play dumb: 'I have called his home several times, Your Honor. I cannot locate my client,' that sort of thing.

"We'll worry about the fallout from this later. Right now, we've got to get Eddie where the Feds can't squeeze him. If you can get him over the border, that would be ideal. If it comes to that, let me know, and I'll make some calls to our people in San Diego and see about them meeting the train and getting him over from there."

"One thing. Eddie was at the Sands earlier this evening. I'm sure people saw him there."

He downed the contents of his glass. "My brother." Then he sighed.

"My client," I echoed him. We both laughed.

"We can make witnesses forget anything if it comes down to it." He looked up from his glass and searched my face. I'd seen that look before. I knew what came next. "Do you think he killed her?"

"No. I think someone set him up to look like he did though."

"Because of this grand jury thing hanging over his head?"

I had my own ideas on that, but kept them to myself.

Howard could read my silences the way I could read his grimaces. "Speak up," he said.

"He can hurt us. You know it. I know it. We can't be the only ones either in town or in the outfit who do. When the Feds pick a guy up on a material witness warrant, nine times outta ten, he stays where they put him until they've got what they want. We got lucky that Danielson was working warrants that day."

When he was running for the state senate seat which had served as his eventual springboard to the place he now occupied on the federal bench, the Right Honorable James Danielson had received so much campaign money from Howard's friends back east that many of his colleagues in Carson City had taken to calling him "the Senator from Rappaport" behind his back. We had called in a marker the day the Hoover Boys brought Eddie in on that witness warrant.

"I know, I know."

"You pay me to think about things like this."

He rattled the ice in his glass absently as he looked out into the casino, at the crowds milling about. Then he glanced at his watch.

"I've got to get back to the Sahara. Take care of this and report back to me at home, wake me up, I don't care. Do what you have to."

"I will."

"Of that," he stood and dropped a twenty on the table, winking across the bar at our waitress, "I have no doubt."

It took me until four thirty to get Brannigan awake and agreeing to meet me at Eddie's building. The plan was for me to get there first, get Eddie over to the train station, then return and meet Brannigan there after he had gone in and "discovered" Brenda's body.

I called Eddie once I'd gotten off the phone with Brannigan. No answer. I called back and let it ring. Nothing. I began to sweat again, even though the pre-dawn is the coolest time of day in the desert.

I needn't have hurried.

Why do they always end up in the bathroom? He'd tried to open a vein, but judging by the jagged gash on his left wrist, his hand had shaken too much. So he'd taken the cord from the blinds in his bedroom, used the doorknob, pulled the cord tight around his throat, and done it that way.

No dangling feet swaying in the shower stall, just him using his own weight to finish the job in a sitting position. He reeked of liquid courage again.

The next few hours were a blur. When Brannigan got there, he took one look into the bathroom, and then used Eddie's phone to call in for both corpses. I settled on a story that was pretty close to the truth: that Eddie had called me in a panic, that the girl next door was dead, and that he didn't know what to do about it. In the new revision though, Eddie placed the call later, and I was just getting home from a late-evening drive down to the Strip, and so on.

The Metro bulls didn't want anyone saying that they went easy on a mob lawyer whose client wound up dead on the very day he was set to testify before a federal grand jury, and they really didn't like it that this same mob lawyer had found the body. And since Brannigan didn't want there to be any talk about him dining on a steady diet of mob pocket lint, he took the lead in taking out Metro PD's ire on me.

It's true what they say about Vegas city cops. They really do only hit you where the marks won't show.

After Metro had sat on me for a few hours, they released me into the custody of a couple of Bureau guys I didn't know, who in

turn escorted me straight up to the office of the United States Attorney for the District of Nevada.

Once I was there, I got to see the top man himself; the actual United States Attorney for the District of Nevada. When I met him, he made a point of telling me how he felt about my client being dead and me being involved. He went on from there to tell me all about the big plans his office now had for me.

These plans included releasing me immediately, and then turning around and putting the word out through Metro's snitches that I had cut a deal with them to keep from being implicated in Eddie's death. The upshot being that I had done so in order to avoid charges of witness tampering, hindering a federal prosecution, and murder.

It's true what they say about Feds too. They don't need to hit you to make it hurt.

The maid ushered me into the sitting room at Howard's place as if she had been told to expect me. Howard was in to greet me not long after I'd managed to settle gingerly into one of his wingback chairs.

"What are you doing here?" He looked his watch. "Why didn't you call before you went to court?" No one had told him. I couldn't believe it.

"It couldn't wait," I said.

He went over to the air conditioner, turned it up high, and beckoned me over to stand beside it. The thing was plenty loud. I wondered who might be listening, and whether they already knew about Eddie. I got up slowly. My ribs were killing me.

"Your brother's dead," I murmured into Howard's ear once I'd gotten close enough.

He looked at me with surprise written plainly over his face. I told him what I'd found. I told him about the Vegas cops and the Feds both sweating me. He took it like a punch. When I'd finished, he sat down heavily.

I was standing there watching my boss stare at nothing, eyes wide, his mouth a little round "o," when Carolyn Rappaport walked in. Radiant in a bright yellow chiffon dress, she greeted me enthusiastically and advanced to kiss my cheek.

She had changed her hair color. At the wedding, she was a brunette. She stood before me now, blonde as Marilyn Monroe, looking over her shoulder to ask her husband something I didn't catch.

"Howard, what's wrong?" She repeated and half faced him, frowning. Blonde as Monroe, I thought again. Blonde as Brenda

too. The hair had been one thing. Seeing that face in profile, not the same, but similar, not swollen this time, either. Hearing her talk in the sort of flat, nasal tones they employed on the Midwestern prairies. In cities like Chicago. And Milwaukee. And Minneapolis.

It all fell into place.

Good God, I thought. Why didn't I catch it earlier, in Caesar's, when we were talking about brothers and sisters and all the things that can pass between them?

Howard pays me to think about things like this. I took it as a testament to my innate humanity that I wasn't able to immediately connect Eddie's troubles to something so *monstrous.*

Eddie's moon face flashed in my memory: mottled and purple, the way it was the last time I'd seen him. I looked back at the cause of all of this, and said, "Mrs. Rappaport, I'm sorry I woke you earlier."

She smiled at me. "Oh, that's all right. And call me Carolyn. I know it's just business for Howard." She looked back in her husband's direction. He didn't look at her. He had fixed his gaze at a point on the opposite wall. She frowned again.

"Mr. Rappaport told me you understood," I said. "Still, it must be annoying, having the phone ring off the hook night after night."

She didn't stop looking at Howard. "It's no bother. We don't get many late calls."

"Really?" I did my best to sound nonchalant. "Gee, that's funny. Mr. Rappaport said that you've been getting them quite often."

She glanced at me, then began straightening the cushions on the sofa. "What?" She'd picked up on something in what I said, and tried to cover it by sounding puzzled.

"Your sister. She calls a lot. Especially late at night. It must drive you crazy."

She fluffed a pillow, and forced a smile, "Oh, yes! Well, it's nice to have family close by, even if she doesn't seem to know how to read a clock."

"Yes," I said. "Family *is* important." At that, Howard took notice of the two of us again for the first time since I'd told him about his brother's demise.

"How long has she been in town?"

"Who? Oh, my sister." Carolyn Rappaport clasped her hands together and looked thoughtful. "Six, seven weeks, I guess."

"Brenda's been in town just under a month," Howard quietly corrected her.

There it was. The name. The last piece of the puzzle. I thought back to the only time I'd seen Brenda, how her face, too, was mot-

tled when I found her in that frigid bedroom. Brenda, in full rigor when I got to her new apartment. Brenda, who'd no doubt been dead since well before Eddie got home from playing the ponies.

I thought about the air-conditioning there in the Rappaport home, and how loud it was, and how it couldn't cover everything, so I said, "Your hair looks great, Mrs. Rappaport. When did you have it done?" I left the more important question of "why" unasked. I knew why. I wondered for a second whether Carolyn had hated her sister, or merely thought so little of Brenda and her low-class ways that she had simply seemed expendable.

"I told you to call me Carolyn, Sean." She looked relieved to be off the subject of her sister. "I did it myself. Just me and the peroxide."

I saw my opening, and made the most of it. "Oh. A suicide blonde, huh?"

She chuckled as she sat on the sofa. "A suicide blonde? Why, because I did it myself?"

I made eye contact with her husband again. The shock had begun to ebb from his features, replaced by something darker and harsher, and less human. He had Eddie's pinkie ring out of his pocket, running it back and forth through his fingers as if it were a section of a rosary.

"Yep. A suicide blonde," I said. "Dyed by your own hand."

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

When the people gathered together on one of the great trial days, they never knew whether they were to witness a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding.

—Frank R. Stockton

*From "The Lady, or the Tiger?" (1882) by Frank R. Stockton*

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In this era of complex, nuanced, serialized storytelling, crisp production values, and top-drawer talent before and behind the camera, one could hardly call television the "boob tube" any longer. Indeed, despite the savage writers' strike, which upended almost every series on air, today's TV drama has never been better. In our roundup of this fall's offerings, the 2008–2009 season delivers the goods of the returning series, resolving nerve-jangling season finales while unspooling new mysteries and introducing new characters and locations. And the fall's new shows *(Crusoe, Fringe, Life on Mars)* are spectacular: Look for character-driven mysteries, deeply literary in origin and thrillingly executed.

**Crusoe (NBC)** Call it *Lost* without the airplane. Or *Fantasy Island* without the midget. This ambitious adaptation of Daniel Defoe's literary masterpiece is visually stunning, pulse-pounding exciting, and generally true to its source material. Philip Winchester (*Flyboys, Thunderbirds*) stars as the titular hero who, with his man Friday, battles marauding militias, hungry cannibals, wild cats, starvation, and apocalyptic lightning storms on a dangerous, mysterious island. Expect a star-crossed love story between Crusoe and his wife, left behind in England, as well as—via flashbacks—the slow-boiling mystery behind Crusoe's mentor and patron, played by Sam Neill (*Jurassic Park, The Tudors*). *October 17*

**Fringe (Fox)** The team behind *Star Trek, Mission: Impossible III,* and *Alias*—J. J. Abrams, Roberto Orci, and Alex Kurtzman—offer up this paranoid thriller that blends conspiracy, science fiction, and reality, a la *The X-Files* and *Lost.* The pilot is sheer genius: two hours of knockout twists and turns, solid characters, and enough spicy plot threads to have us ready to devour another hundred hours of *Fringe* storytelling. The premise: An international flight lands in Boston, all of its passengers and crew victim to a grisly, unexplainable death, drawing the interest of the FBI and the

curiosity of an institutionalized, Einstein-ish genius. Evil corporations, torrid personal relationships, and the supernatural merge in this dynamic newcomer, starring Joshua Jackson (*Dawson's Creek*), Lance Reddick (*The Wire*), and John Noble (*Lord of the Rings*). *September 9*

**Life on Mars (ABC)** The behind-the-scenes drama of this freshman series, which will premiere either this fall or midseason, is outpacing the twists and turns onscreen. Based on the hit BBC series and adapted for American audiences by TV maestro David E. Kelley, *Life on Mars* has suffered cast changes and location switcheroos. Rumor has it that Kelley himself has been replaced. Backstage chicanery aside, don't miss this tale of a modern-day cop who is hit by a car, goes into a coma, and wakes up in 1972. If you think it's a simple case of hit and run, or that there's no sinister conspiracy covering up the truth of our hero's "accident," then you don't know your post–9/11 landscape. With a little flesh and blood, this could be a real keeper. *TBA*

Lenny Clarke, Jason O'Mara, Rachelle Leffre, Colm Meaney. Photo by Ken Foley/ABC.

**24 (Fox)** Between seasons five and six of this groundbreaking action-thriller, its protagonist Jack Bauer was kidnapped and held captive for eighteen months by corrupt Chinese government officials. By the time *24* returns to air for a movie prequel November 23 and a full season in January, fans—who haven't had a new episode of their favorite show since May 2007's muddled and season six finale—will have endured nearly as much torturous waiting. Season seven is looking sharp on all fronts. No more CTU. Lots of Chloe. The return of Tony Almeida. Jack on the lam. A South African military coup. A Washington conspiracy. And Jon Voigt as the Big Bad. *January 2009*

**Bones (Fox)** Hmmm, so series teddy bear Zack (Eric Millegan) is actually a Hannibal Lecter-esque serial killer? Okey-dokey. Season four promises a number of globe-trotting stand-alone mysteries, while also revisiting the overarching Gormogon conspiracy, all based on Kathy Reichs's best-selling series of

books. Look for Millegan to make some surprise visits and for the romance between show leads Emily Deschanel and David Boreanaz to heat up. *September 3*

**CSI: Miami (CBS)** Not since Detectives Crockett and Tubbs sported their pastel sport coats and sawed-off shotguns has Miami's criminal underbelly been so well tickled. Despite the departure of series regular Khandi Alexander, season seven promises more cutting-edge forensics, old-fashioned gum-shoeing, and grade-A scenery chewing, courtesy of David Caruso and his ubiquitous sunglasses. Meanwhile, the CSI franchise offers up a fifth season of CSI: NY and a ninth season of the original show, CSI. *TBA*


Zachary Levi as Chuck. Photo by Hopper Stone.

**Chuck (NBC)** This cheeky action-comedy about a computer geek with a brain full of government secrets may actually have benefitted from the writers' strike. Despite mediocre ratings for its first eight episodes, NBC decided to pick up the show for a second season. Round two finds our titular hero on the lam, attempting to save the world by dodging computer viruses, assassins, and international terrorists. With a smile, of course. *September 29*

**Heroes (NBC)** The writers' strike—not to mention sophomore ambitions of broadening the heroic landscape with limp powers and weak casting—was kryptonite for Heroes. Creator Tim Kring has acknowledged as much and worked overtime to ensure that season three returns to gangbuster storytelling and heady mythology. The show may never again achieve the giddy highs of its "save the cheerleader, save the world" first season, but this brilliant collision of camp, mythology, action, and character is still one of the best things on television. *September 22*

**House (Fox)** Just as the good doctor himself can be a bit of a scattershot pain in the neck, season four—which pushed several beloved characters to the back burner, while introducing a handful of newbies—was not everyone's cup of tea. Then came the musical episodes, which were oddly brilliant. After the heartbreaking death in the show's season four finale, during which House appeared to seal his fate of rotting in hell forever, season five will watch House dodge all chances at redemption, particu-

larly in the juxtaposition of his character with new doctor Thirteen, played by Olivia Wilde. Creator David Shore promises more darkness, more personal stories, and more surprises in season five. *September 16*

**Law & Order: SVU (NBC)** Dick Wolf is to NBC crime series as God is to the Book of Genesis, except God took a break. Wolf's *Law & Order* franchise never stops, not even a little. So *SVU* fan favorites Adam Beach and Diane Neal left the popular series, while Robin Williams and Bill Pullman dropped by for stellar guest gigs, and Mike Myers used the name of series star Mariska Hargitay as his mantra in *The Love Guru*. It's been a busy year for the folks at *SVU*. Brace yourself for much personal tumult for the show's Detective Stabler (Christopher Meloni), who only thinks he's seen it all. *September 23*

**NCIS (CBS)** Following a harrowing investigation into a tragedy in Iraq, not to mention the surprise death of *NCIS's* director (Lauren Holly) in a season finale gun battle, Mark Harmon and cohorts looked to be separated and reassigned, leaving the future of the show in question. Producers recently assured longtime fans that the NCIS won't be apart for long. Indeed, a season-long mystery will have the team quickly thrust back together in this lean procedural. *TBA*

**Prison Break (Fox)** Television's pulpiest fiction mixes things up in its (unexpected) fourth season. Now that the majority of the show's leads are either out of jail or, uh, dead, *Prison Break* ditches its Texas location in favor of trendy Los Angeles and finds Michael (Wentworth Miller) forming an A Team–style unit to hunt the very bad folks behind The Company, responsible for the murder of the series' beloved Sara. Expect surprise resurrections, a wide-reaching conspiracy, and more junk-food thrills. *September 1*

**The Unit (CBS)** Who knew David Mamet, the legendary playwright, indie film guru, and all-around genius, could do good television too? Three seasons of this hard-boiled military-thriller about a top-secret team working global mysteries have proven just how good and diverse Mamet really is. Despite being popular series with U.S. troops stationed abroad, *The Unit* narrowly dodged the cancellation bullet. But Mamet, along with series regulars Dennis Haysbert *(24)* and Robert Patrick *(X-Files)*, returns for twenty-two more adventures. *TBA*

MYSTERY CLASSIC

SILAS K. HOCKING

# A PERVERTED GENIUS

Conversation that evening turned on the subject of burglary. Within the last fortnight there had been four cases of housebreaking of the most daring character, and not a single trace of the miscreants or their booty had been discovered. This, in a small town like Banfield, was exceptional and alarming.

Miss Pinskill, our landlady, who always sat at the head of the table, declared—not without hesitancy—that if she awoke in the middle of the night and found a burglar in her room, she should scream and scream, even if she were certain she would be shot for it, and would never stop screaming till either death or deliverance came.

"I'm certain I should do nothing of the kind," Miss Eliza, who sat at the opposite end of the table, remarked. "I should just hide my head in the clothes, and let him take everything in the room."

"I think that would be very foolish," said Mr. Ball, my fellow-lodger, a very clever and gentlemanly man, who occupied the drawing-room, and sat directly opposite me at dinner.

"And what would you do?" I questioned.

"I should show fight," he replied. "If I knew I should be killed, I should fight all the same. I admit I should stand no chance with a strong man; but, you see, I come from a race of fighters, and so the fighting instinct would leap to the top in spite of everything."

"You might feel differently if it came to the pinch, Mr. Ball," Miss Pinskill remarked.

"I don't think so," he answered quietly. "I don't like boasting; but I did tackle a burglar once."

"You don't say so!" cried Miss Eliza.

"I was only about nineteen at the time," went on Mr. Ball, "and a burglar broke into my father's house. I woke up in the middle of

*From* The Adventures of Latimer Field, Curate *(1903), reprinted in* Detection by Gaslight, *edited by Douglas G. Green, Dover Publications (1997).*

the night, and found the rascal in my room. He had been in the other rooms before."

"And you went for him?" I questioned eagerly.

"I did. Before he knew it I had grabbed him by the collar. He tried to fling me from him, but I held on like grim death; and, finding I was determined, he just slipped out of his coat, leaving it in my hands, and before I could grip him again he had disappeared through the window."

"What a pity!" said Miss Pinskill.

"It was a pity; for three minutes later a policeman came on the scene, but, of course, too late. Now, what would you have done under the circumstances?" he said, turning to me.

"I—I don't know," I said, with some hesitation, at which he smiled, and went on with his dinner.

As a matter of fact, I felt pretty certain that if I found the burglar in my room in the dead of the night I should simply collapse, and let him work his will on me and on my property without the least resistance. I did not feel called upon, however, to say so. A man may be a coward, but he need not tell people. They generally find it out quite soon enough.

I was not at all sorry when the dinner ended, for the subject of burglary, having been introduced, was kept up, and such subjects always make me nervous. I am just as bad if people begin to tell ghost stories. I keep awake half the night after, fancying I hear all kinds of unaccountable noises.

Leaving my dining-room, I retired to my study, and lighted a cigarette to calm my nerves, first of all, however, making sure that my window was properly fastened.

I heard Mr. Ball walk slowly along the hall and up the stairs, and a few minutes later I heard him call, in an excited and most distressed tone of voice, "Miss Pinskill! Miss Pinskill!"

"Yes, Mr. Ball," she cried, running into the hall. "What is the matter?"

"Please come here at once," he said, "and ask the curate to come also."

Now, this was the one and only thing I disliked about my fellow-lodger. He always spoke of me to others as "the curate," and usually in a tone of voice that implied that, in his opinion, curates were something less than men. I knew, of course, that I had nothing to boast of in the way of physical strength, and, moreover, that I was frightfully nervous.

These facts kept me from openly resenting his manner and tone.

There was nothing in his tone, however, to resent on the present occasion. Indeed, he spoke like one in mortal terror.

Instantly opening the door, I rushed up the stairs after Miss Pinskill.

"What is it, Mr. Ball?" she kept asking, as she panted in front of me.

"Burglars!" he said. "Everything of value I possess has been stolen."

Miss Pinskill, true to her nature, sat down on the floor and began to shriek.

I followed Mr. Ball into his bedroom, and found the whole place in a litter. Nearly every drawer had been turned out on the floor, and—as he said, in a most lugubrious tone—all his valuables were missing.

"I hope *my* things are safe, at any rate," I said; and I made off to my own room, only to find that it was in as complete a state of upset as Mr. Ball's.

A minute later Miss Eliza—who had come to her sister's rescue—began to call out that their room had been entered also, and everything of value taken away.

The state of confusion that followed cannot be very well described. No one seemed to know what to do or what to say. I was in such a condition of nervous tremor that my legs almost gave way under me. I had not lost very much of value, it is true, for the simple reason that I possessed no valuables; but the shock had taken all the strength out of me, and left me absolutely helpless.

Mr. Ball suggested at length that the police should be sent for, and Mary, the housemaid, was quickly despatched for that purpose. Half an hour later the place was overrun with policemen.

They examined the windows and doors, they searched the garden for footmarks, they looked into the cellars and outbuildings, they questioned Mr. Ball and myself until we grew sick of answering their questions, they drew sketches of the various rooms in their notebooks, and finally took their departure.

The only discovery they made was that the drawing-room window was unfastened, for which Mary admitted she was to blame. The thief or thieves had evidently come in by that way while we were at dinner, and there the matter ended. As in the case of the other burglaries, not a trace of the robbers could be found.

On the following evening Mr. Ball and I went across to the vicarage, where we had accepted an invitation to dinner. Though Mr. Ball had been in Banfield not more than two months at the outside, he had established himself a general favourite with all who knew him. He was most agreeable in his manners, and was well informed on all questions of general interest, and practically sympathetic with all religious and philanthropic movements. He was clever, too, and knew how to say a commonplace thing in a strik-

ing way. And, though he could be very sarcastic at times, sarcasm was a weapon he very rarely used.

He was somewhat dull and silent as we walked across to the vicarage; but that was easily accounted for; he had not yet got over the loss of the previous night.

"I wish to my heart we could lay hands on the thief!" he said to me. "It is bad enough to be robbed, but to be so completely outwitted by a common burglar is humiliating."

Over the dinner he quite recovered his spirits, and for a while—much to my relief—nothing was said of the burglary of the previous night. He greatly admired the vicar's silver and glass, and went into raptures over a richly-chased antique cup that stood in the centre of the table. He spotted some valuable lace that Mrs. Ramsey wore, and admired it in such an adroit way that he quite won that good woman's heart. He discussed the paintings on the walls with keen insight and knowledge, and hinted to a fraction the value of some rare old china.

I quite envied him his knowledge, his easy grace, his rare conversational powers, his subtle diplomacy. I never knew him shine as he did that night, and my admiration of him very considerably increased.

The vicar became quite confidential, and showed him over the house, and gave him a sight of his treasures.

Mr. Ball suggested that, after our experience of the previous night, he ought to have his doors and windows well bolted. And, the inevitable subject having once started, there was no getting away from it for the rest of the evening.

We did not stay late, as Mr. Ball had to catch the early train to London next morning.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Ramsey, we business men, even when we come away for a few months' rest, cannot wholly escape," he said to the vicar as we were leaving. "I have to run up to town at least once a fortnight. But I feel infinitely better already for my sojourn here."

"I am glad to hear it. But Banfield is a wonderfully healthy and bracing place. What a pity that the good should be discounted by the robbery of last evening!"

"Yes, it is a very annoying affair. But I am not without hopes that I may yet recover some of the plunder. You know the old saying, that rogues are generally fools also."

"In the case of burglars that seems scarcely true," said the vicar. "I think of the fact that five houses have been broken into in Banfield, and not a single clue has been obtained."

"You will be saying soon that burglary must not be reckoned among the hazardous callings," was the laughing reply.

"Indeed, I shall."

And so we parted from our host, and made our way home through the dimly lighted streets.

He shook my hand cordially as we said good night in the hall.

"I shall not see you again for three days at least. But, all being well, I shall be back again on Saturday evening."

I never imagined that I should look for his return as eagerly as I did. I felt that we needed some one in our midst who was clever and resourceful and far seeing. The local police seemed utterly helpless, and the case was becoming desperate. The latest victim was the vicar. On the night following our little dinner his house was broken into, and literally stripped of every valuable thing that was at all portable.

When I told Mr. Ball, he fairly gasped, and sank into a chair, quite overcome.

"Good heavens!" he said. "You don't mean to say they've been mean enough to rob the vicarage?"

"They have indeed," I answered.

"And the fools of police have been foiled again?"

"Yes. It seems they had got a suspicion that a burglary had been planned quite the other side of the town."

"Just like them; they are always in the wrong place!" he said angrily.

"The vicar is inconsolable," I said.

"I don't wonder," he answered. "He had some lovely things. I must go across and condole with him."

"You must do more," I said. "You are a City man. You have courage and resource, and if you will only play the part of detective—and, mind you, I am willing to join you in it—if we don't catch the thieves, we may at least prevent further robberies."

"Not a bad idea," he said thoughtfully. "It will be a novelty, at any rate. But I am afraid, Mr. Field, you are too nervous for the task. You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

"Not in the least," I replied. "I own I'm nervous—ridiculously so. But something must be done, and done soon."

"You are right in that. After I have had a little refreshment, we will go across to the vicarage and see if we can find any clue to work upon."

The vicar received us with manifest relief, and entered into the scheme with enthusiasm.

Mr. Ball discovered a footprint outside the window that had been opened, of which he took careful measurements, and under a bundle of sticks in a corner of the garden I found an old pair of shoes, one of which tallied with the footprint. But most important

of all, was a strip of tweed cloth in a thorn hedge which separated the vicarage grounds from an adjoining farm.

"If we can only find the jacket that this fits, we may soon find the wearer," Mr. Ball said exultingly. "I really think, Mr. Ramsey, we've got a clue at last."

"I hope so indeed!" said the vicar, warmly. "I would give almost anything if we could find the scoundrels!"

For nearly a month Mr. Ball and I exhausted all our energies, but without success. Mr. Ball even sacrificed his fortnightly visit to London, and gave up all his time to the work of tracking down the burglars. Every now and then we fancied we were on the right track, and followed up our supposed clue for days at a stretch, only to find that we were wasting our strength and energy on a wild-goose chase.

A month of keener disappointment than that I have rarely known. Nothing is more depressing than to have your hopes raised to the very highest pitch, and then suddenly to find yourself plunged headlong again into despair. This was our case time after time, till even Mr. Ball, with his seemingly inexhaustible patience and resource, began to lose heart.

One satisfaction, indeed, we had, and we made the most of it; and that was that, though we had not discovered the burglars, we had prevented any fresh burglaries.

"They evidently know we are on the war-path," Mr. Ball said to me, with a laugh, "and so, to all appearances, have withdrawn from the neighbourhood altogether. But it would have been a satisfaction to me if I could have tracked them before I said good-bye to Banfield."

"I feel dreadfully disappointed," I said. "Still, I think we have done some good."

Mr. Ball's three months in Banfield were now almost up, and he was returning to town quite recruited, notwithstanding all the work and worry of the last month.

I really felt sad when I saw his heavy luggage carted away to the station. As a fellow-lodger, he had been almost everything one could desire; and I felt certain that Miss Pinskill would never get any one to fill his place that in any way would compare with him.

We celebrated his last evening with us by a special little dinner; and in proposing his health I really think I excelled myself. Miss Eliza said it was the best after-dinner speech she had ever listened to, excepting the speech Mr. Ball made in reply. That speech I shall never forget, and for many reasons. He had a most winning manner with him, and once or twice while he was speaking quite a lump came into my throat. I have no gift of pathos myself; perhaps for

that reason I appreciate it so much in others. Not that I like being made to cry, for in a man it looks weak.

Well, we all retired early that night, for the effort to appear cheerful when we did not feel it exhausted us somewhat.

I fell asleep quickly, notwithstanding the heaviness of my heart, and was in the depths of profound slumber, when I was startled by the violent ringing of the front-door bell. I waited for some time, leaning on my elbow, for someone to go down and open the door, but I heard no one stirring. So at length, as my window was directly over the front door, I went and raised it, and asked—

"Who is there?"

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Field?" came a female voice that I did not recognize. "Will you please come and baptize Mrs. Sandy's baby? They are afraid it is dying."

"I will come at once," I answered. "Go back, and say I am following as quickly as possible."

And I closed the window, turned up my gas, and began to dress. I felt thankful now that no one else in the house had been disturbed.

In less than ten minutes I was out of my room, and in passing Mr. Ball's door I was surprised to see it standing ajar. For a moment I stood and listened, but there was no sound within.

"I hope you have not been alarmed, Mr. Ball?" I said, standing close to the door.

But I waited in vain for a reply.

Now, I knew that Mr. Ball was a very light sleeper, and was therefore not a little surprised that he was not the first to awake.

I was impatient to get to Mrs. Sandy's child, and yet something detained me. Perhaps it was mere curiosity. I put my mouth to the opening of the door and spoke again, but still no reply.

Then I pushed the door wide open, and walked into the room. It was unoccupied. The bed had evidently not been slept in.

I was more concerned than I knew. A thousand vague suspicions seemed to rush through my mind in a moment, but I could not afford to lose any more time. Creeping gently downstairs, I took my hat from the stand in the hall, and proceeded to unbolt the door. It was unbolted already.

Could it be possible that Miss Pinskill had gone to bed and left it merely on the latch? No, it could not be that. Mr. Ball had evidently gone out before me. But why? That question haunted me as I hurried through the silent and deserted streets and lanes in the direction of the Sandys'.

Suddenly I halted, and drew into the shadow of the thorn

hedge. I was near a large house that stood alone. I knew the house well, and was slightly acquainted with the people who lived in it, though not so well acquainted by any means as I desired.

I had heard a window creak, then I saw it slowly and almost noiselessly open, then the form of a man appeared.

"Another burglary," I reflected; "and, as usual, not a single policeman about."

How it was I did not cry out or faint I do not know to this day, but I did neither. I crept under the verandah with the tread of a cat. I knew the robber would descend by one of the pillars, and I got close up to it. Some trellis-work was carried along the ground from pillar to pillar. The thief would get his foot on this trellis-work, and then step lightly to the ground. All this passed through my mind as in a flash. I was surprised at myself. I never knew my brain act so readily before; and, stranger still, I was not for the moment conscious of any fear.

The foot of the thief came into sight, close to my face. Quickly it descended and rested on the trellis-work, as I had expected; another moment, and he had let loose with his hands. I seized the foot and gave it a jerk, and he fell with his head in a bank of flowers.

With a muttered oath, he tried to struggle to his feet; but I held the foot on the top of the trellis-work, and he could not rise. He was quick to see what had happened, and, with an awful curse, he hissed—

"Let go, you fool, or I'll blow your brains out!"

I almost let go then, for I recognized the voice of Mr. Ball, and the discovery for the moment seemed to unman me, but only for a moment.

"Mr. Ball!" I exclaimed. "Can it be possible?"

"What, the curate?" he said, in mocking tones. "Come, let go, for I don't want to hurt you."

"Never!" I replied.

And I began to shout, "Help! Murder! Police!" at the top of my voice.

"You fool!" he cried. "Another sound, and I shoot!"

"You think I'm a coward," I replied; "but I'll show you!"

And I began to shout louder than before, though I was almost dying with fright.

All this time he was struggling might and main to get away from me; but I held on like grim death, and the more he struggled the more my strength seemed to increase.

Suddenly he ceased to struggle, and I heard the click of a revolver. I knew he was levelling it at me. I tried to get my head

behind the pillar; but suddenly there was a blaze of light before my eyes, then a stinging sensation along the side of my head.

"I am not dead yet!" I cried; but I felt the warm blood running down my neck inside my collar.

The reply was another flash. I felt a hot spot burn suddenly in my right arm, my fingers relaxed their hold, a mist came up before my eyes, I heard a confused sound of voices and hurrying feet, then all the world grew dark and still.

When I recovered consciousness I found myself lying in bed in a strange room, with a doctor on one side of me, and a nurse on the other. They told me that I was at the "Cedars," the house that had been broken into, that Ball had been captured on the spot, where he fired at me, and that all the valuables that he had taken out of the house had been recovered.

Later in the day Mabel Rutherford (by common consent the sweetest girl in Banfield) came and sat by my side, and told me that I was a brave man, and that she hoped I would not die. I felt myself an awful hypocrite; but I was too weak to protest. I knew I was but a coward at best. Howbeit, her words were very sweet to me, and more than compensated me for all I suffered.

Well, I lay there many weeks, and so had ample time to reflect on the strange perversity of human nature. I never realized so vividly before how the best gifts of God might be turned to evil account, and the greatest and noblest talents prostituted to the most wicked ends. Here was a man whose gifts almost amounted to genius, a man who would shine in any company, and whose talents would win him success in any department of life, deliberately choosing to do evil, and turning Heaven's benedictions into a snare. Surely God is very merciful and infinitely patient with the most sinful of His children.

But to return. The morning after the burglary Ball was brought before the mayor and full bench of magistrates. Of his guilt, there could, of course, be no doubt, for he had been caught red-handed in the act, as it were, with stolen goods upon him. But as there was a strong presumption that he was also the author of the other burglaries, the mayor, after animadverting very strongly upon his conduct, remanded him for a week, and he was conducted back to the cells. He appeared to be very crestfallen, and scarcely once lifted his eyes during the whole time he as in the dock.

The court, I was told, was crowded to excess, for the news of his capture had spread far and wide, and people were curious to see a man who had been able to act the part of honest man and thief with such success. That he had accomplices was taken for granted, and the hope was freely expressed that the rascals who had made

themselves such a terror to the neighbourhood would soon be keeping him company. That night, the mayor—who was a very wealthy man—was about to retire to rest with his family, when there came a violent ring at the doorbell. As the servants had already gone to bed, the mayor went himself and unbolted the door and opened it, and was not a little surprised to see a policeman standing in front of him.

"Well, constable, what's up now?" the mayor inquired.

"I'm sorry to trouble your worship," was the answer, in a low voice; "but the truth is, Ball has confessed everything, and I think we are on the point of arresting the whole gang."

"That's good news, indeed!" said the mayor, rubbing his hands. "But come inside, and let me hear the details."

The policeman stepped inside, and the door was closed behind him.

"Please don't alarm the ladies," he said, in the same low tone. "But the truth is, there is to be an attempt to burgle your house tonight. But we shall be ready for them. Already there are police in hiding all round the place. May I suggest to you to put out all the lights, as though you had retired for the night, and remain quietly downstairs?"

"I will do so, most certainly," said the mayor, looking very white, and trembling visibly.

"They will seek an entrance at the back," the constable went on; "and, of course, we must let them get in before we arrest them."

"I suppose you could not arrest them before they got in?" the mayor asked nervously.

"If we did, I'm afraid we could prove nothing worse than trespass against them. No, no; we must bring the whole charge against them if possible."

"Quite right, quite right!" said the mayor, briskly. "I'll leave the matter entirely in your hands."

"Is your family in the drawing-room?"

"Yes; we were just about to retire for the night."

"Well, ask them to keep as still as possible, and if they hear any noise overhead, don't let them get alarmed. I will station myself against the staircase-window on the first landing, so that I may be able to signal to our men, and direct their movements. I hope before the clock strikes one the whole gang will be safe in our hands."

"I hope so, too. Let me get a chair for you to sit on while you wait; it will be better than standing all the time."

"Thank you; I shall be very much obliged if you will."

Five minutes later all the lights were put out. The mayor retired to the drawing-room with his family, and bolted the door, while

the constable stationed himself at the staircase-window with his dark-lantern, and his truncheon ready to hand.

The time passed with painful slowness. Twelve o'clock came and went. Every one sat mute, intent, alert, listening for any sound that might break the oppressive stillness. Half-past twelve struck, then one, and still there was no movement in any part of the house.

"We may expect them at any moment now," whispered the mayor, his teeth chattering; but no one replied to him.

Half-past one struck, and finally two. What an age it had seemed! and still there was not the faintest sound in any part of the house.

The mayor got uneasy, and went to the keyhole and listened. Then he opened the door and looked into the dark hall. Everything was as still as the grave. He walked to the foot of the stairs, and looked up. He could see the chair outlined against the window, but no one sat in it. What could have become of the constable?

Five minutes later lights were got, and a search instituted, and then the whole truth was revealed. Every bedroom in the house, except those occupied by the servants, had been ransacked, and all the valuables taken clean away.

"Good heavens!" cried the mayor; "what does it all mean?"

Then a horrible suspicion darted through his mind, and he rushed off in his slippers to the police-station.

But everything appeared to be quiet and in order—too quiet, in fact, for no one seemed to be about. It was lively enough, however, five minutes later.

In the cell that Ball was supposed to occupy a constable was found, minus his coat and helmet, lying on the hard bed, and apparently fast asleep. Indeed, it was a long time before he could be aroused to anything like a comprehension of the situation.

Next day he told an incoherent story of how the prisoner Ball complained that he had something in his eye which gave him great pain, and he asked his warder to bring his lantern and look into his eye through the bars of the door. The warder did so, and then—well, he never knew exactly what happened then. He believed he was mesmerized or hypnotized. He seemed to lose control of himself, and had an indistinct recollection of doing whatever the prisoner told him.

One thing, however, was clear: that Ball attired himself in the policeman's coat and helmet, and, taking his truncheon and lantern, went direct to the mayor's house, with such results as I have described.

There were those who believed that Ball simply bribed the constable; but that was never proved. In any case, he got clear away, and that was the last ever seen of him in Banfield.

# THE STORY THAT WON

Julie Nevins/Graphistock

**The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won by K. J. Zimring of Decatur, Georgia.** Honorable mentions go to Greg Matejek of Hillsborough, New Jersey; Roseann Benson of Beverly, Massachusetts; P. B. Travis of Folly Beach, South Carolina; Dennis W. Allen of Garland, Texas; Randall A. Martin of Topeka, Kansas; Anna Abbate of New York, New York; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Gil Stern of Las Vegas, Nevada; Charles D. Patton of Virginia Beach, Virginia; and Ila Winslow of Portland, Oregon.

## UNSEASONAL GREETINGS

K. J. ZIMRING

It was starting to smell, that was the problem. Elizabeth pulled off her hat, dropped it beside the snowman, wiped her forehead, and considered what to do.

Dig up a nice hole and empty the snowman into that, maybe? The police had turned the whole yard over in December; she doubted they'd bother to root around again. Too much yard, too little budget, especially for a man they'd disliked as much as Roger.

They'd known he hadn't left her, no more than a cat would leave a mouse while it still had blood and squeaking. *Gone to Florida, rightcha, I don't* think *so,* the sheriff's look had said.

Still, they'd done their job and searched. They hadn't thought to check the snowman, though, and there hadn't been an odor to tip them off back then.

She could almost see him, knees pulled tight inside that plastic belly, head tipped forward inside the hollow one. His smile would be gone by now, melted off, that grin he'd worn as he'd pulled her mother's ornaments from the tree, and dropped them one by one.

Funny, how the sound of her own bones breaking had never moved her quite as much as that.

She set her spine. Mulch, that was the way to go. A nice big pile right next to Frosty here and no one would think a thing about the smell.

No better urn for a man like him, she thought. Every day for her, now, was Christmas in July.

# THE LINEUP

JANE K. CLELAND is the author of the Josie Prescott Antiques Mystery series; her latest book is *Antiques to Die For*. Jane is also the chair of the Wolfe Pack's literary awards and president of the Mystery Writers of America/NY Chapter.

O'NEIL DE NOUX is a former police officer who's published ten books and more than two hundred short stories. His short story "The Heart Has Reasons" (AHMM, September 2006) won the Shamus Award for Best Short Story, presented by the Private Eye Writers of America.

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN is a three-time winner of the Shamus Award. His recent books include the novel *Gas City*, published by Forge, and *Amos Walker's Detroit*. His last story in AHMM, "The Latin Beat," appeared in the June 2008 issue.

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

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KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH'S latest novel is *The Perfect Man*, written under the name Kris Dexter. Her mystery short fiction has won the Ellery Queen Readers Choice Award and has been nominated three times for an Edgar Award.

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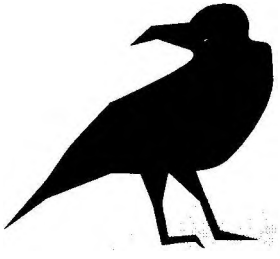

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