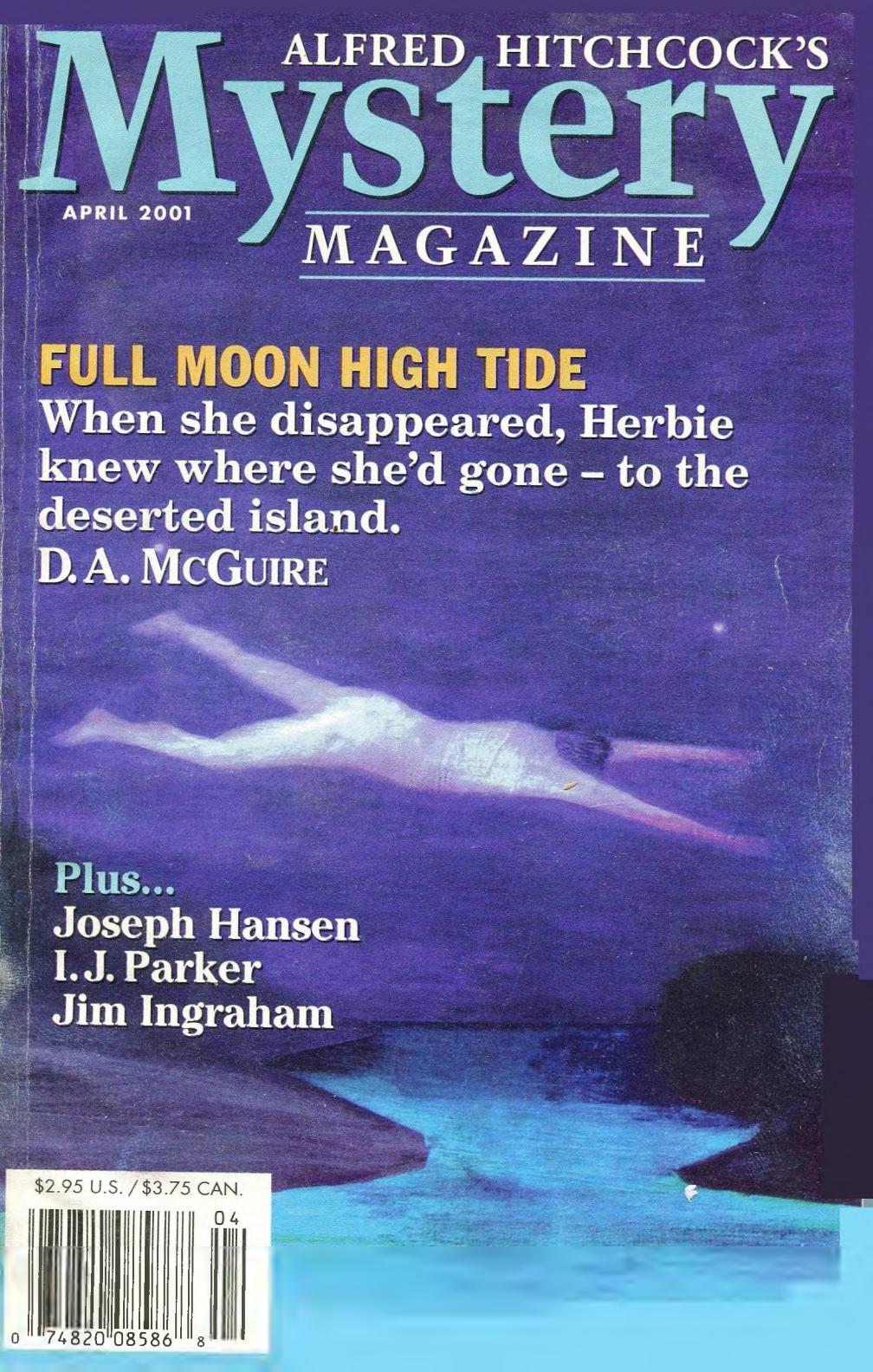
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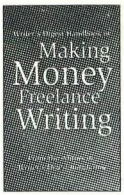

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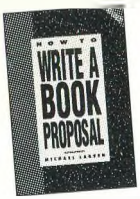

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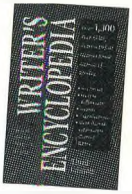

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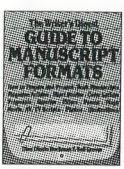

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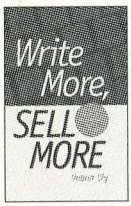

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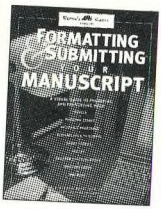

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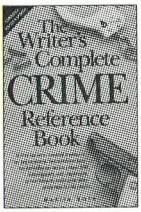

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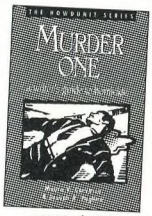

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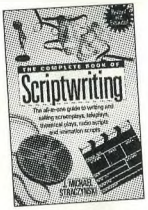

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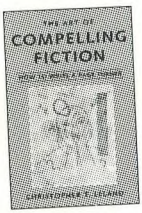

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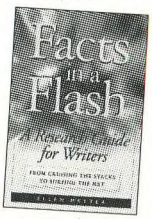

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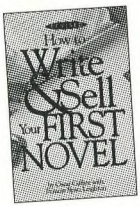

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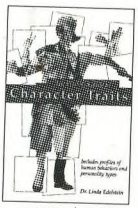

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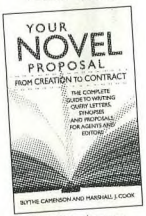

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EDITOR'S NOTES

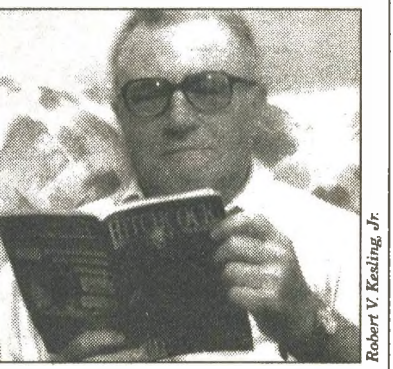
Cathleen Jordan

In this issue . . .

Welcome to Bruce Graham, author of "Four Lawyers," his first mystery short story. A New Jerseyan and graduate of Fordham Law School, now retired and living in Florida, he was an administrative law judge and part-time misdemeanor judge in Iowa. Author of articles and columns for such publications as *The Highlander* and the Indianola (Iowa) *Record-Herald,* he has also written two nonmystery stories, one for *I Love Cats* magazine and another for the anthology *Letters of Love: Stories from the Heart,* due out about now.

Since 1993 we've been bringing you the puzzles of Robert Kesling, and it's high time we introduced him. Mr. Kesling is a former paleontology professor specializing in Devonian microfossils at the University of Michigan and has published over two hundred scientific articles. But he was known there as Doctor Dinosaur for his most popular class (three hundred students per semester!).

"I was born on the Mais-ze-Quah Indian reservation in Cass County, Indiana. Strange as it seems, the land had been owned only by Mia-



Robert V. Kesling, Jr.

mi Indians and Keslings, having been bought by my great-grandfather." He is also a maker of cherry furniture, a gardener, a traveler, and a retired colonel in the U.S.A.F. Reserves.

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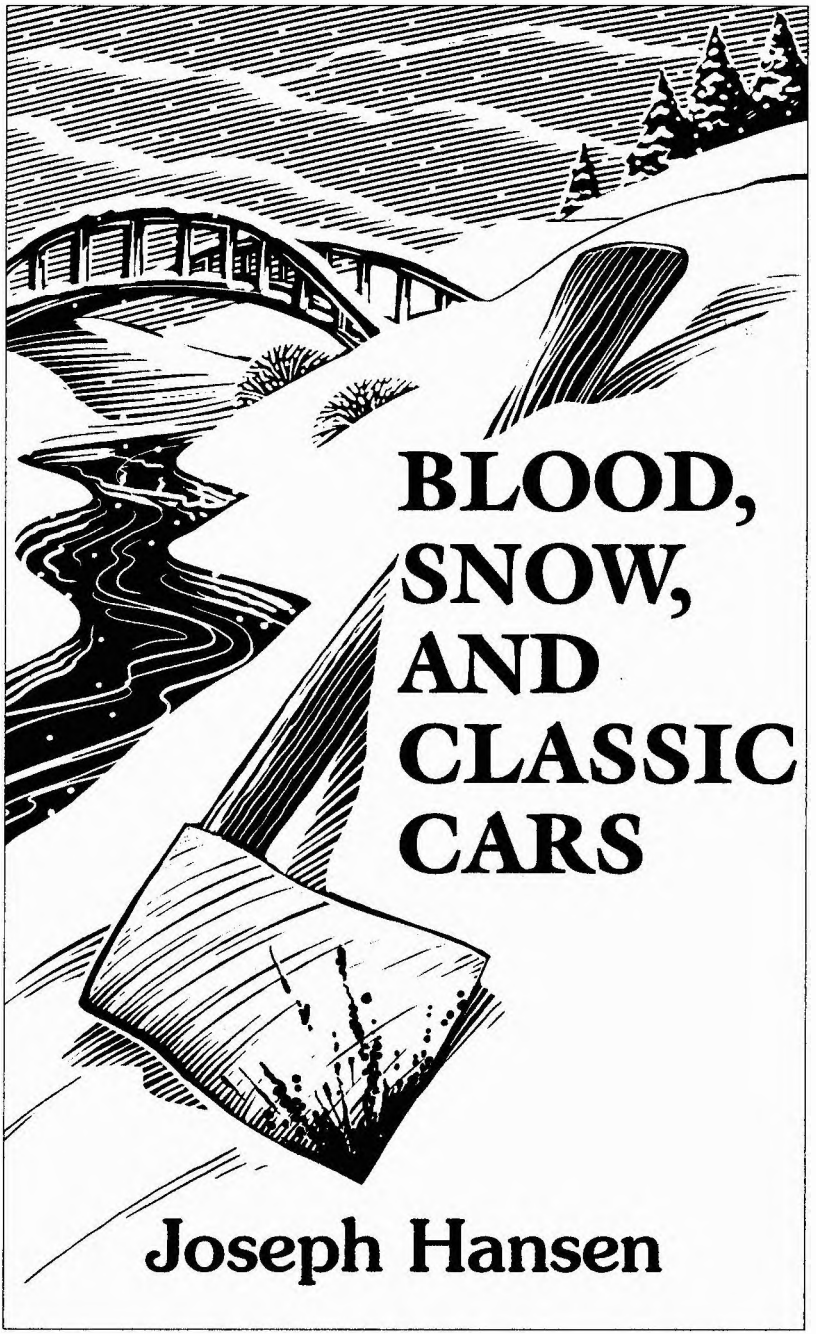


BLOOD, SNOW, AND CLASSIC CARS

Joseph Hansen

Illustration by Tim Foley

Talbot had let Hovis drive the Maserati tonight. Not to Madison, no, but to Randall Falls, the nearest town not too dinky for there to be some action. It was February. It had begun to snow, and while he'd showered and shaved, Hovis had dreamed of driving back here at midnight with somebody new from the bars, in this fantastic car, snow blown into high drifts beside the cleared highway, and gleaming in the moonlight on the branches of the pines.

He was driving home alone. No one he wanted was in the bars. That was okay. He was still young. He could take his time. And even alone, he loved the snow. It was beautiful, as if in some painting. Hovis sometimes daydreamed of going to art school to learn how to paint. But there was no hurry about that, either. This setup, living in Talbot's guesthouse rent free, was too good to leave. About all he had to do was keep the cars shiny.

The Maserati was built for speed, and since he'd met only one rattly pickup truck on the highway tonight, he let his foot weigh on the gas pedal and ate the thirty-five miles from Randall Falls to Talbot's sprawling ranch house in thirteen minutes. He geared down, swung the rumbling, low-slung classic off the highway past the dozen, snow-covered not-so-classic cars Talbot displayed down here, and his headlights flicked across a bundle of rags beside the drive.

He braked. People threw trash everywhere. Talbot hated that. Hovis would pick it up now and get rid of it before Talbot ever saw it. In foot-deep snow he bent over the bundle. And it groaned. He jerked his hand back. It was no bundle. It was a man. A leg kicked feebly, an arm tried to reach out. Hovis began to shake. And not from the cold. He bent closer, narrowing his eyes, trying to see. His mouth was dry. He moistened his lips. His own voice sounded alien to him.

"Gene?"

Heart thumping, finding it hard to breathe, Hovis crouched and folded back a sheepskin coat collar that hid the man's face. The wool crackled because ice crystals had formed on it. This was Talbot, all right. The moonlight made the blood look black. His hair was matted with blood. His hands were slashed. Blood was all over the back of the sheepskin jacket. Hovis ran for the Maserati, fumbled with the gearshift, killed the engine, began to whimper, got the engine started again, and careened up the long curved driveway to the house.

Lemke was new. That was why he was on nights from ten to six Monday through Thursday. Nothing much happened then. But something had happened tonight and he was in charge, so he handled it. The first thing he did when he got to the Talbot place was to look at the victim, radio for an ambulance, and take Polaroids. The second thing was to talk to Bobby Hovis, who had discovered the crime and dialed 911. Hovis bunked in Gene Talbot's guesthouse, had no visible means of support, and had been driving one of Talbot's expensive cars. He had alcohol on his

breath and bloodstains on his clothes and on his hands. He was pacing up and down Talbot's long living room looking as if he were about to cry, but he didn't cry, and he didn't stop pacing even when Lemke told him to sit.

"I had his permission to drive the Maserati," Hovis said.

"I don't think so," Lemke said. "I think you took it without his permission, and when you got home, he was waiting down there for you and raised hell with you about it, and you're drunk and you shot him."

"That's crazy," Hovis said. "He's my friend. He's good to me. I wouldn't hurt him. I wish I'd gotten here sooner. I'd have helped him fight them off, whoever did it." He stopped and gazed wide-eyed at Lemke, holding his hands out. "Who would do such a horrible thing? Why?"

"Nobody liked him," Lemke said. "That's why. He was a degenerate, a drug dealer, jewel smuggler, child molester, pornographer, homosexual. If you don't know how this town felt about him, then you're the only one."

"Then arrest *them*, for Christ's sake," Hovis said. "Why me? Two perverts with one stone, is that it?"

Lemke blinked. "You want to explain the blood all over you?"

"He was alive. He groaned. He reached out. He moved his legs. I thought—I don't know. I thought he wanted me to help him up."

"Robert Hovis—" Lemke detached the never-before-used handcuffs from the back of his belt "—you are under arrest for aggravated assault against the person of Eugene Squires Talbot."

"I had three beers," Hovis said. "Three lousy draft beers."

"Turn around," Lemke said. "You have the right to remain silent." He yanked Hovis's arms behind him. The handcuffs clicked. "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. . . ."

Shattuck came in at six because he hated being home alone. Mornings were the worst. The two kids were off at college. And his wife was dead. Breast cancer. Only ten weeks ago. A house should be full of life first thing in the morning, excited voices, coffee smells, bacon sizzling.

He showered, dressed, entered the kitchen only to cross it to the garage door. He drove along streets of tall old frame houses, under big, winter-naked trees standing in snow, to eat breakfast at Mom's Diner on Main Street—for the talk and laughter, not the greasy food. The old joke was right: *Never eat at a place called Mom's.*

Then he drove straight to the sand-colored stucco building marked RANDALL COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT, the Percival substation of which he, a lieutenant, age forty-eight, was in charge. He pushed in through thick glass doors out of the cold, a massive man, six foot four, two hundred fifty pounds, and hung up his jacket and fur hat. Lanky Deputy Lemke was watching him from his desk like a kid. Was that pride on his farmboy face? Or fright?

"Something to tell me, Avery?" Shattuck said.

And Lemke came eagerly into his office to tell him. He was so excited he couldn't sit down. He talked in a breathless rush, waving the papers in his hand. The arrest report. He'd been writing it for hours. He needed hours. He was slow on a keyboard. When he ran out of speech, he laid the report in its folder on the desk. Shattuck put on reading glasses and began turning the pages.

"Why didn't you phone me when the call came in?" he said.

"Middle of the night. I didn't want to wake you up," Lemke said. "I mean, a man was down. It didn't sound like something all that big and important. I figured I could handle it." He straightened with pride. "I did handle it. Caught the perpetrator redhanded."

"And the weapon?" Shattuck said. "You have the weapon?"

"I don't. But Talbot keeps guns around, lots of guns. Whole town knows that. Why wouldn't Hovis carry one of those?"

"Well, did he? Did you find it on him?"

Lemke shifted from foot to foot. "It must be someplace out there in the snow. Couldn't see it in the dark."

"Yup." Shattuck sighed and picked up the telephone. "You did make sure the injured man got to the hospital, right?"

"First thing," Lemke said.

"Good." Shattuck punched the hospital number. Not in Percival. In Randall Falls. He had to wait, and while he waited, he read more of Lemke's report. After a while, not a recording but a human being spoke to him, he asked questions, got answers, said thanks, and hung up. "Sit down, Avery."

Lemke peered at him, scared. Shattuck did not have a poker face. His disgust was showing, even to as dense a subject as Lemke. "The man was shot six times at close range with a .22. Then his skull and hands and back were hacked with a hatchet. Or maybe it happened the other way around."

"He did look pretty awful," Lemke said.

"You don't say," Shattuck said. "All right, you didn't find the gun. So tell me, did you find a bloody hatchet?"

"Hovis had blood on him," Lemke said stubbornly.

Shattuck tapped the report. "But it shows here that you dragged poor Miz Durwood out into the cold from home to check the Internet—" craggy Edna Durwood was the oldest employee here, and the only one on the payroll who could use the Internet "—and Hovis has no criminal record."

"He was drunk," Lemke said. "Talbot chewed him out. He lost it. You know how hysterical they get."

Shattuck grunted. "So you booked him and fingerprinted him."

Lemke brightened. "Yes, sir. You bet. And locked him in a cell."

"And faxed your report over to Randall Falls?"

"Oh no, sir." Lemke was shocked at the thought. "I wouldn't send it without you signed off on it, sir."

Shattuck handed it to him.

"Good. Then you can just put it in the shredder, now. All copies, Avery. And we'll forget it ever happened."

Lemke was dumbfounded. "The shredder? Why?"

"Because you made a mistake, and unless we destroy all record of it and humbly beg Hovis's pardon, odds are ten to one that Talbot's tireless defenders at the Civil Liberties Union will sue your ass, my ass, the whole county's ass, for false arrest and illegal detention."

Lemke said, "But he did it, lieutenant. It had to be him. He was the only one there."

"He was the only one there, Avery," Shattuck explained, "because the assailant ran off. Hovis phoned 911 and waited around for you. That didn't suggest to you that maybe he wasn't the assailant? That's what it suggests to me. Load two shovels in the trunk of a patrol car, pick up Deputy Schneider at his house, and the pair of you drive back to the Talbot place and search for those weapons. Let nobody near the house or the grounds, and do not say one word to anybody. I don't care how many TV cameras and microphones they have. Not one word, understand?"

Shattuck drove Hovis home so he could change into clothes that weren't bloodstained. Lemke and Schneider had strung between tree trunks broad yellow ribbons that said CRIME SCENE on them, and were turning the snow over around the cars down by the road. He lifted a hand to them in passing. While Hovis changed, Shattuck went into the main house and looked at the engagement calendar on Gene Talbot's dusty desk. Whoever came up here and maimed him didn't have an appointment. He roved through the sprawling house looking for the fabled gun collection. Paintings, figurines, cut glass, but no guns. Talbot was a reader. Shattuck ran his gaze over the shelves. Brazil. Sunken treasure. Lost mines. Jewels and gems. Horse breeding. *The Male Nude in Art.* And of course classic cars. He stepped out into the cold sunshine and pulled the door shut so it locked.

Next he needed to get Hovis off the absorbing subject of himself. Driving up here from the substation, Shattuck had learned about Hovis's straitlaced parents, his boyhood, high school years, single year of college, his 7-Eleven and Wal-Mart jobs. All in Madison. And how, after he came out to his folks and they changed the locks on the doors, he began staying nights with strangers picked up in parks, coffeeshops, bus stations, and how this had led him out of Madison to other towns and at last to Percival, where he met the legendary Gene Talbot.

Now Hovis sat beside Shattuck again, smelling of soap, and Shattuck was driving him to the hospital to see his friend, benefactor, lover. Shattuck still winced at that word in this context. But the long, clean-swept highway curving through pine-grown hills to Randall Falls offered more time for talk. And Hovis talked. If he were sore at what Lemke had done to him, he

didn't seem to mind opening up to Shattuck. He was either guileless or a damn good actor.

"Sometimes he wants company in the evenings, and I stay with him and we—" Hovis was blond and blushed easily "—like, watch, um, videos."

Shattuck laughed without amusement. "I know all about those videos. Hauled a truckload of 'em out of there a few years back. There was a trial about it. He has a Consitutional right to keep them. We hauled 'em all back."

Hovis was quiet for a while, watching the snowy landscape out the car window. Then he went on. "Usually, if I want to go out, he doesn't mind. I can take any car I want as long as he says okay. I don't like to take the really rare ones in case I have an accident. But last night I took the Maserati because I wanted to score and it makes an impression, all right?"

"But it didn't," Shattuck said. "You came back alone."

Hovis shrugged. "Snow kept people home. The bars were half empty."

"The doctors say he hadn't been lying out there long when you found him," Shattuck said. "Try to remember. Did you see anybody around?"

"Nobody," Hovis said. "I mean, even this highway was empty. Once I got out of Randall Falls, I didn't meet but one car all the way back."

"What kind of car?" Shattuck said. "Where, exactly?"

"Old white pickup," Hovis said. "Just before I crossed the bridge, okay?"

"Notice who was in it?"

Hovis thought for a second. "Some high school kid," he said.

"Get a good look at him?"

Hovis turned red. "I was seeing how fast the Maserati would go."

"We had a teenage witness once, claimed Talbot threw parties with high school boys. Wild, naked parties? Drink and dope?"

Hovis marveled. "What? Get serious! He swore this in court?"

"His parents wouldn't let him. County attorney had to drop the case."

"Well, I never saw any boys. Sure, friends come now and then. From out of town. Weekends, mostly. Sometimes they party. But they're Gene's age."

"Make me a list."

Shattuck stopped at the hospital entrance and Hovis got out, but before he closed the door, he bent down to add, "One thing was a little weird. The kid driving that truck—he didn't have any jacket. And I mean it was cold last night."

Shattuck parked in the hospital lot under a leaning, snow-clad pine tree. In a slot marked with some doctor's name. Nice thing about driving a sheriff's car. You could park any damned place you chose.

He had to ask a few busy people, but he at last found out where Eugene Squires Talbot was. And here came Hovis down the hall, carrying a big bunch of plastic-wrapped flowers and looking stormy. "Whoa," Shattuck said, and took his arm. "What's the matter?"

"They won't let me see him." Hovis pointed with the bouquet back

down the corridor. Gathered outside double doors marked INTENSIVE CARE UNIT stood a middle-aged woman, a young woman, and a young man. "Claim they're his damn family," Hovis said. "Flew in from Chicago. Say if I don't stop trying to see him, they'll call Security and have me thrown out. Why?"

"This way." Shattuck led him to chairs clustered around a low table in an alcove. "Sit down. Cool off." And Hovis sat, clutcing the flowers so hard his knuckles were white. Shattuck sat facing him. "That's his ex-wife," he said. "And his daughter. I don't know the man. Maybe the daughter's husband. Time flies."

"He never told me he was married," Hovis said.

"It was a long time ago," Shattuck said.

Hovis laid the flowers on his knees. "Yeah, well. *'Ex*-wife,' isn't that what you said? They're divorced. So what gives her the right to shut me out?"

"I'm not sure she has the right," Shattuck said. "Maybe the daughter has. *She* didn't divorce him. There's no such thing as an ex-daughter."

"It's because I'm gay, isn't it? Well, so is Gene Talbot gay. They think if I don't see him that's gonna change him back? I want to see him." Hovis stood up, dumped the flowers, picked them up. He peered down the hall to those double doors. "Hold his hand, tell him I'm here, tell him I'm sorry I wasn't around when he needed me." He looked at Shattuck. "What the hell are they to him? He never talks about them. I'm here. I'm his goddamn friend." Tears came into his eyes. "I love him. Not sometime years back. Now. And he loves me."

"Yes, all right," Shattuck said. "Wait here. I'll see what I can do."

He went down the corridor, past the pale-faced family, and pushed into the unit where the glaring air was filled with antiseptic smells and voices and the beeping of monitors. Green-clad, white masked, harried staff moved, grimly purposeful, among beds hidden or half hidden by curtains. For a second he got a glimpse of Talbot. He'd never seen anybody hooked up to so many wires, tubes, machines. A nurse carrying a clipboard noticed him. "Sheriff?"

"How's Gene Talbot doing?"

"His heart is strong. It's senseless, since the rest of him is broken beyond repair, but it keeps pumping away." She was a worn-looking woman who had perhaps only a year or two ago been pretty. Her laugh was brief and dry. "But whoever said the human heart made sense?"

Shattuck said, "Robert Hovis is here, the friend who found him last night, and he's very upset. They were close. Lived together. He wants to see him, speak to him. Family's digging in their heels. Can you—?"

She shook her head, her smile regretful. "I can't change hospital rules, sheriff. You're here only because of your badge. And I'm afraid you can't stay. Whatever you need to know officially, you can learn at the desk."

Shattuck blinked. "So the family can't come in, either?"

"No one but medical personnel," she said.

"All right. Thank you." Shattuck turned away. "I'll tell him."

She touched his sleeve. "Oh, and sheriff—no flowers."

Edna Durwood didn't have to read and clip the local papers, the daily Randall Falls *Reporter,* the weekly Percival *Press,* but she did. It was no part of her job description. But often there wasn't a lot of action in this office, and it helped to pass the time. So it cheered her up when Shattuck laid on her desk the flowers Hovis hadn't known what to do with, and asked her, "Have you got a file on Gene Talbot?"

Steel-rimmed glasses with thick lenses perched on her witchy nose. She glared at him through them. But he'd surprised her, and she smiled, a rarity. He couldn't recall when he'd last seen Edna Durwood do that. She sniffed, "Do you know anybody in this town who's been in the papers more?" She took off her mouthpiece-earpiece rig, got up, and marched off to fetch the folders. She laid them on his desk, and went to put the flowers in water.

Shattuck went through the clippings briskly because he remembered much of the fact and fancy they detailed. The oldest was brittle. It was a dozen years back when Gene Talbot had jumped into print. At that time he lived in Randall Falls, where he owned a thriving new car dealership. He had driven his wife and two girls to Madison to catch a flight to Chicago to visit her parents.

Then he had stopped off at a gay bar, where he'd picked up a fair young stranger and taken him home to Randall Falls for the weekend.

This youth was not what he seemed to be. He had a gun and, poking it into Talbot's ribs, had ordered him to drive to his bank and withdraw all his savings in cash and make the blue-eyed boy a present of them. Talbot as instructed walked into the bank with the youth close at his side, but when he got to the teller he told her what was going on. The youth didn't shoot Talbot dead as he had threatened. Instead, he tried to run away, but a security guard caught him.

Unluckily, he told the police, public defender, judge, and whoever else would listen, exactly how and why he happened to be with Gene Talbot that day. Talbot's wife left him, taking along the kids. The good folk of Randall Falls decided to buy their new cars from someone better-behaved. And Talbot sold the dealership, bought the ranch house outside Percival, and settled there to live, surrounded by his collection of classic cars. He wanted to breed racehorses, but Percival's zoning laws wouldn't let him.

This didn't slow him down. He raced through town in Bugatis, Aston Martins, Ferraris, even a 1933 Auburn for a while. He always wore flash clothes the like of which Percival had only glimpsed in magazines. And on weekends he threw parties. Percival knew this because of all the expensive if not classic cars—not one of them carrying a woman—that went tooling out the

highway to Talbot's place. The place was so isolated that anything at all could have gone on there and nobody not invited would have seen or heard.

Percival didn't need to see and hear. Gossip filled in for lack of witnesses.

It wasn't good-hearted gossip. It was mean-spirited and squalid. Shattuck came to hate the talk, and to avoid it if he could. But he wished Talbot would tone down his behavior and buy his liquor out of town. He bought a lot of booze, Wild Turkey, Glenlivet, Tanqueray. And champagne. Taittinger, Clicquot, God knew. By the case. Art Gillespie at Economy Liquor had never seen anything like it. He didn't complain, but he sure as hell did tell everybody.

Then the foreigners started coming. Easily spotted by their chauffeur-driven stretch limousines and the costumes of the passengers. Indians in turbans, Egyptians and Arabs in flowing robes, Africans in khaftans. Japanese. South Americans. And the legendary cars that had stood around Talbot's low-roofed, rangy house on its hill, like prize bulls in a feedlot, were carried off on trucks, as many as six masterpieces at a time.

It would figure, said the fellas at the barber shop, the gals at the beauty parlor, that if Talbot had been rich before, and everyone was certain he had, by now he must be a billionaire. Then he added to the excitement and speculation by leaving town for a time. A travel agent in Madison had a sister in Percival, and she said Talbot had flown to Brazil, to buy land there, and raise thoroughbreds.

The FBI thought different. They thought he had flown down to pick up cocaine in exchange for some of the cars he'd shipped out earlier. Shattuck, of course, was told what they thought.

It turned out they were wrong. Talbot had been flattered to have their attention and, while denying he was ever a courier, pretended to know a lot of Latino drug dealers. The FBI had investigated his leads. They were all brag, no substance. Talbot told one investigator that while he never dealt drugs, he occasionally used them. Recreationally.

"I doubt it," the agent in charge had told Shattuck in disgust. "Yeah, he's got ten thousand acres of land in Brazil. Wasteland. No water. You couldn't raise lizards there, let alone horses. And those cars of his —half of them are put together out of junked parts, slicked up, and sold as untouched originals." He wagged his head over the farewell beer Shattuck had bought him at the Hofbrau on Main Street. "But what a con man he is. Jesus. What a sweettalker. And you know, I think he believes his own lies. He doesn't live in the world we live in. He dreams it up and thinks it's real."

How true this was came out later when Talbot bought a 1953 Cadillac Eldorado convertible from its owner, gave him fifty thousand in cash and the rest, thirty thousand, in diamonds. The seller sued. Experts testified the diamonds were trash. The court agreed. Talbot claimed he'd been deceived about

the diamonds. And he still wanted the car, so he mortgaged his house to make up the shortfall. Percival raised its eyebrows. Talbot wasn't a billionaire, after all. Still, Shattuck thought, he probably had a buyer in some far corner of the world willing to pay him more than the market price.

He stayed afloat and the town kept gossiping about him, and he was back in court a few more times, most notably when some kid told a teacher that Talbot was taping naked sex among high school boys at his home and selling the videos over the Internet. Shattuck, since the sheriff needed to be reelected about that time, was ordered to turn the ranch house upside down. He found a lot of videos that surprised him. Stuff those boys were doing he'd never even heard of at their age. Some of it not till now. But Talbot denied he'd made the videos, said he'd bought them from other sources. And the people couldn't prove he hadn't. The defense could prove the claims about the Internet were false. The Civil Liberties lawyers had a gleeful time establishing Talbot's first amendment right to own and enjoy the videos. And the sheriff was elected again, anyway.

Shattuck lifted his head and looked at the clock. He'd wasted an hour on this stuff. And learned nothing. He turned over the rest of the clippings, only glancing at them. All stuff he knew. But what was this final one? Datelined last week. A funeral writeup. From the Percival *Press*, with the usual typos and misspellings. JURGEN JENSEN BURIED AT 34. Shattuck frowned down the room at Edna, who was fielding a phone call. She hung up, and he asked, "What's this Jensen funeral thing doing in the Talbot file?"

"I didn't know where else to put it," she said. "He's the only person ever died of AIDS in Percival. And you know who dies of AIDS well as I do. Only other gay man we've got here is Talbot."

The office was at the back of the tall white frame church. Nobody had shoveled the walk alongside the building, so Shattuck kicked through snow to the five steps that climbed to the office door, on which a neat sign read COME IN. He went in. It was colder inside than outside, where a pale sun was shining. Doors stood open on three offices, but nobody was in any of them. Still, maybe someone was in the building—he heard organ music.

He found the chancel, squeezed his bulk through a narrow door, and climbed corkscrew stairs to the organ loft. Thirtyish, skinny, the organist wore a ponytail, jeans, and a T-shirt stenciled with a picture of Jerry Garcia. At the sight of Shattuck he raised his hands in mock fear. "My name is Denis Du Pre," he said. "and I didn't do it."

Shattuck said, "You didn't play for Jurgen Jensen's funeral?"

Du Pre's cheerfulness died. "Not what he would have wanted. I played groany old Calvinist hymn tunes. What his parents wanted. They sat there, stiff as wood, with their white-bread daughter and her

son. They were uncomfortable. Church full of gays and lesbians. But the boy was broken up. Big kid, hockey player, straight-A student, class president. Crying like a four-year-old."

"Over an uncle? Any idea why?"

"He'd been kind to him. Years ago. When the parents broke up."

Shattuck gazed down at the rows of empty pews. "Jurgen your friend?"

"Last couple of years, yes. After he got HIV. We have to help each other."

"So you know his other friends," Shattuck said.

Du Pre grew wary. "Some. Why? What's this all about?"

"Gene Talbot is in the hospital. Intensive care. He was assaulted last night. With a hatchet, among other things. He obviously had an enemy. Did he have any friends? Was Jurgen one of them? Was Talbot at his funeral?"

"No way. Jurgen knew him, but they didn't socialize. Jurgen didn't like him." Du Pre's laugh was brief and humorless. "Does anyone?"

Shattuck cocked an eyebrow. "Are you adding to my problem?"

Du Pre was appalled. "Oh no. Forget I said that. Talbot is the kind who makes us all look bad, and he was resented for that. But no gay did this, sheriff. A hatchet? That is pure bigotry, pure hate crime. Is he going to live?"

"I doubt it," Shattuck said.

Du Pre's mouth twisted. "And when you catch the one who did it, his lawyers will plead him not guilty by reason of mental defect. He'll be a victim, not a killer. All he needs is medication, not punishment. No one will remember poor, awful old Gene Talbot."

Shattuck dug a card from his pocket. "As soon as the news is out, there'll be talk." Thin fingers took the card. Sad eyes studied it. Shattuck said, "In your crowd, you may hear things I wouldn't." He started down the twisted stairs, feet too big for the narrow treads. "If you do, phone me, all right?"

Du Pre sounded panicky. "What do you expect me to report?"

"Shouts and murmurs, especially murmurs." Shattuck edged himself out the tiny doorway into the chancel, took a step, then stopped and called up to the organ loft, "What's that nephew's name?"

"French. He'd come to the hospital to see Jurgen. Sulky. Wouldn't shake my hand. But that's the name he gave. Larry French."

"I left Avery, uh, Deputy Lemke, off at home," Brun Schneider told Shattuck. "It was a long shift for him. He was real tired." The red-haired, pop-eyed young deputy stood holding a blue fleece-lined windbreaker jacket. Cheap. You could buy them anywhere, and millions did. "Digging up all that snow didn't turn up anything. But this was in the river. You know. By the bridge there? Avery spotted it when we was driving across. Caught in the reeds. Frozen there." He turned it over in his hands. It was still a little bit stiff. "Looks like blood here. Inside."

"Take it to the washroom," Shattuck said.

In the washroom he laid it on a

hand basin and peered at it closely while it dripped on the vinyl floor. It did look like blood. Washed to a thin pink by the river, but maybe the lab in Randall Falls could make something of it. He sent Schneider after a plastic bag. When he came back, Shattuck had him hold open the bag, and he dropped the jacket into it. He said, "I don't suppose in your excitement, you and Lemke remembered the hatchet, did you? You didn't wade in up to your ass in frozen slush and poke around for the hatchet, did you?"

"You think the assailant wrapped it in the jacket?"

"I think that's how the blood got on it," Shattuck said.

"Yeah, right. Well, I guess I can go back with hip boots."

"And a rake." Shattuck took the sack away from him. "You do that."

Schneider pushed glumly out of the washroom, and Shattuck followed and said, "At a guess, how many beat-up white pickup trucks would you say there are in Percival and vicinity?"

Schneider stopped, turned, grinned at him. "You're kiddin', right?"

Shattuck sighed and nodded. "I'm kiddin', Brun."

The list Bobby Hovis had made for him of men who had come to Gene Talbot's house on odd weekends was not long. After he had dropped the jacket off for analysis at the sheriff's station in Randall Falls, he went to find the men. None of them had heard what happened to Talbot last night, he watched them sharply as he told them, and he judged they were truly shocked. Had Talbot told them of threats to his life? Had he spoken the name of anybody he was afraid of?

"No" from the dentist, reedy, balding, pink and white, in the expected crisp white jacket. "No" from the veterinarian, stocky, with black bristly brows over bright blue eyes. In his store dogs never let up barking, and Shattuck wondered what the man did not to be stunned by silence at home at night.

"No" from the third man, who sold men's wear in a shop that signed itself Savile Row. He looked like the image of a beautiful youth in a snapshot that sunlight had damaged. He was, Shattuck guessed, in his mid-fifties. Like the others. Like Talbot. Maybe ten years younger was the slight, nervous man in a green apron and yellow rubber gloves who with his mother operated a florist shop on a busy corner. He took Shattuck behind a tall, glassed refrigerator filled with irises and orchids and whispered his negatives, seeming worried that his mother might discover his sexual bent. Even this late in the day.

The Tool Room was open, but without customers. The bouncy bartender bubbled over with chuckles. His Elvis pompadour and long sideburns, the way he rolled up the short sleeves of his loud Hawaiian shirt to hold a pack of Marlboros, the wooden match he chewed, and the cigarette he kept ready behind his ear, only showed how time had passed him by. His arms and chest bulged, all right, but it was fat mak-

ing the shirt too small for him, not muscle. Not lately, not for a long time. He stopped joking when Shattuck told him what had happened to Talbot. He staggered backward, sat down hard on a stack of beer crates.

"I told him those South American drug dealers were dangerous. I warned him. He just laughed. And now look what's happened." He began to cry.

"Those drug deals were fantasies," Shattuck said. "I wish they'd been real. Then I'd have somebody to go after for this."

The barkeep blew his nose, dried his eyes. "Fantasies?"

"The FBI proved that," Shattuck said. "Years ago."

"Well, he certainly made me believe him."

"That was his stock in trade." Shattuck started for the door. It was old fashioned, with a big oval of glass in it. Sun glaring off the snow outside made him squint. He turned back. "Jurgen Jensen? He ever come in here?"

"All the time." The bartender stood up. "Till he got too sick. AIDS. What a waste." He lit a cigarette and bleakly watched smoke drift in a shaft of sunlight. "He was bright and funny, but he was also good and kind. Really. Everybody adored him. Funeral was only last week. I was there. So were all his friends. In Percival of all places. I thought that ugly church would fall and crush us."

"He and Gene Talbot never came in here together?"

The bartender almost reeled. "You don't know what you're saying. No way. Those two had nothing, but I mean nothing, in common."

"When Jurgen was a kid, Talbot never, uh, took him to bed?"

Headshake. "Gene likes 'em beautiful but dumb. Jurgen wasn't dumb."

It was just five but dark and already very cold again, somewhere in the twenties. Lights were on indoors at the Paychek place. But from the sound of it, so was the television set, and Shattuck had to ring the chimes and knock a long time before a porch light went on and Janos Paychek, a hefty, beard-stubbly man in sweats opened the door. He looked sore. Then he took in that this was a uniformed peace officer, and he looked startled. Then he looked alarmed. "What's wrong? Something happened to my kids? They only went to the—" He shut his mouth when Shattuck held up a clear plastic bag for him to see.

Shattuck asked, "You lose this? It's got your name carved into the haft."

Paychek scowled, squinted at the hatchet, reached out.

"Uh-uh." Shattuck stepped back. "Don't touch."

Paychek said, "Yeah, it's mine. Where'd you get it?"

"Somebody threw it in the river," Shattuck said. "Last night. Just after a bloody crime out at the Talbot house."

"Oh, hell." Paychek was a pale man to start with. Now he turned paler. "It was on the news. You think I did that?"

"I don't know what to think,"

Shattuck said. "You know Mr. Talbot?"

Paychek shrugged. "Buys gas from me sometimes. But I don't know him. Not how you mean. I mean, he's a drug dealer, keeps guns around, he's a pervert. Everybody knows that. Hell no, I don't know him."

"What kind of car do you drive, Mr. Paychek?"

"A 1989 GM pickup," Paychek was shivering, rubbing his hands. He looked behind him into the glowing warmth of his living room. But he decided against inviting Shattuck in. "It's freezing. Let me get a coat, okay?"

Shattuck said, "What color is your pickup?"

"Used to be cherry red," Paychek said. "Kind of rust color now. Look, I wasn't even in town last night. Me and the wife was clear over to Appleton. Her folks' place."

"I'll need to check on that," Shattuck said. "What's their name?"

"Henrickson. Hank and Sophie." Paychek gave a street address. "Old man's got prostate cancer. Do I get my hatchet back now?"

"It has to go to the police lab, first," Shattuck said, "to see whose blood is on it. And whose fingerprints. If any. I doubt even an axe murderer would forget to wear gloves in this weather."

"It wasn't me," Paychek said. "Somebody stole it, didn't they?"

"Maybe," Shattuck said. "Thanks for your time."

He trudged back out to the patrol car. As he started to get into it, a rust-colored pickup truck with bags of groceries in the back jounced squeakily in at the Paychek driveway. A pair of girls about ten or twelve were riding in the cab. They wore red and yellow striped stocking caps. The driver was a long-haired teenage boy with Paychek's pale skin. He was trying to grow a Mark McGwire beard. As he sat waiting for the garage door to go up, he stared at Shattuck. Out of curiosity or fear? Hard to tell. Shattuck motioned to him.

The kid switched off the engine but not the lights. He got down out of the truck and came at a slouchy walk. The girls gave glad cries and followed him. They stood in front of Shattuck in a bunch. The girls didn't exactly stand. They wiggled. And giggled. Their cheeks were rosy with the cold.

The boy scratched his scraggly beard. "What do you want?"

"The answer to a question," Shattuck said. "Where were you last night?"

"Right here," the boy said. "Babysitting them."

"We rented *The Lion King,*" the smaller girl said.

"For the forty-zillionth time." The boy nodded at the bagged hatchet in Shattuck's hand. "What's that?"

"Someone tried to kill a citizen with it last night. It belongs to your father. But he was in Appleton. That's why I wanted to know where you were."

"Pizza Hut," the boy said. "Video store. And here. That's all."

"You want to tell me your name?"

"Ernie." The boy gave a sour laugh. "My folks claim they didn't mean it that way, but it's some kind of joke. Ernie Paychek, right?"

"If you say so," Shattuck said. "Thank you. Goodnight."

Ernie slouching, his sisters skipping, they went off across the brown, snow-patchy lawn to the red pickup. Shattuck opened the trunk of the patrol car and dropped the hatchet into it and slammed the lid down. The pickup rolled into the garage and the garage door closed. Shattuck got into the patrol car and drove off.

When he got up in the dark at five, he could see out the window that it was snowing again. The streetlamp showed him that. He flapped into a bathrobe and went to the kitchen. He brewed a pot of coffee and switched on the radio for news. The Talbot murder was there, among storm warnings, lame jokes, and raving commercials. ". . . lies in a coma. Lieutenant Ben Shattuck stated yesterday that the sheriff's department is using all its resources to find the person or persons responsible for the coldblooded gunning down and brutal beating of the wealthy classic car collector."

Shattuck showered, shaved, put on a fresh uniform, boots, sheepskin jacket, fur hat, and went out, not through the garage this morning but through the front door. This was because he'd driven the patrol car to Randall Falls last night, to leave the hatchet at the lab and to stop at the hospital for an update on Talbot. He was still alive. The ICU staff told Shattuck it was a miracle. Bobby Hovis was sitting in a waiting area. Stained plastic coffee cups were stacked one inside the other on the low table in front of him. A magazine was open in his lap. He wasn't reading it. He was staring straight ahead at nothing. He looked drained. Shattuck sat down facing him.

"You've been here too long," he said. "You need sleep."

It took Hovis a moment to recognize him. "Did you find out who did it?"

"Not yet. Tell me something. The boy in the white pickup—did he have long hair and a beard?"

"A beard?" Hovis peered. "Hey, he was blond, sixteen, seventeen."

"Why don't you let me drive you home now?" Shattuck said.

Hovis shook his head. "He could wake up. I have to be here for that."

"They'll call me," Shattuck said, "and I'll call you. I promise."

"Yeah. Well, look, truth is I don't want to be out there alone. I don't know who this monster is. He could come back." He glanced down the hall. "If they throw me out, there's motels across the street. That way I can be here as soon as the doors open in the morning."

"You all right for money?" Shattuck reached for his wallet.

"Gene never let me run out." Tears came to Hovis's eyes. He blinked them back, made an effort to smile. "Thanks anyway. I'll be okay."

Once he'd reached Percival, Shattuck had felt too damned tired to bother fetching his own car from the station parking lot, too tired even to park the patrol car in his garage. He'd left it on the street. Now he stepped out into the falling snow, pulled the door shut behind

him, and scuffled along the white-blanketed front walk to the brown car. It looked oddly slumped. This was because its tires were flat. He crouched to see why. Slashed. He smiled. Hell, he must be closer to solving this case than he'd thought.

When Lemke brought him his car, Shattuck headed for Mom's Diner. But the bright windows of the place that normally cheered him up sent him on past this morning. He didn't want to hear the gloating of the breakfast crowd over the Talbot beating. And he didn't want to field their prying questions. Not even if he had answers, and he didn't. He had picked up two Eggs McMuffin and an apple turnover at the drive-by window of McDonald's and brought them here to his desk. Faxes lay on the desk. They were from the police lab in Randall Falls. The blood on the jacket and hatchet was AB negative, an uncommon type that matched Talbot's. Good. But there were no fingerprints on the hatchet. The maniac had been mindful of the cold. He'd worn gloves.

Edna Durwood brought Shattuck a mug of coffee. The mug had BOSS stenciled on it. "Thank you," he said and blew at the steam.

"Welcome. The Appleton police canvassed the Henricksons' neighbors, and they say the Paycheks were there the way they claim." She started off, then turned back. "Oh, and Captain Baer wants you to call him right away."

"Will do." But Shattuck was a big man and needed nourishment to get moving, so first he ate the two little egg, cheese, and ham sandwiches and the apple turnover, washed them down with coffee, and wiped his mouth and fingers on tiny paper napkins. Then he picked up the receiver and punched Baer's number. "Ben Shattuck," he said. "What's up?"

"What kind of citizens you producing over there in Percival?" Baer said. "Two A.M., one of 'em started roaring around in circles in the hospital parking lot, yelling and firing an automatic rifle at the moon. Whoopee! So, as you can imagine, all the hospital people ran to see. Or ran to hide. Or ran outdoors to up their chance of getting shot. Just one cool character remembered to get on the phone to us. But time we got there, the fun was over."

"Anybody get a look at the driver?"

"He was wearing a ski mask," Baer said.

"Anybody write down a license number?" Shattuck said.

"Now, what do you think? But they did agree on the vee-hicle. It was a beat-up white pickup truck."

"I'm so pleased to hear that," Shattuck said.

"You'll be even more pleased to hear that another individual in a ski mask ran into Intensive Care the minute the hoo-rah began in the parking lot, while the medics were all spinning their wheels or bumping into each other. And shot off a pistol. Six times. In the general direction of Eugene Talbot."

"Oh my God," Shattuck said.

"Can you believe?" Baer said. "Not one bullet hit him. Twenty-twos, like night before last. But

these didn't go into his skull. They went into the wall, the ceiling, the floor. Oh, and one blew the valve off an oxygen tank."

"So he's still alive?" Shattuck said.

"Probably outlive us both."

"And ski-mask got away?"

"And ski-mask got away. The ICU people were focused on that oxygen tank nobody could turn off. And I don't like to say it, Ben, but my night troops—they're not too swift. Both ski-masks got away."

"In their goddam white pickup," Shattuck said.

"Cheer up," Baer said. "Only a few hundred of those in Randall County."

Shattuck grunted. "And one more firearm than we needed."

The one more firearm, it turned out, was from the collection of Herb Many Horses. Herb was important in Indian affairs thereabouts, had all his life liked hunting deer, and had more than once been chairman or whatever they called it of the Randall County branch of the National Rifle Association. At one time and another he and Ben Shattuck had sat on committees together. Or had butted heads on TV and in the public print over gun issues. Now he came through the front doors, a broad-faced, broad-shouldered, big bellied, brown-skinned man wearing a mackinaw and a matching hat with earflaps. He didn't stop at the reception counter where Deputy Schneider presided but pushed the little wooden gate and went directly to Shattuck. He didn't say good morning. With a disgusted look he laid creased papers on the desk.

"These are the registration papers for an AK-47 I owned."

"Past tense?" Shattuck said. "What happened to it?"

"Some son of a bitch stole it. Got in through a basement window. Not worth locking. It's too small for a man. Had to be a kid. Screen's just lying there in the snow. What would a kid want with a weapon like that? Kick would knock him on his ass first try."

"Maybe the kid let some grown-up in through the front door."

Many Horses took off his hat. "Busted the glass out of the cabinet and reached in and took it. Naw, only one set of wet footprints. Little ones." His brows knitted. "Must've happened when I was over to Randall Falls. Them Ojibwas. They get a problem, I never knew them to solve it theirself yet. Got to drag every Indian in the U.S. and Canada into it."

"Sit down," Shattuck said. "I've got a story to tell you." He sketched in words what had happened at the hospital last night. "Descriptions made it sound to Captain Baer like an AK-47. To me, too. Maybe it was yours. Who knew about it, Herb? Who knew you owned one?"

"Family, is all," Many Horses said. "My oldest son, George—he give it to me for Christmas. So that's what, six weeks? No strangers in that time."

"Kids?" Shattuck wondered, "small enough to get through that window?"

Many Horses frowned, flipping

the earflaps of the hat on his knees. "Just my grandkids. But if they want something from me, all they got to do is ask. They know that."

"Not for an AK-47, though."

"They wouldn't want it," Many Horses said. "They'll get their own guns when they get the right age. They know that. I taught 'em. Taught 'em everything about guns. How to clean 'em, how to carry 'em safe, how to shoot. I know you don't believe in that. But it's my way, the Indian way, the American way."

"And stealing what you can't pay for is the human way. Herb, you have to protect that collection of yours better. A glass-front cabinet? Seriously?"

"Nobody ever stoled none of 'em before," Many Horses said. "This ain't no high crime area, Ben. This ain't Milwaukee, this ain't Chicago."

"Not yet." Shattuck stood up. "Ask Miz Durwood to copy these. You can take the orginals back home. Deputy Schneider will take your report, and you can sign off on it. Only take a few minutes."

"Yellin'? Shootin' in the air from a pickup truck?" Many Horses rose, put the hat on, picked up the papers. "Sounds like teenagers on a beer bust."

"That white pickup," Shattuck said, "doesn't suggest anybody to you?"

"Suggests half the town. Used to drive one myself." And he went off, bandy-legged, in round-heeled cowboy boots.

Kevin Ralph was thirteen but still small enough to crawl through that basement window at his grandfather's. His mother brought him into the station at three thirty. It was snowing again, and the boy wore a parka and floppy galoshes. He was pale and shaken and kept repeating, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." His young mother, in a white fake fur jacket and white shiny boots, was slim, big-busted, hawk-faced. Her expression was grim. She didn't answer the kid. Likely she'd heard his apologies all the way over here in the car and was tired of them.

Shattuck sat the two of them down. "What are you sorry about?" he said.

"I shouldn't have done it," the boy said. "But yesterday, after school, Ernie comes to me at my locker, and he goes, is it true my grandpa has a gun collection, and I go, it's true. And he goes, does he have an Uzi? And I go, no, but he's got a AK-47. And he gets real excited, and he goes, will I help him? Because he has to have it to capture this drug dealer he knows about. There's a big reward. And if I get him the gun, he'll split it with me."

"Ernie?" Shattuck frowned. "Ernie Paychek?"

"A big kid," Lorena Ralph said wryly. "A hero."

Kevin went on. "But today I heard what happened last night. In Randall Falls. At the hospital where that queer guy is dying that somebody tried to kill. And how this truck drove around firing off this automatic rifle, and I thought, Jesus, it must be Ernie that chopped the queer guy with the axe, and—" Kevin's voice broke, his mouth

trembled, tears ran down his face "—and I got scared he lied to me, there wasn't no drug dealer. No reward. He got that off TV. He's just tryin' to murder this queer guy. And then he'll kill me, too, because I know."

"And so then, too late, he comes and tells his mother." Lorena Ralph scowled down at the weeping boy as if he were past saving. "Like he shoulda done in the first place before he ever broke in at his grandpa's." She grabbed his shoulder and gave him a shake. "Big kids are bad news, Kevin. How many times I gotta tell you—keep away from big kids?"

"I'm sorry," Kevin said again, hanging his head. "I'm sorry."

Shattuck caught the mother's eye. He lifted his chin and stood. She stood, too, a little uncertain. Shattuck touched the boy's shoulder. "We'll be back in a minute," he said, and led Lorena Ralph to the coffee room. She went in ahead of him, and he closed the door. "I want you to take him out of town. You have relatives anyplace that can put you up for a few days?"

Fear widened her eyes. "You think this Ernie would hurt him?"

"He might try," Shattuck said.

"Eau Claire?" she said. "I have a sister in Eau Claire."

"That's fine," Shattuck said. "Don't wait. Take him now."

In the biting cold, the early-closing dark, Shattuck knocked at the door of the Paychek house again, the back door this time, and didn't have to wait long at all before a woman opened it. She was fortyish, plain. Graying blonde braids wrapped her head. Her hands and apron were floury. She held a glass measuring cup. She blinked. "Sheriff?" she said. "You bringing back Janos's hatchet?"

"Not yet," Shattuck said. "It's got Gene Talbot's blood on it, Mrs. Paychek. We have to hold it for evidence. Is Ernie home?"

She turned to look at a white kitchen wall clock. "He oughta be. Truck in the driveway?"

"Not yet," Shattuck said. "Look, I can see you're busy, but—" he took a folded paper out of a pocket "—I've got a search warrant here. I need to look around inside."

Her mouth dropped open. "Search warrant? What for?"

"A gun, an automatic rifle. It was stolen yesterday. And the boy who stole it says he gave it to Ernie. I believe it was used in a crime last night. And I need to find it."

"Oh Lordy," she said. "Now it's guns, is it?"

Shattuck edged her a little smile. "Let's hope not. If I can look around, we'll see, won't we?"

"Ernie's a good boy," she said, not stepping aside to let Shattuck in. "Looks after his little sisters real nice. Even cooks breakfast for me sometimes. Sundays. Oh, I know he brags a lot to the other kids about bad stuff he supposedly does. But it's not true. It's just to make them, like, admire him, you know?"

"I know how that is," Shattuck said. "Can I come in, please?"

She set the measuring cup aside and jerkily wiped her hands on the apron.

"Well, sheriff, I'd rather Janos

were here. My husband. I don't know . . ."

Shattuck stepped inside. It was warm as toast, and the cooking smells were wonderful. Lots of paprika. A Dutch oven bubbled on the stove. Bread dough lay on a floured board. "It'll be all right," he assured her. "I won't take long. Just show me Ernie's room, now, will you?"

A white telephone was affixed to the wall. She went to it. "I want Janos here." She took down the receiver. She was flushed and defiant. "I think I've got that right." She began pushing buttons. Her hand trembled.

"Absolutely," Shattuck said. "I'll just go ahead and search."

He clumped through to Ernie's room, opened some drawers, peered under the bed and into a closet that smelled of sweaty socks. But after he stepped on something and picked it up and it turned out to be a painty-headed screw, he knew where the gun was. Kevin Ralph's small-boy voice said in his head, *He got that off TV.*

Shattuck stood on a chair that creaked ominously under his weight and peered through the slightly tilted grill of an air-conditioning vent. Sure enough. He got down off the chair just as the woman came to stand scowling in the doorway of her son's room, and Shattuck's search became all show. Leaving the gun was dangerous, but that's what he did. And inside five minutes, with thanks and apologies, he was out of the house into the cold again.

He drove under big winter-stripped trees to the next block and parked. The street curved just right, so he could see the Paychek place from there. If it didn't commence to snow again. He talked to Edna Durwood on the radio, hung it up. This weather was wrong for a stakeout. He grew colder as the dark came down. But in twenty minutes the rust-red truck swung into the driveway, both men in it. Maybe the kid worked for his dad at the filling station after school. The truck rolled into the garage, and the door came down.

He checked his watch and turned on the heater. Just long enough to take the edge off the cold. He didn't want to exhaust the battery. He switched off the heater, turned up his collar, pulled down the earflaps of his fur hat, and waited. Another fifteen minutes passed. The garage stayed closed. Paycheks, father and son, were taking the news of his visit calmly, looked like. Or had she even told them? Maybe she'd wanted them to eat in peace first. Thinking how good that kitchen smelled made Shattuck hungry. Had he misjudged her? Wasn't she going to tell them at all? If not, why not?

He hadn't time to worry about it. Light glared off the rear view mirrors, making him squint. A patrol car pulled in behind him and parked. Its lights went off. A door slammed. And skinny, horse-faced Fritz Baer walked up beside him—hooded jacket, turtleneck sweater. Shattuck opened the window.

"You bring any food with you?" he asked.

Baer gave his head a wondering shake. "You always hungry?"

"I'll pick up a pizza." Shattuck started his engine. "Won't take me long. That's the place to watch." He pointed. "Number 522. The cowboy who staged the Wild West show in the hospital parking lot lives there. Ernie Paychek. Seventeen, long hair, little nothing beard. Drives a rust-red 1989 GM pickup."

"The one at the hospital was—" Baer began.

"White, I know. But what I believe is, sooner or later, maybe not till the family is asleep, Ernie will come out and drive off in the red one and lead us to the white one. And whoever that belongs to is who tried to kill Gene Talbot. Twice." Shattuck had halfway closed the window when he remembered. "Be careful, Fritz. I searched the house. He's still got that AK-47. I left it where he hid it so he'd think he's smarter than I am."

"I hope he isn't." Baer stepped back. "Anchovies, right?"

Shattuck touched his hat. "You're the captain," he said, and drove off.

By the time he got back to the Paycheks' street, snow had begun to fall again. He pulled up behind Baer's patrol car, switched everything off, lifted the warm pizza box off the passenger seat, opened the door, and got out.

He didn't close the door. There wasn't time. A white pickup truck with its lights off came roaring up the street toward him. Someone fairhaired hung out the window on the passenger side. That someone had an automatic rifle. The rifle began to stutter and spit fire. Bullets banged into the metal and glass of the patrol car. Shattuck dropped the pizza box, crouched behind the open door of his car, and yanked his 9mm from its holster. With crazily squealing rubber the white pickup careened past him. Bullets shattered glass over his head, and the fragments struck his fur cap, his collar, his shoulders. He pivoted and fired at the rear tires of the pickup. It held the street for a heart-stopping second, then tilted, jumped a curb, fell on its side, and crashed into a tree. Shattuck ran to the patrol car. Baer was bunched on the floor under the steering wheel. All angular elbows and knees, he pulled himself awkwardly onto the seat. He hadn't been hit.

"Sorry," he said. "He must have sneaked out the back way. On foot."

"You want to radio for an ambulance?" Shattuck said.

Doors began to open up and down the block, yellow light streamed out into the snowfall. Householders appeared, shrugging into coats, calling "What happened?" to each other.

"Everything's okay," Shattuck shouted. "Sheriff's already here."

Baer was talking on the two-way radio. Shattuck, to reassure the citizens, reached in front of Baer and switched on the bar of winking colored lights on the roof of the patrol car. Then, shaking splinters of glass out of his fur hat, he trudged up the snowy street to see who was in that silent white pickup truck.

By ten thirty Larry French, the big fairhaired, hockey-playing A student who had fired the AK-47 tonight lay in the Intensive Care Unit of the Randall Falls hospital in

a coma, in a bed only six feet from Gene Talbot's. The smash-up of the white truck had fractured the boy's skull. His thin, washed-out mother, probably a nervous wreck anyway, sat in the waiting alcove in the hall across from a sour-looking man in a cheap suit who must have been her husband. She chainsmoked cigarettes. He worked a crossword puzzle.

Ernie Paychek, whose turn to fire the AK-47 had come last night, had broken an arm, a few ribs, and a good many teeth, but he was in a regular room. His mother and father were with him. They sat side by side on stiff steel chairs, staring numbly at their son. His face was bruised and swollen. His mouth was puffy. He was drugged for pain. But the doctors had told Shattuck that he could talk. And he did talk. What he said, to Shattuck, was unprintable.

Three hours later a broad, white, many-buttoned telephone yodeled on Fritz Baer's desk, where he and Shattuck were drinking coffee and writing up a report on a computer. Baer lifted the receiver, said his name, listened, and hung up. He looked at his watch. He stared at Shattuck. The expression on his long, lantern-jawed face Shattuck couldn't read.

"You're not going to believe this," Baer said.

"Try me," Shattuck said.

"Gene Talbot died at one oh-five."

Shattuck frowned. "That surprises you?"

"What surprises me," Baer said, "is that Larry French died seven minutes later." He watched Shattuck stand up and head for the coat rack at the end of the room. "Where you going?"

"Ernie Paychek will talk to us now." Shattuck said. "You coming?"

"He came over around eight," the boy said in the room where Shattuck and Baer stood like a pair of shadowy monoliths beside his bed. They had not turned on the lights. The only illumination came from a window. Landscape lighting reflected off snow. "He wanted me to go with him, but I couldn't. I had to babysit my sisters. He had ski masks for us. Gloves so we wouldn't leave fingerprints. A .22 was stuck in his pants. He said we'd break into the house. Talbot had all kinds of guns. Larry said he had to have an Uzi.

"I said, 'What for?' and he said, 'You can rule with one of those.'

"And then I went outside with him, and he saw this hatchet by the woodpile and threw it in the truck. 'What's that for?' I said, and he said it was in case the house was hard to break into. Then he got in the truck. 'See you after,' he said and drove off. Look, can I go to sleep now?"

"Soon," Shattuck said. "Did he come back?"

"Sure. I was surprised how soon. Like he'd been to the store or something. He said Talbot had been home. So Larry rang the doorbell and pretended he wanted to buy one of those junkers Talbot keeps down by the road. A Mustang. But it needed a lot of work. And Larry said thanks but no thanks and got

in his truck and came back. So it was a big nothing.

"But I could see he wasn't telling me the whole story. He was pale and jittery and kept jumping up and walking around, grinning to himself. We were in the kitchen, right, and my sisters were in the family room watching 'The Lion Yawn,' but it's not all that far, they could see and hear us, and finally he grabbed me up and yanked me into the garage and said, 'I killed him, Ernie. I killed the rotten pervert. He kept talking all the way down the hill, joking, being charming, right? That voice. The lah-di-dah way they talk. It drives me crazy. And when he bent to unlock the Mustang, I pulled out the .22 and shot him in the back of the head. Filthy faggot. He was the one who gave Jurgen AIDS. My uncle. He was the one who killed him.

" 'He fell down in the snow. He was all bloody, but he wasn't dead. He was reaching out. "Help me," he kept saying. "Something's happened to me. I need your help." And I just kept pulling the trigger till all the bullets were gone. "Die, you creep," I said. "Why won't you die?" But he wasn't dead. So I started kicking him. But he just grunted. He didn't die.

" 'And then I remembered the hatchet. And I ran and got it, and I chopped him. Like chopping firewood. Just chopping at his head. And he put up his hands, and I chopped his hands. His shirt pulled up from his belt and I saw his back, and I chopped his spine. And finally he stopped moving. He didn't say anything more, didn't make a sound. He was dead. Christ, I'm glad. That son of a bitch. I'm so happy.' He stretched his arms up. 'Thank you, Jesus,' he said."

"What was so special about this Jurgen?" Baer said.

"When Larry's dad walked out when he was like nine or something, Jurgen, like, I don't know, filled in for him, right? He was Larry's mother's brother. And he was always around. He took Larry to hockey games, ice fishing, the Brewers. Then, when his mother married again, the husband didn't like a queer hanging around and told Jurgen to get lost. But Larry never forgot, and when he turned sixteen and his new so-called dad wouldn't buy him a car, he went to Jurgen, and Jurgen bought it for him. The white pickup. Who from? Had to be Gene Talbot, right?" In the aseptic darkness, Ernie Paychek laughed. "Isn't that what friends are for?"

"Talbot didn't sell pickup trucks," Shattuck said. "And he and Jurgen were never friends. Larry was mistaken, Ernie. His beloved uncle didn't get AIDS from Talbot. He couldn't have."

"Why not?" Paychek said. "They were the only two faggots in town."

"We've seen his medical records," Baer said. "Talbot was HIV negative."

FOUR LAWYERS

Bruce Graham

Illustration by Patrick Timmes

"Three defense attorneys, the district prosecutor, and a stenographer," said Barrows. "Who brought the doughnuts?"

Wilson held up his hand.

"Okay," said Barrows, "the rest of us spring for lunch."

"Are we going to be here that long?" asked Wilson.

The brevity of Wilson's statement took Barrows by surprise. The middle-aged, balding, ascetic-looking veteran of dozens of high-profile criminal cases was accustomed to launch into an extended oration at the drop of a gavel.

"Okay then, I'll begin the bidding," said Barrows. He stared at a sheaf of papers before him. "Circuit Judge David Johnson, forty-two, was accustomed to traveling away from home every other week, and to Springfield, seventy miles away, every few weeks. He was married, with two grown children, one in the military, the other at Michigan State. His wife manages a real estate brokerage office in their town, which she opens every weekday morning at eight thirty. He was a man of strict habits, rarely drank, never gambled, didn't swear or smoke, was prompt and courteous to a fault, avoided eggs, butter, granulated sugar, white bread, red meat—"

Graves snickered.

Barrows seemed to ignore the young, earnest-looking, overweight junior associate from the oversized firm. Barrows had been itching for days to ask Graves how he'd been drafted into representing the seven-dollar-an-hour convenience store clerk, a question Barrows knew he'd not be able to ask until long after this can of worms was untangled.

Barrows continued. "Most dangerous to his health, the judge exercised. He jogged almost every morning, from around six to almost seven. The judge's otherwise abstemious habits didn't prevent him from seeking and finding nubile and congenial companionship while away from home. We know of a liaison in Springfield a year and a half ago, another, well, I'll not mention the name or town, a few months ago. His most recent dalliance involved your client, Tom." Barrows nodded toward Graves. "She says it began four months ago when they met at the convenience store where she worked."

"Egalitarian sort," said Wilson.

Barrows was tempted to be flippant, to comment on the obvious charms of Graves's client, the thirty-one-year-old Tracy Dunston. Instead he continued with his presentation. "The week of June ninth the judge was in Springfield and stayed at his usual stop, the Riverside Motel, an out-of-the-way midscale hostelry not far from the hiking trail that winds around that part of the city. Your client, Tom, shared the judge's room for two of those nights, the tenth and the twelfth. Am I going too fast, Mary?"

The court reporter, drafted into this conclave for the day, shook her head. "It's fine."

Barrows resumed. "The eleventh was a circuit judges' weekly dinner meeting; he endured a continent night. The judge's tenancy ended unexpectedly early on the morning of the thirteenth. He did not return from his predawn jog, and his body was discovered shortly after noon, stabbed and pitched in the weeds along the hiking path, about a mile from the motel."

"How was the body found?" asked Colton.

Barrows looked at the lawyer for the male suspect: young but with the cool assurance of an experienced practitioner in Criminal Court, yet one with whom Barrows had never directly crossed swords. "The judge was scheduled to hear uncontested divorce cases beginning at eight thirty that morning. When he wasn't there by nine, the motel was contacted. When he didn't respond to a call to his room, the police were brought in. His morning jogging routine was well known, and a search along the trail was a logical approach. Enough people used the trail, and he hadn't been reported, so the police searched along the edges of the trail. The room was gone over and evidence found that he hadn't been alone overnight."

"Very tactfully put," said Colton.

"Details available on request," said Barrows. "The police began a canvass of places in the vicinity and were on the track of Mrs. Dunston—"

"Now, Jim," said Graves, "that gives the impression that they had some reason for finding my client—"

"Not as a suspect," said Barrows, "but as someone who had information. In any event Mrs. Dunston contacted the police after the evening news hit the tube. She said that she left the motel a little after seven that morning, to get to her job by seven thirty, and didn't think anything was wrong until the judge didn't call her that afternoon. Your client, Rod, comes into this as the spouse of the deceased, who stands to benefit from significant insurance, with jealousy over the judge's treatment thrown in for good measure."

"And spite," said Graves, "to do the job where and when it would involve Mrs. Dunston."

"A stereotype," said Colton.

Barrows smiled at Colton. "Thank you, Ms. Politically Correct. But will your PC credentials keep you from using an approach from which *your* client might benefit at trial?"

"Sustained," said Colton, smiling back at Barrows.

"The male half of the Dunston marital team is a suspect. Man was about to put asunder what God had joined together, over his objections; he was known for a short fuse and had shot off his mouth in a couple of watering holes about how he was going to get whoever was cavorting with his wife. Your client," said Barrows, nodding at Colton, "gave conflicting stories to the police about that morning—"

"Not conflicting," said Colton, "overlapping and vague."

"Oh yes, that," said Barrows. "Mr. Dunston's drinking habits since he and Mrs. Dunston split in February included almost nightly visits to the Northside Tap, beginning shortly after eleven, where he'd remain until closing and then leave, half or more in the bag. On this particular night, however, he didn't show at all."

"The second shift ran late?" said Colton.

Barrows shook his head. "That won't work. Second shift closed up at eleven thirty, only a half hour late. And there's the question of his clothes."

Colton frowned. "His clothes?"

Barrows looked down at the papers in his hand. "It's here somewhere. Oh yes. He arrived at work on the afternoon of the thirteenth in new jeans and denim shirt, purchased that morning, successors to the same outfit he'd been in the habit of wearing for weeks, and he hasn't been able to account for his old ensemble."

"And Mrs. Dunston's motive?" asked Graves.

"We're a little light there," said Barrows. "But she refused to say much beyond what I've already told you, and that she was at the motel the two nights that week and left for work about seven each morning.

"But we do have a posthumous psychological profile of His Honor. This tells us that he was possessive with perhaps a touch of obsessive and strongly into control. We could speculate that your client—" Barrows nodded toward Graves "—might have wanted out, or fully in, with the then Mrs.—now Widow—Johnson out, and that the judge wouldn't swallow it, wanted to keep it the way it was, and your client decided that the best way to get out was to get rid of the problem."

"Murder?" said Graves.

Barrows waited for more. When it did not come, he said, "She tells us the judge was occasionally violent, not enough to lead to police complaints, but a familiar pattern. We've yet to hear the 'Burning Bed Syndrome' defense. Are you saying you won't use it?"

Graves again said nothing for several seconds. His face relaxed. "We're here to hear, Jim."

Barrows said, "She was a few minutes late reporting for work that morning and was seen going into her house wearing one outfit that A.M. and leaving the house headed for work in different duds."

"After a night of romance," said Graves, "she needed fresh clothes."

"Afraid not, Tom," said Barrows with a shake of the head. "Her night-before glad rags were at the motel."

"Would she have left evidence of her presence at the motel if she wanted to do in the judge?" asked Graves.

"She knew everyone knew she'd been there," said Colton, "and saw no reason to try to hide it."

Barrows pointed at Colton. "Give the little lady a big hand. The people in the motel restaurant saw her with His Honor the night before.

Phone records show the judge called her a couple of times a week. Now to the Widow Johnson. She reported to her office after eight thirty that morning. She denied knowing anything about Mrs. Dunston but said she assumed that the judge partook of female companionship when on the road, since he'd done it before. The family home is in a condominium complex, sixty units, with cars kept in garages. She stopped at the grocery store that morning, had some store items in the car, and store records show the purchase at eight thirty-six."

"She knew where His Honor stayed?" asked Graves.

"Sure," said Barrow. "And his jogging habit, and it was sixty-eight miles by shortest direct route and seventy-four miles by circuitous secondary roads. Plenty of time to leave the house in the predawn dark and return to the store at half past eight with a little amateur surgery fitted in."

"Nobody saw her car at the motel?" asked Wilson.

"We have no one as yet, no speeding tickets either way, nobody who saw her leave home before dawn," said Barrows. "This was the first time she'd been to her office after eight thirty in almost two years."

"She punches a time clock?" asked Wilson.

Barrows shook his head. "A staff member lives between the Johnson house and the office. She walks, and tells us that every morning she leaves her house at twenty-five after, takes four minutes to walk to the office, and is always passed by Mrs. Johnson. They exchange waves, the Widow Johnson is always there with the office open. She remembers thinking to herself that morning when she had to open the office herself that something must have happened to the judge's wife. She was calling the Johnson home at eight forty when Mrs. Johnson came in the door."

"Woke up late," said Colton.

"No, she told us she hurt herself getting up."

"Oh yes," murmured Wilson. He fumbled in his folder and held out a sheet of paper. "A visit to a doctor that afternoon."

Barrows said, "You sent us a copy. She was examined by another doctor the next day, and his opinion is that her injury doesn't work for how she said it happened but is consistent with a glancing blow from a jogging shoe."

"All this is very interesting," said Graves, "but my client's parents aren't made of money. My meter is running."

Barrows stretched out his hands on the desk and pushed his chair against the credenza behind him. "I'm open to a deal."

The three defense attorneys said nothing: thirty seconds; forty seconds; fifty seconds. Then Wilson said, "Somebody'd better ask. What are you offering?"

"One of your folks pleads to murder two, twenty-five years, no parole before fifteen."

"A strange way to do it," said Wilson, smiling. "You've given each of us information that weakens your case."

Barrows stood and stretched. "Your clients haven't told you, your ethics would prefer you didn't know, but they got together on this project, one did it, perhaps the others don't even know which one. Then they set everyone up with enough suspicious circumstances to raise a reasonable doubt in their own case."

"Unique approach," murmured Wilson.

Barrows learned forward, fists on the desk. "How does this sound: one of your folks pleads to murder second and takes twenty years, no parole for ten, provided he, she, testifies against the others, no deal for them."

Blank stares from all three lawyers.

"If you don't like that," said Barrows, "an alternative: all of your clients plead to conspiracy, maximum, ten years, no parole, and we close this up."

The hubbub lasted almost a minute before Wilson's voice rose above the others. "You're joking, Jim."

"Your clients got together, one of them did it, and the others set themselves up as suspects. Would you all prefer my trying the bunch for murder one?"

"Are you serious?" asked Graves.

"If any or all of them are charged, they could present a case for the other two doing the job, reasonable doubt, which would, they think, let all of them off the hook. Reasonable doubt. But the case for all of them having gotten together is strong."

Graves smirked. "We'll have to run this by our clients."

"Of course. And in a few days I'll speak to each of you separately."

Wilson stared at Barrows. "Such brass I've never experienced."

"Now, Rod, if you'll look at it from my perspective—"

"We're paid to view it from our side," said Graves.

A random remark by Barrows about the weekend's arena football game opened the way for casual banter as the three defense attorneys milled their way from Barrows' office through the anteroom and into the art deco hallway.

Barrows returned to his office and closed the door. He sank into his high-backed swivel chair, slid the chair a foot or so toward the court reporter, and studied her as she packed her equipment. "No need to ask if you got it all?"

"Everything except that flurry of words toward the end. I knew you didn't need to know it all. I'll reconstruct it tonight as best I can."

"Did I sound persuasive?"

"An honest answer?"

"You've given it." Barrows smiled at the freckled face wreathed in the long shaggy hair that cascaded over her shoulders. "When will you be cutting your hair?"

She crossed her legs, top of red skirt grazing the center of left knee. "When you get a conviction in this case."

"Will that be the same time you accompany me to the opera?"

"Which performance?"

"The final presentation is *Tosca,* before that, *Figaro.*"

She nodded. "Dutch treat?"

"In deference to political correctness and to avoid the appearance of harassment—"

She laughed. "I can't afford it, I'll take the appearance of harassment, and you can risk being politically incorrect. You'll never get a conviction by that time."

"We'll see."

Barrows handed three papers to Mary. "Friday's performance. I'll pick you up for dinner at five thirty."

Her face was blank.

Barrows moved away to greet the judge and the bailiff. Barrows handed several documents to each lawyer at the defense table and stood at his own table. "Your Honor, it's been agreed that this be done in a group. All defendants will plead guilty to conspiracy to commit murder, a violent felony, with the sentence to be the maximum, ten years, no parole until at least seven years are served. The State is ready for the Court's colloquy."

The defense attorneys mumbled assents. The judge nodded to the bailiffs, who went to the hallway door and led in two women and one man to join the defense attorneys.

Reporters, two television cameras, and miscellaneous unidentified persons almost filled the spectator area behind the bar.

The judge—Ricketson from District 7, a new appointee especially designated for this proceeding—made a brief statement that he was not acquainted with the deceased or family, and stated the purpose of the proceeding.

Six sheriff's deputies—two female—entered the courtroom from the side and stood in a knot at the end of the jury box. Three of them carried handcuffs and leg irons. The Widow Johnson stared at the officers and appeared to swallow hard several times.

Mary glanced back and forth between the judge, the defense lawyers, and Barrows—gaze lingering longest on Barrows—until Judge Ricketson's almost hour-long dialogue with the defendants, their attorneys, and Barrows reached its climax with his statement of sentence of each defendant to ten years, with at least seven years to be served before they would be eligible for parole, followed by an anticlimactic drone of appeal rights and bond responsibilities in the event of an appeal. The smooth and almost scripted verbal flow—which Mary had heard hundreds of times in her years as court reporter—was interrupted only by occasional muffled sobs from Tracy Dunston.

When the three were shackled and removed, the spectators, bailiffs,

and newspeople gone, and the judge departed for home, Mary leaned on the rail surrounding her work station. "How did you do it?"

"Ethical lawyers."

"Come again?"

"A few careful shadows and a few court-ordered wiretaps. Each defendant was followed and their phones were tapped. Eventually they talked to each other, and we had them."

"But what did the lawyers have to do with it?"

"Ethical principles forbid lawyers to give advice on how to advance, commit, or avoid detection of a crime. The lawyers were afraid to tell their clients how to avoid being trapped by wiretaps or shadows; that would have aided their clients in their scheme. And ethics requires that the lawyers tell their clients of my offer. Their clients—least two of them—weren't cool enough to keep on with the charade without reassurance, and they talked to each other."

"So you didn't have enough during the first meeting?"

"No. Their scheme to create reasonable doubt might have worked. Are you ready for *Tosca?*"

"Yes, provided it's the beginning of a scheme that may lead somewhere."

" 'May,' the critical word, yes, I'll agree to that."

"Which one did it?"

Barrows shrugged. "I don't know; the conversations are ambiguous on that. They drew straws, and the one who did it didn't tell the others. They'd worked out the scenario for what each was to do if they were only supporting actors and if they were the actual sticker. Each one knew only that he—she—was or was not the actual doer of the evil deed."

"Don't you want to know the whole story?"

"I know enough: three convictions for one murder, a good percentage for a reelection campaign. I'll see you in four days and two hours."

THE NEW YEAR'S GIFT

I. J. Parker

HEIAN-KYO (KYOTO), ELEVENTH CENTURY (JAPAN) DURING THE FIRST OR SPROUTING MONTH (FEBRUARY).

The dark figure crossed the street and paused in front of the rice merchant's shop. A sliver of light from inside briefly lit his young face; then he melted into the shadow of the doorway.

Only a few doors away a middle-aged couple, huddling together against the freezing drizzle under an oilpaper umbrella, stopped on their homeward walk. Their name was Otogawa, and they were returning from New Year's dinner at their son-in-law's house.

"Did you see that?" the woman hissed. "Wasn't that Kinjiro sneaking into Itto's place?"

"Curse that Itto!" mumbled her husband, swaying on his feet and nearly dropping the lantern. "Hope the fellow kills him. The old miser's got us like rats in a bag, rot him!"

"If you stayed away from wine and dice, we wouldn't be in this shape," she scolded. "And you're drunk again! As if we had anything

to celebrate when you're about to lose the shop."

"Shut up!" he muttered and gave her a push that made the umbrella tilt crazily and drench them both with icy water. He cursed and staggered toward the door of his shop.

His wife followed him inside, muttering angrily. He collapsed on the raised flooring and began to snore. She lit an oil lamp from the lantern he had carried, put away the wet umbrella, took off her outer wrap, and removed her husband's muddy wooden sandals. Then she scurried to the front of the small shop where a narrow window opening high up in the wall looked out over the street. It was covered with oilpaper, which was translucent in the daytime. Climbing on a small wooden chest, she peered through a rent in the paper at the rain-glistening street outside.

She was just in time, for the dark figure emerged from the shop next door and the young man rushed past her window.

"It was him," she cried triumphantly. Her husband's comment was a loud snore. Jumping down, she ran to shake him awake. "Get up! Something's happened next door. You must go over right away!"

"Wha—?"

"To Itto's! That young hellion Kinjiro just came out again. And he was running. He's done something."

"Why should I care? Serves the tight-fisted villain right if the kid robbed him."

"You fool! If you offer your help, the old man may wait for the money." She slipped the sandals back on his feet and gave him a push towards the door.

With a grunt her husband staggered out into the icy rain.

The festive New Year's season began badly in the Sugawara household. On the first day of the year, the weather was so abysmal that the emperor could not pay homage to the lodestar, a bad omen for the nation and apparently also for the Sugawara family. Akitada was passed over in the annual promotions. On the second, the diviner came to cast his divining rods. When he read the resulting hexagrams, he looked glum and shook his head. Young Yori came down with a fever that night. On the third, the so-called "tooth-hardening" day, Akitada's elderly secretary Seimei bit too heartily into one of the "tooth-hardening" and life-prolonging rice cakes and broke a front tooth, throwing the whole family into gloomy anticipation of his death. Then Akitada caught a cold.

By the morning of the seventh day, the day of the seven herbs rice gruel, he woke with a vile headache and sore throat. His misery grew when no gruel appeared. In fact, there was no breakfast at all—not even a soothing cup of hot tea though Seimei was usually obsessively punctual and reliable.

Shivering, Akitada dressed and went across the chilly courtyard to the kitchen. There he found to his irritation his entire staff—Seimei, the cook, his wife's maid, and Sa-

buro, who swept the courtyard and answered the gate—clustered around a seated beggar woman.

"What is going on? And where is my rice gruel?" Akitada croaked, glaring at everybody accusingly. This was no time to gossip with stray beggars! It was the busiest time of the year and he had a cold.

Most of the kitchen surfaces were covered with trays and baskets of New Year's delicacies: melons, radishes, and huge platters of round flat rice cakes along with salted trout and roasted venison and boar, all auspicious foods for the coming year. Among the foodstuffs Akitada saw his bowl of seven herbs gruel, so beneficial for all sorts of ailments —sore throats for example—left to grow cold because of the shabby visitor.

They immediately scattered and knelt, touching their heads to the floor. Seimei, senior retainer and family friend, performed this obeisance in a perfunctory manner, sitting up quickly to say, "It's Sumiko, sir. She's in trouble."

Sumiko? Akitada blankly eyed the kneeling beggar woman. She was wet and dirty. On second glance she looked younger than he had thought but sickly and misshapen.

"You do remember Sumiko, sir?" urged Seimei. "Lady Sugawara's maid? She left us last summer to marry Kinjiro."

"Oh!"

Akitada was shocked. This sickly, worn, and slatternly looking woman was their Sumiko? His wife's little maid had sparkled with health, prettiness, and laughter. In fact they had fully expected her to run off with some wealthy merchant's son. Sumiko had certainly had enough admirers and had turned down several good offers of marriage, perhaps because she was attached to Akitada's wife. She had even accompanied them to the north country. For eight years Sumiko had been a part of their family, and then, a year ago. out of the blue, she had announced that she wished to marry a penniless good-for-nothing.

The young man was not only poor, eking out a miserable wage as a messenger between post stations, taking and bringing horses as they were needed, but he had been in trouble with the law. Sumiko defended him, claiming he was a changed man and would be adopted by a generous relative, but Akitada and his wife did not take this seriously; they attempted to talk her out of it. Sumiko had ignored all warnings and married her man.

"The police have arrested her husband for the murder of his adoptive father," said Seimei now, justifying all of Akitada's misgivings about the match.

Sumiko burst into violent sobs.

"She says Kinjiro did not do it," Seimei continued, "but they have no money, sir, and Sumiko is not well. She expects her first child any day. Not knowing where to turn, she has come to you."

Akitada looked again and saw that the pitifully thin woman in her loose faded garment was indeed in the last stages of pregnancy. Akitada was not as a rule a superstitious man, but now he

thought of the diviner and wondered what new calamity had just befallen them. This, however, he did not say. Instead he exclaimed with false heartiness, "And quite right, too. We'll soon have you smiling again."

When the young woman raised herself with difficulty, supporting her grotesquely swollen belly with both hands, Akitada marveled that she could have walked this far in her condition. Her face had a translucent bluish pallor, and her lips were colorless. As he searched for more soothing words, she gave him a trembling smile, and for a brief moment he recognized the old Sumiko.

"You are cold and wet," he said. "Have you eaten today?"

She shook her head.

The cook jumped up. "I'll heat some of the seven herbs gruel."

Sumiko waved the offer away. "I only came to beg you to help Kinjiro, sir." She paused, then added pathetically, "For old times' sake." She fumbled in her sleeve and produced a small package wrapped in crimson silk. This she extended to Akitada. "And to wish you and your lady an auspicious year," she whispered.

Akitada took the gift from her icy fingers and unwrapped a small carved tortoise, symbol of long life and happiness. The tiny creature on the palm of his hand was a lucky charm, not expensive but clearly treasured for its magic powers. If anyone needed luck, it was Sumiko, but he could not refuse the traditional New Year's present.

"Thank you, Sumiko," he said. "I am very sorry about Kinjiro's trouble and will certainly try to help." He was afraid he sounded as dubious as he felt. To his mind, Kinjiro's reputation made his guilt a virtual certainty. "But you must eat some gruel first." His own stomach growled. "The herbs will be good for you and your child." Casting a hungry glance at his bowl of gruel and a pitying one at Sumiko, Akitada told Seimei to make the young woman comfortable and bring her to him later.

Back in his study he sat down behind his desk, placed the tortoise in front of him, and drummed his fingers dejectedly. He wished he had snatched one of the rice cakes on his way out of the kitchen. He wished Sumiko had not appeared today of all days, bringing such a gift. With a sigh he rose and went to a small chest where he kept his valuables. Inside lay a small stack of gold coins. He took one and a sheet of decorated paper to wrap it in.

Placing his gift for Sumiko next to the turtle, he waited. Seimei eventually appeared with a steaming bowl of gruel and busied himself making Akitada's morning tea.

"What is the story?" Akitada asked, raising the bowl to sniff the aroma of parsley, borage, garlic, and other pungent green things before taking a cautious sip. His wife Tamako had gathered the first greens of the year herself. They were added to the usual plain rice pottage in honor of the season and to ward off disease during the coming year. While Akitada doubted such long-range effects, he was very fond of

the flavor and thought its medicinal properties soothed his painful throat.

"It appears Kinjiro was invited for New Year's dinner at his adoptive father's house," Seimei told him, "but they quarreled and Kinjiro left in anger. The following morning the old man was found stabbed to death." Seimei measured tea into a small teapot of Chinese porcelain painted with sprays of pink plum blossoms. The pot also was a custom of the season. "Itto's neighbors testified that they saw Kinjiro return during the night. He does not deny it, but says he left the old man alive and parted from him on the best of terms and with a gift of silver."

Akitada's face lengthened.

"Yes, it sounds unbelievable, and it's his word against that of the widow. She says, when her husband told Kinjiro he had canceled the adoption, Kinjiro became angry and threatened him. The police searched Kinjiro's room and found the silver but no weapon. With his reputation they had no choice but to arrest him."

"They found no murder weapon?" Akitada sipped his gruel slowly, savoring it. "What about this adoption?"

Seimei brought the teapot over and placed it on a small wooden brazier, warming his hands over it. "It's quite true, sir. Kinjiro's immediate family is dead, but his grandfather had a cousin, a rice merchant here in the capital. This Itto was childless, and when he reached his eightieth year, he gave up hope and adopted Kinjiro as his heir."

"Good heavens!" Akitada put down his bowl abruptly. "Not the Itto in the eastern market?"

"The same, sir. The second richest rice merchant in the capital."

Akitada shook his head in amazement. "What an extraordinary stroke of good fortune for that ne'er-do-well! And it is this wealthy and most generous Itto that Kinjiro is supposed to have killed?"

"It is. Fortune and misfortune are said to be tied like the twisted strands of rope. But if you've finished your gruel, may I bring Sumiko in? She is waiting outside in the corridor."

"Yes, of course. And inform my wife that she will stay with us for the time being."

Sumiko looked marginally better than before and had stopped crying. He presented her with the gold coin and his good wishes for a happier future. Without unwrapping it, she bowed and expressed her gratitude with a humility totally out of character for the pert young woman Akitada remembered. He sighed inwardly. No point in rubbing in that she should never have put her trust in Kinjiro, adoption or not.

"Sit down, Sumiko," he said in a kindly tone. "Seimei tells me that Kinjiro was adopted by a wealthy man."

She looked down at her hands, again protectively folded over her swelling abdomen. "Yes, and we thought ourselves blessed at first. But Kinjiro was unhappy from the beginning. He tried working for Master Itto until they quarreled and he left." She looked up at Aki-

tada and said earnestly, "Kinjiro does have a temper, but he would never hurt the old man. He's like Mount Fuji; he erupts, but there's no harm in him."

Akitada doubted that. "What did they quarrel about?"

She hesitated. "Master Itto wanted him to move into his house and run his business."

"But surely that is not too much to ask of one's heir!"

She lowered her head. "Without me, sir."

"Without you? You mean he wished you to keep separate establishments?"

"I mean he wished Kinjiro to divorce me so he could arrange another marriage for him. You see, Kinjiro married me without his approval."

Akitada was appalled and did not know what to say. He began to have more respect for the unlucky Kinjiro. "And this quarrel happened on New Year's Day?" he finally asked.

"Oh no. Last autumn. Kinjiro came home drunk one day and refused to go back to the rice shop. When I asked him what was wrong, he said it was all over. The adoption wasn't working out." She paused and looked down at her hands, twisting restlessly in her lap. "I begged him to go back, but he was too proud. I offered to leave him, but there was the child and he wouldn't hear of it. He lost his job and the allowance Master Itto paid him. The post house would not take him back, and he could not find other steady work. For a while he did small jobs here and there, but soon we had hardly any food and the landlord threatened to throw us out in the middle of winter. The day before New Year's I thought I would have to go begging in the streets, but Master Itto sent a boy to invite Kinjiro to New Year's dinner." She sighed deeply.

Kinjiro's motive for robbery and murder could hardly have been stronger. Akitada suppressed his apprehension. "What happened?"

"Master Itto was very pleased to hear of the child, and he changed his mind about me, but he wanted Kinjiro to give his first son to a monastery. He was afraid of dying and thought that the Buddha would look kindly on such an offer. Kinjiro refused, and Master Itto accused him of heartlessness and ingratitude. He said he was not his son if he only wanted his money and would give nothing in return. Kinjiro told him to keep his money, and he was certainly no father of his. It must have been a terrible fight, but I made Kinjiro go back that night to apologize. I told him it was a son's duty to obey his father. Besides, we were starving and soon would be in the street, and he would have neither a son nor a wife. So Kinjiro went back, and Master Itto was so pleased that he gave him two bars of silver to pay our debts and told him to bring me the very next morning to live with him and his wife so that I'd be properly looked after when the child was born." She sighed again and said forlornly, "We were so relieved."

After a pause Akitada asked, "What can you tell me about the household?"

"There was Master Itto and his wife. And Hayashi. He's the shop manager. And a boy for the rough work."

"Not many servants for a wealthy man."

"Master Itto was careful with his money."

Akitada considered such economies miserly but did not say so. "Did Itto have any enemies that you know of?"

She shook her head helplessly.

There was little more to tell. The police had come the following day and arrested Kinjiro for the murder. Sumiko had spent a week appealing to constables, judges, and prison guards, hardly eating and sleeping only from exhaustion. This morning she had run out of options and turned to Akitada.

The case against Kinjiro did not appear particularly knotty, but neither was it hopeful. In fact, everything pointed to him: motive, opportunity, personality, and past history. Kinjiro was abjectly poor, while Itto had been a wealthy man without other heirs; Kinjiro had been seen at Itto's place near the time of the murder; he was known as a man of violent temper, and they had quarreled once again on the very day of the murder; and he had a police record.

But apart from being unable to refuse Sumiko's plea after her years of faithful service, Akitada had been touched that Kinjiro had stuck by Sumiko even when tempted with a life of comfort and wealth.

"Well," he said in a bracing tone, "let me see what I can do. Meanwhile my wife will make you comfortable here until this matter is resolved."

Sumiko wept with gratitude.

Akitada found Itto's shop in the market quarter. All the shop fronts were festively decorated for the season, and shoppers crowded the roads on either side of a narrow canal. A small Buddhist temple adjoined Itto's property on one side, and an oil seller occupied the other. In front of it a bridge spanned the canal, and on the other side stood a small wine shop, the Kingfisher Tavern. Its entrance was also decorated with pine branches, straw ropes, and paper twists in celebration of the New Year.

The chilly wind had caused Akitada's throat to ache again. He decided to have some of the hot spiced wine served during the holiday season and plan his strategy.

There were no customers in the Kingfisher. The landlord, a morose looking elderly man in a black and white checked cotton robe, stood in the doorway watching the shoppers. His expression turned hopeful when Akitada approached, and he rushed to welcome the noble guest with smiles and bows. Akitada ordered the wine and took a seat where he could watch the street. The wine arrived, pleasantly sweet and warm to his raw throat and chilled body.

At the temple across the way two old beggars sat on the steps, and boys skipped up and down between them. Just inside the gatehouse a monk was selling incense to a couple of women who had come to worship, no doubt to pray for good for-

tune during the new year. The pervasive spirit of hopefulness was painfully at odds with his errand for Sumiko and her unborn child and its father, who might not live out the month.

Itto's shop took up the front of a larger property that extended far to the back. The rice merchant would not have had much trouble sharing his living quarters with Kinjiro's growing family. No doubt the old man had begun to feel lonely with just an aging wife to keep him company in his large house.

The shop door, covered with a curtain bearing the symbol of a bale of rice and the characters of Itto's name and decorated with the ubiquitous pine branches, led to the business premises, part of which could be seen under the propped-up shutters. A clerk was inside, serving a customer. An agile youngster behind him ground rice kernels into flour by running on a wooden wheel that kept large mallets pounding away and added to the cheerful noise of the busy street.

Akitada reached for his wine flask and found it empty. Instantly the landlord appeared at his side with a fresh one. "Good, isn't it?"

"Yes, thank you. You must do a good business here."

"So-so. Now and then people grab a bowl of noodles or a plate of vegetables and rice and rush off again. But there's only me, and it's more than a man can handle by himself." He looked wistfully across the street.

"I suppose you get to know your neighbors pretty well," said Akitada, following his eyes.

"Have you heard about the murder?"

Since the landlord seemed eager to chat, Akitada invited him to share a cup of wine. "What happened?" he asked.

The landlord sat and poured. "The old rice dealer was killed the night of the first, and the police arrested his adopted son. He was no good, always quarreling with old Itto. Itto's wife was beside herself with worry. She's a great little woman, that Mrs. Itto, handsome and hardworking. The old miser didn't deserve her. Well, she's free of him now and rich to boot." He smiled. "Itto was past seventy when they got married," he went on. "The decrepit old fool wanted children. No such luck!" He chuckled.

Akitada raised his brows. "Men have been known to father children in old age," he pointed out. "It is women who become barren. How old is Mrs. Itto?"

"Not yet forty. She'll need a good man to look after her interests." He turned to glance over his shoulder. "There she is now," he cried, "talking to that Hayashi. He's the manager, a dry stick but he knows the business. Fine-looking female, wouldn't you say, sir?"

A small, brisk woman had appeared from the back and was speaking to the clerk. She was wearing a black silk gown that emphasized her generous bosom and round hips. Her hair was parted in the center and gathered behind her head. Even at this distance she appeared overtly feminine. Akitada abruptly adjusted his image of a frail old widow.

"An old man with a much younger wife," he mused aloud. "Did the police suspect her of having a hand in the murder?"

His host stared at him. "Heavens, no," he cried. "Why should she bother when old Itto had one foot in the other world already and all his wealth coming to her? No, no. The young fool did it all right. The Otogawas saw him."

"Oh?"

"Yes. That's their shop next door." The host leaned closer. "Otogawa gambles. Rumor had it that he owed Itto money and would have to sell his business, but since Itto's died, he's looked as happy as a starving sparrow who found a pot of rice."

"Surely he will have to repay his debt to Itto's widow."

The landlord smiled. "If the widow asks for it."

Akitada watched the animated Mrs. Itto chatting with the customer and remembered that the Otogawas had pointed the finger at Kinjiro.

His cup drained, he reached for his string of copper coins and paid. "It's a strange world," he said, shaking his head, and strolled across the bridge and into Itto's shop.

The manager rushed up, bowing deeply. He was a skinny man in his forties, with anxious eyes and an obsequious manner.

"I wish to see the owner," Akitada told him, raising his voice over the noise of the rice mallets.

The man cast a nervous glance over his shoulder. "Might I be of some assistance, my lord? I am the manager and take care of all the business."

"Really?" Akitada raised his brows and eyed him sharply. "And your name?"

"Hayashi. Most humbly at your service." Another bow.

"Well, this does not concern you."

Mrs. Itto joined them quietly. On closer view she had a round, handsome face with full lips and bright eyes. The eyes took in Akitada's appearance with minute interest. She bowed deeply. "This insignificant female is the Widow Itto. How may I be of service?"

"It is very noisy here. Is there somewhere we can talk privately?" Akitada glanced pointedly at Hayashi.

She said quickly, "Mr. Hayashi runs my business. I have no secrets from him." She hesitated. "There's only my husband's office."

"That will do very well. Allow me to express my condolences on your loss." Thinking Hayashi's promotion interesting, Akitada made no further objections to the man's presence.

She led the way to a large room behind the shop. Hayashi trailed behind. Itto's office was a gloomy place with rich dark wood paneling. The carved shutters over the single high window were closed. Furnishings, mats, lamps, cushions, and chests were all of good quality, proof of the comforts enjoyed by wealthy merchant families. A corner of the room had been set aside for an ancestral altar. Wooden plaques bearing the names of the deceased surrounded a small painting of a seated Buddha. Various vessels held food offerings to the spirits of Mr. Itto's ancestors, among them a

small pyramid of New Year's rice cakes. The newest of the wood plaques occupied the center.

Akitada approached the altar. "I see you honor your husband's forbears. An admirable family custom." He bowed respectfully towards the late Itto's plaque. Mrs. Itto joined him, lit some incense, and bowed also. Hayashi, clearly a reluctant companion, hung back.

On a shelf behind the altar rested some family heirlooms: an old ledger with purple silk cover, a finely made lady's fan and another for a man, a pair of spurs with silver mountings in a pattern of intertwined reeds, an old wooden baton of office with some faded writing on it, the breastplate of an armor, also decorated with reeds, and a quiver of dusty arrows.

"Your husband's family enjoyed an illustrious past," commented Akitada. His eyes were watering from the pungent smoke of the incense.

"One of them was a general who won a big battle. My husband was very proud of his family." She turned away, touching a sleeve to her eyes.

The suffocating scent burned in Akitada's throat and made his head hurt. He moved away from the altar. A desk littered with papers and documents stood against one wall, a cushion, slightly askew, in front of it. Two plain wooden chests, the kind used to hold coins and silver, their doors and drawers heavily reinforced with metal and locks, stood on either side. This was where the rice merchant had transacted the financial side of his business and where he must have been working late when surprised by his attacker.

His widow, following Akitada's glance, shuddered and averted her eyes quickly. "Forgive me for bringing you here," she said. "We are ordinary working people who cannot observe mourning customs. My husband was at his accounts when his relative attacked him and stole the silver from that chest. My husband's spirit has been exorcised, but you may wish to go back to the shop."

"Not at all," Akitada said, wishing his head would stop throbbing. "A terrible thing! Did you lose much?" The chest looked as though it held a great deal more than the two silver bars found on Kinjiro.

She raised a plump hand to her eyes. "I lost my husband. Isn't that enough?"

"I suppose one of the servants discovered the crime?"

She nodded. "The boy. I sent him to see to see if my husband wanted his morning rice."

"You had not missed your husband during the night?"

She flushed a little. "My husband was sleeping here when he was working on the accounts. At year's end people pay their debts, and the accounts must be kept carefully. But won't your lordship sit down and take a cup of wine?" She placed some cushions and invited Akitada and a reluctant Hayashi to be seated, then clapped her hands. When no one appeared, she exchanged a glance with the manager, who got up quickly and left.

They sat silently for a minute or so. Akitada's headache made him

dizzy, and his throat felt full of thorns. He swallowed painfully, hoping the wine would soon appear. In the shop the noise of the mallets ceased abruptly, a blessed silence, for each thump had raised an echoing throb in his skull.

Mrs. Itto said, "It is hard for the boy to hear anything over the sound of the mallets."

Akitada nodded. He remembered that there were no other servants.

She twisted her hands nervously. "If only my husband had listened to me, this would not have happened. I felt it in my bones that the young man would do my husband harm." She fidgeted some more, then got up. "Excuse me please, while I see what's keeping the wine."

The moment she was gone, Akitada went to the merchant's desk. A ledger lay open, the entries making tidy rows, listing sums of money paid to or received from various persons, and the purpose of the payment. The more recent entries were in a different, less precise hand.

Akitada turned a few pages. Itto had not only bought and sold rice but like other rice merchants had lent money against rice and other property, being in effect a sort of pawnbroker. The amounts collected before the new year were impressive, but a few sums were still unpaid. Akitada found the name of Itto's neighbor Otogawa easily, with a substantial debt of twenty silver bars. It had been crossed out crudely and without Itto's neat notation of date of repayment. Pursing his lips, Akitada glanced at the two chests. The lower door of the right one stood slightly ajar, and he gently eased it open. Inside were the tools of the merchant's trade, four abacuses, two ink stones, several brushes in their holders, water flasks, a scale for weighing silver and coins, and, at the very back, a peculiar upright lacquer rack with a silver design of grain or grasses. He was bending to look at it more closely when he heard steps in the corridor and hurriedly resumed his seat.

The widow entered, followed by the boy with a tray. Having set this down on the floor between their cushions, he left. A moment later the mallets started up again.

"Hayashi had to wait on a customer," Mrs. Itto explained as she joined Akitada. "Please allow me to pour you a cup of spiced wine."

"Thank you." He drank, but his throat still ached abominably, and he spoke with difficulty. He wished himself home. Only Sumiko's pallid face and her little tortoise held him back. "The purpose of my visit was to extend my condolences and to ask what your plans are for the future," he told the widow.

She stared at him, surprised, since she had never laid eyes on him before this day, but answered readily enough. "I shall carry on my husband's business with the help of Mr. Hayashi."

"How admirable! Most women shy away from the difficulties of worldly affairs. But then it is lucky that you have a man you can trust."

She flushed deeply. "You misunderstand, sir. I am perfectly capable of looking after the business myself.

My late husband taught me a little, and I used to have my own shop before I married him. I wouldn't think of turning money matters over to someone else, no matter how devoted."

She had spoken quite sharply. Mrs. Itto clearly was a woman who not only could take care of herself but also manage the faithful and accommodating Mr. Hayashi. Akitada said, "Forgive me for prying into your family affairs, but I had wondered what Master Itto's arrangements had been for his adopted son's family." Seeing her blank astonishment, he added, "Perhaps I should have explained from the start that Kinjiro's wife Sumiko once worked for us and I continue to take an interest in her welfare."

For a moment she looked stunned. Then she cried, "Oh, it is too much! You expect me to support the wife of the man who murdered my husband? Imagine foully killing someone who offered a helping hand!" Her face was flushed. "I warned my husband. 'He is nothing but a common criminal,' I said. But my husband worshipped the memory of his family and wanted to continue the line. At the same time he hoped to do a good deed for an unfortunate relative. He wished to present a good account to Emmo-o when he appeared before the judge of the dead. So he picked this Kinjiro, a handsome fellow with a bad character.

"I told him it would do no good, but he said the boy would change. 'Fast ripe, fast rotten,' I said. In the end he agreed with me and canceled the adoption." Looking at Akitada with tragic eyes she cried, "And that is why Kinjiro killed him. Oh, my poor husband!" and burst into tears.

She appeared genuinely upset, and Akitada questioned his suspicious mind. After all, young wives could be as devoted to their husbands as old ones. "Believe me," he said apologetically, "I understand your feelings. It must seem shocking to you, but if the adoption papers are still in effect, Kinjiro's wife and her unborn child have some claims on your husband's estate."

She clenched her fists, crying, "I told you, he changed his mind! He tore up the papers."

"Ah," said Akitada, rising, "in that case, of course, there is no more to be said. Please forgive my intrusion on your grief."

Sobbing into her sleeve she muttered, "I shall not rest until my husband's murderer is punished."

At the shop's door Hayashi was talking to a balding red-faced man in a dark cotton robe. Both bowed deeply. Akitada paused to wish them an auspicious year and to comment on the weather. They returned his good wishes and agreed it was a long way from springtime yet.

When Akitada lingered, Hayashi said, "This is Mr. Otogawa, our neighbor."

"Oh," said Akitada, "you are the one who saw the killer."

Otogawa shook his head. "No, your honor. Actually it was my wife. From that window there. She shook me awake, crying 'Get up! Something's happened! You must go check on Mr. Itto.' "

Akitada widened his eyes. "And did you?"

The man gulped.

"Er, no. No, I didn't actually go. The fact is . . . too much wine at my son-in-law's house." He grinned sheepishly.

Akitada nodded his understanding. He turned to Hayashi. "And you, of course, had the day off to spend with your family?"

"Yes, of course." The answer was prompt, but Hayashi suddenly looked frightened.

Akitada glanced up the street towards the temple. "With a temple right next door, I expect the good monks were a great comfort to Mrs. Itto in her bereavement."

Otogawa gave a sharp, braying laugh. "Not that temple. Old Itto's been feuding with the abbot for years over the property line. No, Mrs. Itto went to the Purple Cloud Temple for the funeral arrangements."

Hayashi cleared his throat. "If you will excuse me, your honor, and Mr. Otogawa, I must get back to business."

Akitada looked after him. "A hardworking man," he said.

Another sharp laugh from Otogawa. "Now more than ever." He glanced anxiously towards his shop. "But I mustn't gossip. My old woman says I have the big mouth of a fool." He brayed again. "And the big laugh of a fool, too." He turned to go.

Akitada kept step with him to his shop door. A strong smell of cheap lamp oil met them. Inside a sharp-faced woman was measuring oil into small jugs.

"I'm back," announced Otogawa, walking in.

"You've been long enough!" she scolded, intent on her task. "Talking to that henpecked Hayashi again?" Her eyes fell on Akitada in the doorway, and she got up, simpering and bowing.

"Sorry! Sorry, your honor," she said. "I did not see you."

"The gentleman was visiting Mrs. Itto," explained her husband.

"I understand you are the one who identified the murderer." Akitada smiled at her.

She preened a little. "So I did. He was rushing out of the old man's house as if all the devils of hell were after him. Carrying away Itto's silver."

"You could see that in the dark? Were you very close to him?"

"I was at that window there." She pointed towards a narrow slit covered with a wooden grille. "He was this close—" she measured the distance with her hands "—and he was grinning like a fiend!"

"No doubt you ran next door to warn the Ittos?"

There was an awkward silence during which husband and wife looked at each other. "No," she said. "I didn't know he'd killed the old man."

He said, "It would've done no good."

"How do you know?" Akitada asked quickly. "Perhaps you might have stopped the bleeding in time."

"No way!" cried Otogawa. "Too many wounds! In the belly, the chest, the throat. You never saw so much blood . . ." He broke off abruptly when his wife jostled him.

"Go see to the soup or it will be ruined," she snapped.

"Don't let me keep you from your meal," Akitada said and turned away.

Taking a deep breath of clean winter air to clear the stench of oil from his stuffy head, Akitada considered Otogawa's slip with great satisfaction. So the neighbor *had* gone to see Itto after Kinjiro left, and they had kept that fact to themselves. Only someone who had been there could describe Itto's wounds so precisely, and to suppress such knowledge argued guilt. Kinjiro had not contradicted their testimony, but it was their testimony that had got Kinjiro arrested. Earlier Akitada had wondered if they had traded favors with the widow, a release from their debt in exchange for turning in Kinjiro, but now there was another, much darker motive. Had Otogawa gone to see Itto, argued with him about his debt, and killed him, knowing he could pin the murder on Kinjiro?

Akitada paused in front of Itto's shop to wipe beads of perspiration from his face. He felt feverish and dizzy and knew he should be in bed. Shivering, he wished once again that Sumiko had chosen a better time to ask his help. If only his head were not so fuzzy, or his limbs so infernally heavy! Still, he was done. All he had really needed to do was to find another suspect, one who could be offered to the police instead of Kinjiro. And Otogawa would serve admirably.

But he stood undecided. Inside the shop Hayashi was busy with a customer. He too had raised certain suspicions in Akitada's mind, but that would take more effort. No. He would go to Police Superintendent Kobe, convince him of Kinjiro's innocence, and then return to his warm and comfortable home to be cared for by his family.

The trouble was, he was dissatisfied with the Otogawa solution. Something nagged at his mind, something he had overlooked on his visit to Itto's place.

Shivering in the icy wind, he wracked his muddled brain. It had been in the rice dealer's room. Something had been out of place, or missing. Missing—like the weapon used in the crime. Then, suddenly, he knew.

The missing weapon was a sword, the sword of Itto's illustrious ancestor.

The question was, what had happened to it. His eyes fell on the adjoining Temple of the Four Heavenly Kings. Temples subsisted on the generosity of the community. The New Year's season was a particular blessing in this respect. Akitada decided to pay one more visit.

Throwing the beggars a few coppers, he climbed slowly towards the temple gate. The incense-selling monk in the gateway, seeing the silk robe and stiffened hat of an official, jumped up in hopes of a generous gift to the temple. "Welcome, welcome, your honor!" he cried, bowing deeply, palms pressed together. "May the Buddha bless you and guide your steps through this dark world."

Akitada dabbed at his face and nodded his thanks. "I was passing and thought I would pay a visit," he

said vaguely, looking around. "Perhaps someone can show me the sights?"

Akitada's rank produced a guide who was a senior monk. Burdened by advanced years and a large belly, he waddled slowly and spoke in a fruity, ponderous voice. He was determined not to leave out the smallest detail, and Akitada, who wished for nothing so much as a dark corner in which to sit and rest his aching body, had to pretend interest and devotion. In desperation he finally interrupted and croaked a question about the temple's treasures.

His guide, flattered by his thirst for knowledge, led him to a small treasure house. "I'm afraid we have little to impress your lordship," he said apologetically. "Just gifts from ordinary people in the quarter, though there are one or two valuable items. A sutra copy commissioned by a wealthy patron is perhaps special enough to show to a person of your discernment."

The treasure was indeed modest, a collection of lacquer boxes inlaid with mother-of-pearl or bone, an old lute with broken strings, and several pieces of porcelain. Akitada was admiring the sutra scroll, which was indeed fine, written in gold ink on deep blue paper, when he found what he had come for.

Half hidden behind a large brass censer lay a short sword, the kind called *wakizashi,* worn in the belt and used only for close combat on foot. This particular sword was made for ceremonial occasions. Its ornate grip was decorated with silver inlay as was its finely lacquered scabbard. The silver decorations depicted swaying reeds, the same reeds that decorated the breastplate on Itto's altar and the sword stand in the merchant's chest.

Akitada pounced on it. "An instrument of death," he cried, turning it in his hands. "Surely this is a strange gift for a temple."

"A family heirloom we think," the monk said. "Some of the craftsmen and merchants in the quarter are descendants of military families or have taken wives from noble houses."

The sword was old but well kept. When Akitada pulled it free of the scabbard, it moved easily, and the blade, ordinary steel, was clean and quite sharp, with a fine edge along both sides and a sharp point.

"You 'think'? Do you mean that this was donated anonymously?"

"Yes indeed. A special present on New Year's Day. It is common for people to leave small gifts of money or food at the gate during the night, but leaving a fine sword like this was a little unusual. Mind you, we were very glad to receive it. Someday it may pay for temple repairs."

Akitada put the sword back. "Thank you," he said. "It has been a most enlightening tour." Fishing a large handful of silver coins from his sash and pressing them into the delighted monk's hand, he added, "I feel deeply blessed by my visit and hope that you and your temple will enjoy a prosperous year."

It was strange how much better he felt a little later as he walked into Superintendent Kobe's office and

cried, "The blessings of the New Year to you, my dear Kobe! I have found the sword used in the Itto case."

Kobe, an old friend and sometime rival, raised his eyebrows. "May you prosper and live a hundred years! How did you know we were looking for a sword?"

Akitada chuckled and sat down. "I didn't." Then he explained about Sumiko and his visit to Itto's shop and the temple. "The sword is Itto's. It has the same pattern of reeds as Itto's military heirlooms and the sword stand was hidden in one of his chests. Someone left the sword at the temple gate during the night of the murder." Akitada paused and smiled with satisfaction. "And that means Kinjiro could not possibly be the killer."

"How so?"

"Kinjiro was seen leaving by the nosy Mrs. Otogawa. He was rushing off in the opposite direction."

"True." Kobe frowned. "If you are right, where does that leave us? He was the only one with a motive."

"Not at all. In fact Kinjiro was the only one without a motive. Old Itto had forgiven him. On the other hand, I chatted with a few neighbors and found at least six of them had reasons to wish Itto dead." Akitada cleared his throat. "Do you happen to have some hot wine?"

Kobe sent for it and poured.

His throat eased, Akitada continued, "For example, there is the Kingfisher Tavern across from Itto's shop. Its landlord has been lusting after Itto's wife and expects his luck to turn now that she is a widow. And then there are the Otogawas. They owed Itto twenty bars of silver and were about to lose their business. The debt was canceled in Itto's account book, but not by Itto's hand. Otogawa described the murdered man's wounds to me and commented on the bleeding. That means he entered Itto's house after Kinjiro left but lied about it to your people. It is possible that he found the old man alive, killed him, altered the books, and threw the blame on Kinjiro. Then there is the widow, who seems to have formed a very close relationship with her manager Hayashi. Both had strong motives, for when Itto reconciled with Kinjiro that night, the young man became his principal heir. Itto's widow would have had to depend on Kinjiro for support. It is likely that she listened at the door as the two men talked, and when Kinjiro left, she entered, took the sword from the ancestral altar, and stabbed her husband to death. She might have been helped by Hayashi. After the murder someone cleaned the sword and left it at the temple gate—a clever and quick way of disposing of the murder weapon. And that brings me to the monks, who had a long-standing feud with Itto over the line between their properties."

Kobe grinned weakly. "Not the monks," he said, "and I don't see any of the neighbors taking the time to carry away the sword. The widow is a possibility."

Akitada nodded. "Of course it was the widow."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Only she would have hidden the sword stand in her husband's chest.

A sword stand is a distinctive object. She could not leave it on the altar without the sword. Being only a woman of the common class, she would not have known that the absence of a sword among military heirlooms is a sign of dishonor. Itto would never have prided himself on an ancestor who had lost his sword."

Kobe slapped a hand on his desk. "Of course! Why didn't I think of that? The trouble is we'll never prove she did it."

"Oh, I don't know," said Akitada. His head was beginning to throb again, and he felt incredibly sleepy. "My task is done," he said, getting to his feet. "I promised Sumiko that I would prove her husband's innocence. But if I were you, I'd confiscate Itto's books. In a business like his there are bound to be illegalities. I shall not be surprised if you find that the Ittos and Hayashi were lending money illegally. Bring in the widow and her manager, along with the Otogawas, and question them. I think the Otogawas and Hayashi will have plenty to tell you once you put a bit of pressure on them. Hayashi looked browbeaten and afraid of the widow."

When Sumiko and Kinjiro came to thank Akitada for his help, he was outside with his wife. On that sunny morning Tamako had come to him in great excitement and led him to the far corner of the garden.

"Look!" she had cried, pointing upward at the ancient plum tree that stretched its gnarled and lichen-covered limbs against the limpid blue sky. "It's not dead after all, and spring is finally here. The old tree is going to bloom again."

Akitada looked up and saw a touch of rosy red, the color soft yet bright against the black bark. And then he saw another blossom, fragile as porcelain, and another. The twigs were covered thickly with pale buds, their tightly folded petals flushed with pink, each promising to become another perfect flower, the earliest harbingers of spring.

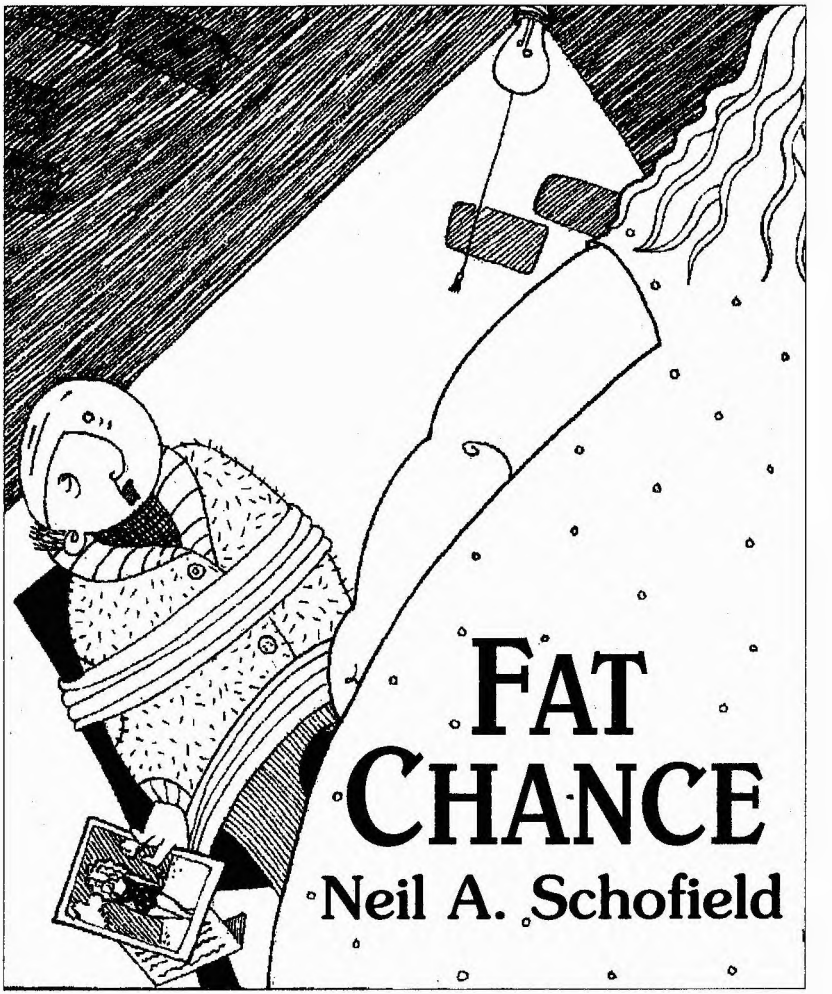
They were both smiling at the auspicious omen when they heard steps on the gravel path and saw Kinjiro and Sumiko walking towards them. Sumiko, pretty as a flower herself, carried a small bundle tenderly in her arms, and Kinjiro, tall and well-built, had his arm around her shoulders and a broad grin on his handsome face.

"Oh, I can see why Sumiko married him," murmured Tamako, eyeing the young man with wide-eyed admiration.

"Ah yes," nodded Akitada. The corner of his mouth twitched. "He is a very wealthy man now that Itto's widow has confessed."

"That is not at all what I meant," Tamako reproved him.

"No?" Akitada raised a brow. "Then it must have been due to the auspicious little tortoise." He put an arm around Tamako's shoulder and drew her close.



FAT CHANCE

Neil A. Schofield

Mr. Steeples was miserable, cold, and in the dark. In addition, he was tied firmly to a chair in what seemed to him, as far as he could tell, to be a cellar. He had no idea how long he had been there, that was the trouble. And he had no idea why he was there. Presumably, at some point, someone was going to come and tell him. He wondered briefly whose toes he might have stepped on recently, then rejected that thought. He just didn't have that sort of enemy, he wasn't in that sort of league.

He sniffed miserably. The air was cold and dank and had a sort of bricky, earthy smell to it. In fact, strangely enough, it reminded him vaguely of the public bar of the Bunch of Fives. He thought nostal-

Illustration by Kelly Denato

gically of his dark corner table where he had spent so many peaceful moments. If only he had stayed there....

Suppose, one day, you happened to be both thirsty and in London, you might be unlucky enough to find yourself being attracted, as if by some malefic influence, through the door of the Bunch of Fives. The Bunch lies where the Clerkenwell Road sidles furtively into the city with a sideways glance, and it is as far from the popular, tourist's idea of Ye Olde Englishe Pub as it is possible to get. In fact, it is distressingly typical.

The public bar of the Bunch of Fives is cold, stuffy, and dank. Stepping inside, you know instinctively that the people there are *only* there because everywhere else they know is worse. You also know that you could do worse than to *go* somewhere else. On entering, you are presented with a bar lined with hunched shoulders and thickly folded napes belonging to a variety of gents who are all, to one degree or another, At It. And unsuccessful with it, what's more.

From the bleak forty-watt bulbs in the rusted chandelier a grey, unlovely light falls exhausted onto the uncarpeted wooden floor and expires. A sickly coal dust fire gutters hopelessly and smokily in the fireplace. The furniture was clearly a grumpy afterthought. The walls are the exact shade of yellow that you would find in the skin of a Vietnamese laborer in a cordite factory who had smoked eighty cigarettes a day for forty years and who had finally perished of jaundice. There are no pictures or decorations, no Olde Englishe sporting prints or horse brasses, there are no whistling, *pleeping* machines, no dartboard, pool table, or other leisure amenity. People do not come here to enjoy themselves. This is not a place to come on Christmas Eve or any other day of public celebration.

The landlord, Max, by irritating contrast, is a round, cheery soul with an unconvincing mustache and a perky manner that only serves to rattle clients whose nerves are already ragged due to their trade or calling. Consequently, there are frequent lamentable displays of bad temper: indeed, blows are sometimes desultorily offered and returned.

But for all this, Mr. George Arthur Steeples liked the Bunch. It was private, no one asked your business, no one volunteered information, no one sang or told jokes, no one told you the story of his life. Mr. Steeples liked it because it was close to the fifth floor loft that served him as office. He liked to come here to have a quiet sort-out, to ruminate and plan. And he came to collect certain redirected mail that he'd arranged to pick up here.

One foggy November morning Mr. Steeples had entered the bar, as usual carrying his battered briefcase. He paused at the door to survey the company.

A rum-and-Pep called out, "Oi, Steeples! Close the door, willya. It's freezing outside."

A large Jack Daniels, whose repartee was frequently admiringly quoted, observed, "Won't make any

difference if 'e does close it. It'll still be freezing outside." This gnomic shaft was being gropingly picked over for sense and content as Mr. Steeples ordered his usual large vodka and tonic. He also took possession of the big manila envelope that Max, touching the side of his nose in that irritating way some people have, pushed across the bar.

Mr. Steeples took himself to his usual table in the darkest corner of the bar. He took off his substantial overcoat and sat down. He also removed his bowler hat and placed it carefully on the table beside him. A man of particularities, Mr. Steeples. Always the overcoat and hat. And, beneath, always the same sober three-piece suit and bow tie. Looking at his silvery hair and his pale but handsome face, you would have said a bookkeeper or a chief clerk with a shipping company. A solid man who kept his own counsel.

Mr. Steeples communed briefly with his drink, then pulled the envelope towards him, opened it, and got to work. There was quite a harvest this week. There must have been—what, at least a hundred, a hundred fifty letters. He drew one out at random. An inexpensive cream-colored envelope, neatly addressed. He took out his pocketknife, another old fashioned habit that he fondly affected, and slit open the letter. Inside was a simple sheet of writing paper folded around a five pound note. The paper contained nothing more than a name and address and a simple message: "Dear Sir, Please send to the above address. Thanking you in advance."

Mr. Steeples regarded the letter fondly as he finished his drink. Then he took the five pound note, went to the bar, and ordered another large vodka and tonic.

Mr. Steeples was in mail order.

For more years than he cared to remember he had made a very nice living, thank you, supplying the needy of the nation with objects and services that they didn't think they needed until Mr. Steeples told them otherwise through his classified advertisements. Of course, once having paid good money for the Swiss Navy Diver's Watch, or the Wonderubberized Working Trousers ("One Size Fits All!!!"), they realized that they had been right all along. But they had been mesmerized, like so many, by the muddy line illustrations and the multitude of exclamation marks, and by then it was too late and the sums of money so (calculatedly) pathetic that Mr. Steeples had been remarkably free of lawsuits in his long and interesting career.

And so he had prospered in a modest and unassuming way, buying up job lots of the world's refuse, placing his little siren advertisements, reaping the harvest of replies in his dusty office, and then packing and dispatching (through the tetchy intermediary of Mrs. Rabindranath and her seemingly innumerable family in South London) the 24-in-1 Tool ("Saws, Welds, Drills, Folds Up To The Size Of A Penknife!!!"), the Home Dentistry Kit (quite similar to the 24-in-1 Tool in many ways), the astonishing Domestic Sonar ("Keep Track Of That

Troublesome Neighbor!!"), or whatever it was. On the way he'd managed to purchase a two bedroom house in the suburbs to shelter Mrs. Steeples (there were no little Steepleses, for reasons that are hardly our affair, I feel), he changed his secondhand car for a newer secondhand car every two years, and he was amassing a handsome balance in the Bicester & Beccles Building Society. Until one day, quite by chance, he had gone out the Damascus Road.

Well, to be accurate, he had gone out the Clerkenwell Road to look in a large news agent's for a particular magazine that Mrs. Steeples had specified, something with an exclamation mark, *Hers!* or *feemale!* or something of the sort, the kind of magazine that leads a sickly, unconvincing existence for some months and then goes to an unmarked grave. He was having a lot of difficulty finding it, there were so *many* magazines. Shelves *full* of them. Crammed with them.

He gradually became aware that a good number were slimming magazines, an awful lot of them in fact. And then he found, through patient study and under the watchful eye of the floorwalker, that most of the mainstream periodicals had features, articles, giveaways, recipes aimed at the slimming woman.

He left the news agent's without *Hers!* (which anyway was absorbed some months later by *feemale!*, which in its turn quickly ceased publication, unmourned) but with an armful of magazines that he took back to the office and read minutely and conscientiously, page by page. At eight o'clock that evening he was staring at the wall with wondering, if bleary, eyes.

Mr. Steeples was quite simply dumbfounded. How could he not have known? How could all this have been going on without his realizing?

For what Mr. Steeples had discovered was that there was an entire industry—he priced it in the billions of pounds—devoted to people who wanted to be smaller, thinner, slimmer, or not so fat. There was everything—there were machines to rub away unwanted pounds, machines to massage the fatty mounds and provide a pitiful simulation of exercise; there were specially confected foods designed to act as a sort of Polyfilla for the stomach but that supplied zero nourishment and therefore zero fat; there were special teas, tisanes, and infusions; there were supplements to sprinkle on the vast mounds of food that these people evidently ate and that adsorbed unwanted fats. There were patches to stick on your stomach, there were things to make you sick after eating, there were things to make you sick at the sight of food *before* eating, and for all he knew there were things to stick in your ear. There were hypnosis courses, Zen methods, crystals to hang over your table, diets, recipes, creams, pills, potions, seaweeds, maggots, societies, therapies, self-help groups, advice columns. There were lots and lots of photographs of fat people *before* and the same (allegedly) thinner people *after;* there were enough ("Tests Prove!") patent slimming methods to fill the

Encyclopaedia Brittanica; there were people in Tibet who hadn't eaten for six years and still found the strength to write out a small ad; and there was even a man in Elk Bottom, Mo. *(Mo?* Where the hell was *Mo?),* who would project precisely focused astral beams at long distance to stop you eating.

What he saw as he gazed at (or *through,* rather) the wall of his office was a landscape, a sunlit, beckoning vista: cloud-capped, quivering, pink mountains of cellulite; great looming Pyrenees, Alps, *Himalayas* of guilty, unsightly thighs, hips, stomachs, breasts, and bottoms; vast, wobbling acres, hectares, square—no, *cubic*—miles of unwanted flesh. There were thousands of tons of fat surplus out there somewhere, *everywhere,* and there was an entire industry consecrated to shoveling it away. There were millions of people who were, to put it bluntly, far too full of themselves and ready to try anything, even the most outré, lunatic (in some cases, it seemed to him, suicidal) methods, to get rid of just a little of said selves.

Mr. Steeples noticed in passing that nowhere in this bazaar did anyone ever pass out the simple instructions Don't Eat So Much and Get Some Exercise. He supposed that was too easy. Nobody would have believed it.

The very next day he took his first dip in what he fondly began to think of as the Slimming Pool. He was done with the jejune, ephemeral benefits of the Zip-Up PeToilet ("Rover Can Make Himself Comfortable In The Comfort Of Your Sitting Room!!!"). He would abandon (not without a pang) the astonishing LadderBoots ("Add 3.5 Meters To Your Height!!! Clear Gutters, Repair Overhead Power Lines, Rescue Loved Pets, With Ease!!!") All that was at an end. He was going to make the Great British a little less great.

His first efforts did not meet with unqualified success. The jars of slimming cream ("Simply Rub Away Unrequired Bulk!!") that he had bought from Benny Marenghi and that were supposedly manufactured in a Korean monastery (and just what had those monkish fools thought they were doing when they concocted this muck?) did not sell, and those that did were returned with acrimonious, even threatening, comments. There were still seventeen thousand jars in the rented and increasingly noisome lockup in Lewisham that he tried not to think about; the last time he had briefly put his head in, substantial amounts of it actually seemed to be fermenting, bursting out of jars and boxes and crawling aggressively across the floor. He had thrown the key down a drain and thereafter resolutely ignored the increasingly plaintive telephone calls and letters from the lockup's owner.

The Soviet-made—or Soviet-botched—massage machines, one of which he had, shouting loudly, thrown across the room because it had given him a very nasty shock indeed, had been an unqualified failure. A dead loss, in fact. He was firmly convinced they were a direct

spinoff from some of the KGB's viler excesses. The insurance people were to this day carrying out their slow but tenacious inquiry into the slow but tenacious fire that had broken out in the wiring of his building. And the electricity company was still being humorously laconic about the really very insignificant explosion in their substation.

As for the Sauna Suit, the less said the better. Could he really have considered selling a slimming method that involved zipping yourself into a set of rubber combinations filled with superheated steam? He was still choosing his own sitting positions with great care.

After these and other equally depressing setbacks, he had sat in his office wondering whether he were chasing rainbows and should go back to what he knew: Dr. Finch's Nose Hoover, he was certain, would find an eager public. He thought again with yearning of the astonishing LadderBoots(!!!).

He was dispirited. All these things were far too complicated. What he needed was something with a simple, direct appeal. Something that would make large people send money.

Then the idea hit him. It really was as simple as that, wasn't it? And on the spot, in what he regarded as a historic moment, he drafted a small advertisement. In the following euphoric weeks he even dreamed that its stark, direct simplicity might one day qualify it for a marketing award.

It read:

LOSE POUNDS!!!
IMMEDIATE RESULTS
GUARANTEED!!
NO PATENT PRODUCTS, PILLS,
POTIONS, OR APPLIANCES!
SEND £4.99 (NO CHECKS OR
POSTAL ORDERS, PLEASE).

Underneath was an address, one of several with the sole function of receiving mail for Mr. Steeples and sending it on to another address, where the residents would dispatch it to the Bunch of Fives.

Mr. Steeples was being very careful with this. He knew this time he had taken that first tiny step across a certain line. It was all right to sell rubbish. His right to do so was guaranteed by law. But this was something else. Being a prudent man, he had taken legal advice and received assurances that he was completely safe. If, that is, you could actually take the word of Danny DaCosta, a lawyer of Maltese extraction who was permanently on the verge of being unfrocked for a variety of peculative antics.

Mr. Steeples had been equally careful in placing the advertisements. He had targeted magazines specifically for their small circulations and had visited the advertising managers personally, even, in two cases, making small cash contributions to personal (and extremely private) pension plans.

In the first week after the advertisements had made their first appearance, he had held his breath. In fact, he couldn't really believe anyone would fall for it. But they had. In their hundreds. Envelopes arrived containing five pound notes

and addresses. And Mr. Steeples did nothing. He opened the envelopes, took out the money, and banked it. He sent nothing in return, delivering exactly what he had promised. Lost pounds. Five, to be precise.

He had calculated the price very carefully, reasoning that anyone who sent five pounds in cash had undoubtedly sent many hundreds before for slimming products and that the five pounds would be written off simply as lost or wrongly addressed. And in the event, would they sue him, would they complain to the Office of Fair Trading, for a measly fiver? He thought not.

He continued to run the advertisements, and the letters continued to come in at the rate of about two hundred a week. One glorious week he had three hundred seventeen letters, each containing five pounds. He sat in the office behind his desk heaped with mail and contemplated taking Mrs. Steeples to Italy. Or *sending* her, perhaps.

He was no fool. Sooner or later the market would dry up. But *carpe diem,* he thought happily even as he picked up the telephone to hear the remonstrances of Mrs. Rabindranath, who wanted to know if he intended to retain her services; her family was now on very short commons, was he understanding this?

He tired of Mrs. Rabindranath's railing, cut her off sharply, and made his way to receive the latest crop at the Bunch of Fives. Where, after his second vodka and tonic, he continued to open his mail.

Then he pulled out an envelope larger than the rest, pink and heavy, a good rag-based paper that spoke of money. He held it to his nose. A faint whiff of Chanel he thought, if he were any judge, but there was also something else. What *was* that? An odd, musty smell. He opened the letter. Inside was the expected five pound note but there was also something else. A letter. And a photograph.

He looked first at the photograph. It was of a woman, a tall, very good-looking woman in her thirties? forties? with a figure no one could describe as fat or even plump. It was rounded, beautifully proportioned. She was posing on a seacoast somewhere. It was clearly a windy day, and her long copper-colored hair was blowing slightly across her face. She was smiling.

Then he read the letter.

It was brief but plaintive. It told Mr. Steeples that the writer, a certain Colette Bellingham, was prone to excess poundage. That she had tried everything. She would very much like a *confidential* personal consultation, for which she would be happy to pay the going rate for his time. And that he would not regret it—she'd express her gratitude in *any way that seemed appropriate to him.* Ms. Bellingham would be At Home every afternoon between three and five. No need to make an appointment.

Clearly it was open house, Chez Bellingham.

The signature was large, flowing, and sensual, and the address was somewhere in Sandown Park. A postscript emphasized the absolute necessity for confidentiality.

Mr. Steeples, a man in the full

prime of his masculine life, looked at the photograph. Then he read the letter again. Then he looked back at the photograph. He could not restrain himself from licking his lips. Nor could he restrain some unworthy thoughts that flicked across his mind, fuzzy and indistinct, interleaved with the very clear and distinct image of Mrs. Steeples. He had to do some severe editing work before the images settled down.

He put all the remaining envelopes back in his briefcase, took Colette Bellingham's fiver, and bought himself an unheard-of third vodka and tonic.

At three o'clock that afternoon Mr. Steeples was driving his Citröen carefully up a rutted lane not far from the racecourse at Sandown Park, and he was cursing softly to himself. The high hedges prevented any sort of orientation, the lane was single-track, and he had no idea if he were going in the right direction. He had just spent some thirty minutes driving at seven miles an hour behind a tractor carrying a bale of winter feed whose driver, judging by his driving, was either mad, deaf, or dead. Now, to add insult to injury, it looked very much as if it might snow.

He breasted a nasty little rise that almost took off the exhaust system and suddenly there was the gate on the right-hand side. A large, impressive, double wrought-iron gate. The Cedars. That was it. He turned into the gate, braking slightly to look at what lay before him. As he continued up the long, beech-lined drive, the house came into view. Eighteenth century, if he were any judge. A little rundown, some neglected stonework on the facade, but despite that, the place smelt unmistakably of money.

In front of the house the drive split to form a circle. The place was practically a stately home, with a high main door approached by symmetrical balustraded stone staircases. To the left of the house was what appeared to be a set of open stables converted to a garage; he could see several cars parked inside.

He noticed as he got out of the Citröen that the other cars seemed, like the house, a little neglected. There were leaves piled high on the bonnet of one, a Jaguar, and none appeared to have been cleaned for months. Eccentric aristocracy, he thought. Just the ticket.

At the top of the staircase he paused on the stone terrace, looked and listened. The massive front door was dark. No lights showed though its thick, engraved glass, and there was no sound.

There was a huge, old fashioned bellpull on the right. He pulled it, and far away inside the house he heard an erratic jangling. He waited for what seemed like weeks, and then slowly the door opened. No face appeared, no voice asked him his business, but Mr. Steeples stepped boldly across the threshold and into the entrance hall, and curiously was immediately sitting down. Sitting in total darkness in a large, uncomfortable, wooden chair, at least from the feel of it. He was minus his hat and coat. But he was plus a place at the back of his skull

that was throbbing infernally; he could tell when he moved his head that dried blood was encrusted under his hair. The movement started a warm trickle down his neck.

He groaned, and that allowed him to gauge his surroundings. He was not in the entrance hall, that was certain. In fact, from the bricky smell and the lack of echo, he had the distinct impression that the room he was in was very small. But there was movement somewhere. He could hear faint and rather worrying sounds: a high keening, soft dragging sounds, a very faint crackle as of electricity, and once, he could have sworn, a distant, muffled sob.

His head hurt like hell. In trying to put an exploratory hand to his skull he discovered that neither he nor the chair moved. His arms and legs were tightly strapped to the chair, which seemed to be bolted to the floor. All that moved was his brain, which washed up against the inside of his skull with an almost audible clang.

As if his slight movement had been some sort of signal, the door opened and a woman entered. In the weak light from the passage behind her he could see that indeed he was in a brick room, a cellar. She closed the door and flicked on a switch. She was huge. This, he saw immediately, was not Colette Bellingham. She was wearing an ankle-length, tent-shaped dress that only served to accentuate her vastness.

She gave him a long unsettling stare and then hooked a plain wooden chair towards her with one foot and sat down. "George Arthur Steeples," she said quietly. She had been through his pockets, he realized.

"Madam," he began, "I've no idea what this ridiculous—criminal—charade might be about, but—"

"George Arthur Steeples. Lose Pounds." She was considering him as she spoke. She had a large, sweet face framed by long auburn hair. Her teeth were very small and very white, and her eyes were extremely blue. Mr. Steeples thought if she were to lose, say, a hundredweight, she might be a real beauty. He was appalled when this thought, even in the present dreadful, nightmare situation, forced a titter from him.

She smiled understandingly.

"I know," she said comfortingly, "and you're not the first by any means."

Mr. Steeples decided that he was clearly dealing with a madwoman but gave it his best try.

"Madam, I came here for a professional consultation with Ms. Colette Bellingham. I cannot possibly conceive of your reasons for this bizarre treatment, but let me tell you that I have every intention—"

"It was the photograph, wasn't it? Come, you can tell me. The photograph brought you here."

"The photograph?"

"Yes, come on, what sort of *professional* consultation did you have in mind for Colette Bellingham?"

"Well—"

"Yes. '*Well.*' You thought you were onto a good thing, just like the others."

"I can assure you, my good woman—" That was a mistake.

"Let me assure you, my good man, that I am far from being your or anyone else's good woman."

She stopped short and abruptly stared ferociously at the floor. She stared for so long that Mr. Steeples thought she might have had some sort of seizure. He coughed slightly. She looked up.

"Oh yes. There you are."

Mr. Steeples attempted to ease his aching arms and, despite his handicaps, tried to clamber onto his high horse.

"Madam, I've no idea what concatenation of circumstances have brought you to such a pass—"

But she interrupted once more. Mr. Steeples had the awful idea that he was never going to finish a sentence again.

"You can't know what it's like. No one can. A person is what a person is, for God's sake. One has the right to be left in peace to be what one is. But no. You lot Out There created your ideals, and everyone must fit in. And if certain people don't or can't fit in, so much the worse for them."

Mr. Steeples tried to speak but stopped when the lightbulb dimmed and he heard a distant sizzling crackle of electricity accompanied by a faint shout. The woman raised her head.

"Ah. He gave it a try again, brave man. That's one of your confreres, the massage pad merchant. If he can stand ten seconds of his massage pads full on, he gets something to eat. He hasn't so far because they're wired directly into the mains. But he tries, he tries. Every other day or so."

She watched him closely. Then she smiled again.

"Oh, they go on for miles, these cellars. There's lots of you down here. There's Mr. Hebron, for instance. He's testing the food value of his patent Weight-Reducing creams. Actually," she said thoughtfully, "I haven't looked in on him for a couple of weeks. Do you think he's all right?"

Mr. Steeples found it hard to speak. All that emerged was a hoarse rattle. She nodded.

"I'm sure you're right."

Mr. Steeples said, "Look—"

"And guess what, Mr. Steeples?" she said gaily, suddenly clapping her hands together. If Mr. Steeples hadn't been tied down, he would have jumped a foot in the air. "The exercise machine man's down to six stone! I've promised him a nice bowl of soup the very *instant* he reaches five." Her mouth took on a petulant curve. "But he doesn't seem much up to pedaling or rowing now for some reason, I don't know what. I'll have to knock some sense into him."

"Look—"

The excitement over the exercise machine man's achievement died away. "It was very wrong of you all, you do see that, don't you?"

Mr. Steeples croaked a little.

"You mustn't prey, you see. It's very wrong. If people are big, they're big, and it's very wrong to make their husbands think they should be small or slim or thin or willowy or whatever you've decided is the right thing to be. Because their husbands end up being very, very unkind, and they end up in

the cellars with all the other unkind people. Like their family." She was spitting now. "And especially their wicked, spiteful, fun-poking *sisters* with their long red hair and their slim look-at-me figures."

Now that he looked carefully, Mr. Steeples could see, underneath the plump cheeks, a distinct family resemblance to the woman in the photograph. He suddenly had a shivery vision of the two-hundred-year-old brick-lined cellars stretching for miles. He tried to imagine how many people there were down here, and what cheer the luckless Colette might bring, but those thoughts were swept away in the torrent of other useless, random thoughts that came behind it. He knew, he absolutely *knew,* that there was a thing he could say that would solve everything. If he could only concentrate and say this one thing to her, she would immediately see the justice and the reason of it and untie him and let him go.

He was still struggling to chase away the other errant and unproductive thoughts (like *if only* he had told someone where he was going and *if only* he had stuck to the Wonderubberized trousers, and—incredibly—*if* they could see him now, that little gang of his) that were buzzing like midges around his brain, and he was still convincing himself that someone, he didn't know who, was going to burst in and then they'd all fall about laughing, or something else would happen he wasn't quite sure what, when she moved quickly towards him, and suddenly Mr. Steeples had a piece of adhesive tape across his mouth. She stood in front of him, her hands behind her back.

Scchhtck.

Mr. Steeples cocked his head slightly.

"You're quite lucky you know, George Arthur Steeples. With you it's much simpler than with the others."

Scchhtck.

There it was again. What *was* that noise? Mr. Steeples didn't like it. It had sharp edges, did that noise.

"Because all you have to decide is how many pounds *you personally* want to lose . . ."

Scchhtck.

He rolled his head and moaned behind the adhesive tape. She brought her hands into view.

". . . and more important, Mr. Steeples, *which ones*?"

Mr. Steeples cursed his horrible luck and tried to faint. In this he was unsuccessful for an unfortunately long time.

If, three weeks later, you had been thirsty and in London, you might have found yourself moved to enter the public bar of the Bunch of Fives, where you might have heard the denizens of that awful place remarking that they hadn't seen much of old Steeples recently. But then, to be honest with you, by that time there wasn't much of old Steeples to see.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

Hulton / Liaison Agency

Going undercover? We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

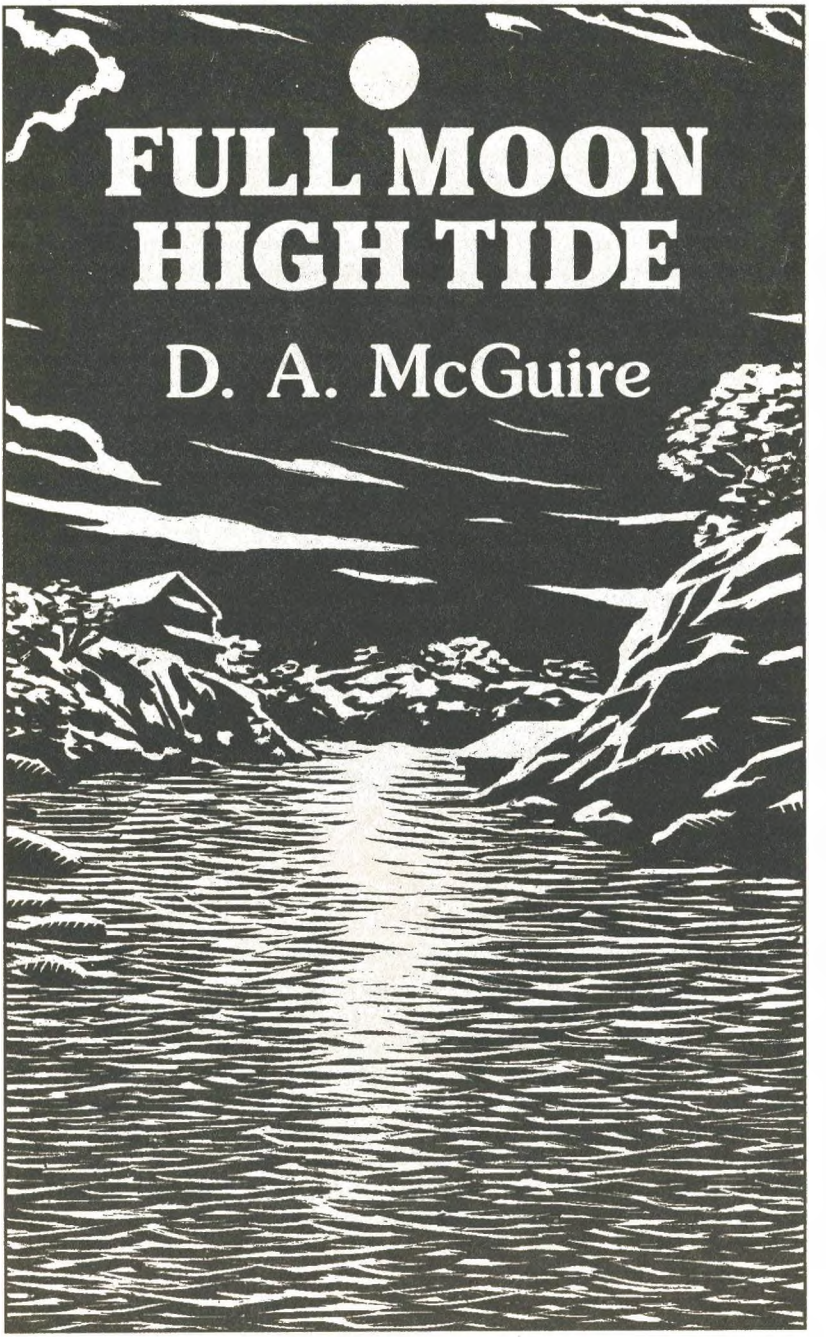


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

It happens once a month. The water comes in high enough to touch the seawall and cleans out the throat of the bay. Treasures both priceless and mundane line the battered seawalls as horseshoe crab shells and seaweed, old boots and tangled fishing line, golden whelk egg cases and pink and purple jingle shells are thrown up to join the tidal rack. The children always find the best things first, cleaning the rack of every bit of green, bright blue, or amber-colored sea glass they can find. The adults move in next, scooping up the soda cans and bits of metal and plastic that drift in and might otherwise mar the shoreline.

Because of them, and the tides, this is a perfect beach. It's made more perfect by the renters who come out to South Beach and dig up the dune grass and fling it into piles along the tidal rack. But they don't understand that if they destroy the grass they destroy the beach. Still, for someone paying two thousand dollars a week for a seaside rental, the dune grass gets in the way of beach towels, deck chairs, and early evening games of volleyball in the sand. The grass is an inconvenience; it's expendable.

So that's what I was thinking of as I watched them pull up the grass, that and wondering if I should make an anonymous call to the EPA or some local group. Instead I shrugged and sat down on the seawall. I was sore all over. School had been out for three weeks, and I was well into my summer routine, working all day mowing lawns, painting houses, hauling trash, and doing odd jobs for the property owners who rented out to the summer tourists. These people wanted service but didn't want to pay the high prices of local nurserymen, carpenters, and painters. It was cheaper to hire a fifteen-year-old kid. Cheaper to hire me.

So it was hard work outside in the sun all day. I was already tanned up pretty good, but I went to bed most nights thoroughly exhausted. I had to turn away customers. The answering machine was full every night:

"Herbie, heard what a good job you did stripping and painting that shed over to Clarkson's, so if you're looking for another job, I could use help with some roofing . . ."

"If you've got the time, Herbie, give this number a call. Know these folks, they got some doors they need stripped and painted and the local guys are charging an arm and a leg. Told them you're reasonable and quick."

"Herbert, you did such a nice job on my rosebushes. Would you mind going over to Quinicut and doing the same for my sister Gladys? Here's her number, and oh, she's got some lovely bulb plants she wants moved, and I have another friend who's looking for a little deck, just eight by eight, nothing fancy. Do you know how to . . ."

That's what I had facing me tonight. That's why I'd walked across the lawns of the beachfront houses, sat down on the edge of the seawall, and watched the rich kids in the bay zoom around on their Jet Skis or dive off the raft, laughing, teasing, and playing with each other.

These were the kids whose parents were paying to have the dune grass torn out so the beach with its pure white sand would glide in a perfect line from seawall to water.

Later in the summer, when some of the owners returned, they'd probably ask, "Hey, Herbie, do you know who ripped out the grass? We'll lose our beach if this keeps up."

Well, maybe I'd say and maybe I wouldn't. For certain, though, I wasn't going to say anything to the three guys doing it. They were all brown skin, muscle, and more. Wearing swim trunks, they were built like wrestlers and pulling up wads of the grass. One had a wheelbarrow, and they were throwing the grass in that. The biggest of the three, a blond fellow built like a Viking, had found a horseshoe crab and was waving it in the face of another. This guy jumped back, and they all laughed.

Probably wasn't even a real crab carcass, just an empty shell.

So I ignored them and, totally, thoroughly spent, lay back on the grass, hands under my head. The constant roar of the jet skis and an occasional speedboat going by must have lulled me to sleep. For suddenly I was jarred awake. Someone was talking to me; someone was making a shadow over me.

"Didn't you hear me, boy?" someone was saying.

I opened my eyes and looked upside-down at possibly the most beautiful, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl I'd ever seen.

"I asked if you knew this was private property?" she went on in the loveliest accent I'd ever heard. Spanish. Maybe Italian. It rolled off her tongue like poetry. "We're renting this house." She indicated the large white Cape behind her with the wrap-around porch. It was the biggest, most extravagant property above the seawall on South Manamesset Beach. "Not that *I* care." She flung her hair back; her lips creased into a grin. "But if my father caught you, he'd probably kick your ass off the grass, if you get my drift?"

I sat up, rolling my shirt in my hands. I'd forgotten I'd ripped it off. I was on my feet, and she was laughing at me with her beautiful eyes, her beautiful mouth, her whole beautiful face. Then her eyes danced up and down me just like—

Well, just like a guy would dance his eyes up and down a girl. Except I wasn't a girl.

She looked at my face, and I swear to God she licked her lips before she smiled. "I know you. You're the boy who mows the lawns around here, right? You've got this real big . . . lawnmower, right?"

"Yeah" was the only thing I could manage to say. It was like I had no tongue, no voice, no words.

"You always keep your shirt on, don't you? We—me and my sisters—we've noticed you're the boy who never takes his shirt off, but you know what?"

I got one whole word out. "What?"

She turned away slightly, looked back at me over one smooth golden-brown shoulder. "You really should. I'm Amy. You want a soda or something?"

"She said what?" screeched my

friend Remy as he rolled off the sofa on my front porch. "She said *what* to you?"

"You're lying," Covey said snidely, curled up on the floor, bag of chips in one hand, dish of melted ice cream in the other. Chocolate ice cream. I had taught them both to like my favorite dip.

"She did," I said nonchalantly. "Invited me up to her porch yesterday afternoon. We sat there, had sodas and . . . talked." I shrugged.

"You liar," Covey sneered. "That girl, her father is, like, a gangster or something. Owns that big yacht out in the bay, the *Splenda*-something."

"Splendara!" Remy looked up at me from the floor. "Herbie Sawyer, you lucky—" I'll delete what Remy called me. But I frowned and jerked my head back to indicate that my mother was right inside, in the living room ironing clothes and watching an old movie on TV.

"So, what was she wearing?" Covey challenged me. "You liar."

What was she wearing? Gold lamé tank top. Black silk short shorts. Gold sandals. And lots of jewelry: three gold bangles on her right wrist, a couple of chains with dangling hearts on the left. Gold loop earrings. Two thin gold chains around her neck. Lots of gold. Because she knew it showed off her deeply tanned, perfect skin, her huge brown eyes, her long dark hair, which she swung against her shoulders when she laughed. She was perfect.

"I don't remember," I said. "I mean, who notices—" I plunged a chip into the melted ice cream "—what a girl's wearing?"

"We saw her, didn't we?" Remy was still in a fit of wonder. He gave Covey a shove and said, "Herbie and me, we were out fishing with old Mr. Hornton back on . . . when, Herbie? The Fourth, no, the day before the Fourth. We saw that boat come into the bay near Smiley's Island. God! Girls all over it, and guys built like road wrestlers, remember?" He started to laugh, to choke on his chips. "We had old Mr. McCabe on board, too, and he thought some of the girls were topless. He ran over to the side of the boat shouting, 'Hey, some of them girls are naked!' Mr. McCabe is so big, he nearly capsized that little boat of Mr. Hornton's. Do you remember? Do you?"

I was eyeing Covey's suspicious face. "Yeah, I remember. But none of the girls were—" I considered for a moment. Watching the fifty foot luxury motor yacht, the *Splendara,* come into Manamesset Bay had been quite a sight. Boats all around pausing, watching, fishermen with their lines in the water turning around practically upside-down to get a look. Not only at the boat—long and sleek and powerful, cutting the water at about eighteen knots—but at the half-dozen beautiful dark-haired girls sunning themselves along the bow. Amy had probably been one of them. "—naked," I finished. "Old Man McCabe's got a problem with his eyes."

Remy leaned forward, slapped me on the leg. "But he went nuts looking for Mr. Hornton's binoculars, remember? Wanted to get a better look. Hell, I mean heck, Herbie, this is really something. You

got to talk to Amy Federico? Damn, she's the hottest girl on South Beach. You are one lucky—" He caught himself that time.

"One lying bastard," Covey said, having no problem with the word. He jerked his head toward the door. "Your mom can't hear me. And besides, you're lying. Amy Federico's not the kind of girl who'd talk to any of us. You were out there on the seawall dreaming."

"She wasn't talking to *us,* you jerk!" Remy cried, swiping Covey again. "She was talking to him, to Herbie!"

"Yeah," I said. "And she's invited me back tonight, some kind of party her family is throwing. She said to dress informal." I stretched. "Which means you two jerks have to go; I got places to go and—"

"Women to ——" Remy screamed, nearly choking on his last chip.

Which was followed by the sharp, angry rap of my mother on the door, her face grim as she shook her head at the three of us.

"You stink," Covey hissed at me under his breath. "You really stink, Sawyer."

I don't think I'd said more than a dozen words to Amy on the porch that afternoon. I'm not generally a big talker unless I have something to say. But the following night I had absolutely nothing to say to her, so I sat and listened and watched her smile and swing her head. Behind us some heavy music was playing; her father was very "into opera music," she informed me.

Because the entire time I was sitting there listening and barely talking, I was thinking this: how could a girl this beautiful, this vibrant, this perfect, ever be—well, be into me, if you know what I mean. I was a middle-class kid. No, amend that. I was a lower-middle-class kid who lived in a small house with his widowed mother, a woman who up until two years ago made her living waiting on and catering to people like the Federicos.

And as the sun went down and the music got louder and the fancy cars started to pull into the stone-lined driveway behind the house above the seawall—Ferraris and Porsches, Lincolns and Jaguars, custom SUV's and even one big heavy-duty Humvee—I felt the gulf widen between Amy and me. Sure, I'd been found lying on her lawn, though I could've explained to her, had I wanted to, that no one here paid much attention to who owned what, or where the line between private property and community right-of-way began or ended.

No, what I did do was sit and stare and listen as the big house filled up with people, wealthy people, all the women loaded with jewelry and wearing skimpy summer dresses. The men were in custom-tailored suits and couldn't wait to tear off their jackets, wrench loose their ties, and stand around the custom-built bar in the corner of the enormous living room. The three wrestler types who a day earlier had occupied themselves pulling up dune grass were now outfitted in white shirts, black trousers, and bow ties and were walking among the guests carrying trays of fancy glasses of wine. From a rear

kitchen poured the aromas of good Italian cooking: garlic and tomato, hot bread and spicy salad dressings. I was in a cavalcade of riches and barely knew which way to turn, me in my best khaki pants and clean white shirt. There I was, on Amy Federico's arm, being introduced to her grandmother, who did "ninety percent of the family's cooking" and even now was stirring up a huge pot of Italian paella, especially rich on the saffron. I was dying.

Then I was being pulled in and out of rooms, being introduced to Amy's sisters and cousins, one beautiful, moon-eyed, dark-haired goddess after another, every one with a smile that spread wide across her lovely face. Isabella. Angelina. Elisabetta.

Ariella. Regina. Francesca. *"Che bello,"* one whispered to another as Amy tugged me past them. A third, her eyes whisking over me, murmured, *"Che occhi.* Our Amy, she is so smart; where does she find them?"

Each girl was more exquisite than the one before; each one so much like Amy, whispering, then giggling among themselves. The comments flowed as easily as the wine, the imported beer, and the punch, which one lovely, dark-eyed cousin insisted was "just good fruit punch, no alcohol. Try it." A tall, cold glass filled with plump pieces of fruit was pressed into my hand.

Then I felt an arm slip around my waist: Amy's oldest sister, Gina Gabriella. Her hand was in my hair, and she turned me around while Amy briefly left to lift a tiny child, a towheaded toddler, into the air.

"Such a pretty boy," the sister said to me. Her hair, thick and lush and dark, was streaked through with gold. I swear to God I couldn't speak, was mesmerized as she asked, "How do you get that color?"

I just stared at her; I must have looked a complete dunce.

"Your hair," she explained. "That incredible color, how do you get it?"

"From my genes," I said, trying to sound not too much like a smart-aleck.

"Jins?" she repeated, frowning. She looked confused, and turning to two of her sisters, cousins, whatever, she said, "What does he mean, 'jins?' " Then to me, "Is Jins the name of your colorist?"

One of the girls laughed and whispered into her ear, which caused her to slap me playfully on the arm. *"Sei scherzoso!* You fresh boy!" Leaning closer to me as Amy came dancing back, she added, "I like fresh boys!"

Suddenly Amy's arm was through mine again.

I felt like a new puppy on a leash, but a very obedient puppy, so that when I knew it was time for me to go (let's be honest: who would have wanted to leave that house, that atmosphere, that girl?), I told Amy with great reluctance that I probably should be going, it was getting late.

We were on the porch, which was largely empty. People were inside eating. The sounds of laughter, music and the clinking of glasses and cutlery were coming through the windows.

"Mother? Father? Both?" She ran one hand through her hair. With her other hand she was playing with a tall, cool glass of soda water.

"Just a mother."

She brought the glass to her lips, leaned against the porch railing, facing me. "Where's your father?"

"Died when I was three."

"That's too bad," she said softly, lowering her eyes, then fluttering them back up at me. "I don't have a mother." A quick backwards look into the house full of people. Someone was trying to sing along with a pair of opera singers; even the music was intoxicating. "I'll bet you're good to your mother," she said, putting the glass on the floor. Immediately one of the big guys, the blond one, removed it. "Thank you, Dieter," she said to him. I'd known this girl less than three hours, really, but she'd already demonstrated her affectionate nature, her complete lack of inhibitions. When she moved closer to me, her hand fell on my arm.

"Yeah, I think I am," I told her, trying to be casual, like it was a perfectly normal thing for me to have a girl like her all over me.

"And she trusts you?" Amy went on, her voice like a song, lilting up and down. People were just beginning to spill out of the house, drinking and laughing; a volleyball game was starting down on the sand. Soft, mellow lights flashed along the outer edge of the lawns.

"Of course," I said.

"Never done anything wrong?" she asked, sliding her hand down my arm to take my hand.

"No . . ."

"Then she knows you're utterly dependable. Come take a swim with me, be a little late tonight." She let go of my hand and was gone, running down the lawn to the seawall steps; from there she was off down the dock. The tide was rising. A cool, damp breeze was coming in off the water.

What choice had I? I tore off my shirt, flung it in the grass, and followed her.

It was a truly incredible night.

"Hear you had an interesting time last night."

I was doing maintenance on my lawnmower, the usual stuff, cleaning the blades, checking the sparkplugs. It had been stalling out lately, and I needed to keep it in good shape to get through the rest of a long and potentially profitable summer.

"I got in a little late. Should have called." I was having a tough time with one of the lug nuts, but before Jake could lean over to help me, I got it off. "Why, did she say something to you?"

"No." Jake sat down on an old sawhorse I'd left out in the yard; I'd used it to hold up a cellar door I'd stripped, primed, and painted for a neighbor. "No, she just said it was close to midnight when you got in. Didn't call or anything."

"Jake, I was out at South Beach, just—" I shrugged. "I told her where I was going, that I'd probably be late." Besides, I wanted to say, my mind had been on a hundred other things, and except for that brief moment when I thought I should be

leaving . . . well, truth was, much as I loved my mother, she'd been the last thing on my mind last night.

"Partying, admit it, Herbie. You were partying." Jake smiled at me.

"I met a girl." I walked over to the driveway for my gas can.

"Anyone I know? Local girl?"

"Amy Federico," I said, lugging the can back. Jake looked straight at me.

"When's your first job today?" he asked. I met his eyes, knew I'd said or done something wrong.

"I'm mowing the Pattersons' place at nine; Rolleskis' at eleven, then I've got a job painting a fence around two or three this afternoon."

"Get in the car. I want to have a talk with you."

Jake was dating my mother again. Big deal. It didn't mean he and I were buddies again; it didn't mean we were anything again. We'd had a little misunderstanding back around Christmastime, something that hadn't straightened itself out in the last six months. So Jake did his thing; I did mine. We stayed out of each other's way. Now here he was, telling me as we tooled around in what he liked to call his "vintage Firebird" (and *that* didn't impress me any more), "I think you ought to know this up front, Herbie. I'm not trying to make trouble or tell you how to lead your life, but your new girlfriend—" Sharp blue eyes glanced over at me as we came down the shore road that ran from Manamesset through Bourne into West Falmouth, "No easy way to say it. Amy Federico's father is Salvatore Federico, and Sal Federico's father is Gino Federico, the grand padre, the big one, Herbie. He's currently serving a twenty-to-life term in a federal penitentiary for racketeering, bribery, and a host of other not so savory crimes. What I'm trying to say is that the girl's grandfather is a mob boss, and not a very nice one."

Funny how I didn't react, or appear to react, that is. I just rolled down my window despite the blast of air conditioning Jake had running and leaned my arm out. "Yeah, so? That all you wanted to tell me?" I wouldn't look at him.

"Herbie, she's a beautiful girl, no doubt about it. All Sal's daughters are beautiful girls. I heard one was engaged to—" he mentioned some self-important movie star who made two films, then faded from sight "—but the family made her break it off. That's not important. What is, if you intend to see this girl . . ." He sighed; this wasn't easy for Jake.

And I wasn't helping.

"I just want you to know, that's all," he finished. "I've got nothing more to say."

"And Amy's father? He involved in his old man's business? Of course he is, right?"

"No. That's the odd thing about this family. The old man—" he shook his head "—he never came right out and said it, but friends, no, 'associates' of his claim that Gino set up several successful, legitimate businesses for his one and only son. Salvatore Federico is clean." There was a long pause as he rounded the curve on Stony Beach Road. "At least he is on paper. Or maybe he's

smarter than his old man and just wants us to think he is. He certainly was smart enough to get into the electronics business twenty years ago, cell phones, satellite dishes, that sort of thing. Supposedly Sal Federico can account for every cent he takes in. God knows he's been taken over the hurdles enough times, every time his father comes up on another charge. The authorities have never been able to find anything on him."

"You sound disappointed."

"Girl's got her hooks in you already, doesn't she?"

I ignored that remark. "Thanks for the information, Jake, but I can take care of myself. If you say her father's legit, okay, he is. But even if he weren't, what's that got to do with Amy? She in the syndicate, too? What do they use her for? She a hit man or something?"

"I want you to be careful."

"Okay, if someone tries to recruit me to be a drug runner, or asks who's buying guns out on Manamesset Beach, I'll come to you. That enough?"

Amazing how patient this guy could be, and he was a cop. "You're one cocky kid, aren't you? I'm trying to do you a favor." He pulled up sharply into Stony Beach's parking lot. It was early yet, a Saturday morning; there were half a dozen campers parked there.

"Oh, I get it. I see what you want," I told him. "You're recruiting me to spy on her family, right? Who you working for? Who do I report to, Jake, some secret state agency trying to pull a sting, or is it the Feds?"

Now, I might have expected Jake to react more strongly. Instead he just put the car in park, leaned back in the driver's seat, and said, "You really like this girl, don't you?"

"This girl, Jake," I said with careful emphasis, "I just met." But slowly I let down my guard. "On impulse she invites me to this party. To impress all the relatives and friends, I guess. I'm not stupid, Jake. She had no date; I was lying on her lawn; I was convenient. She needed someone on her arm as she sashayed around last night, and so she could make a big impression when she ran down to the beach, tore off her dress, and dived into the water. That someone was me."

"She tore off her dress and dived in?" His eyebrows rose.

"From the dock," I said, remembering. Things had happened so quickly I'd barely had time to think. Or to remember that I hated diving into black water like that. But when the brain is pressed, it can do an amazing number of calculations very quickly: where the tides were, how deep the water was, and where the weeds were—the eel grass that would stroke your arms, legs, and belly if you swam at low tide. I hated eel grass.

But because Amy had just dived in, leaping from the rail of the dock itself, I really had had no choice but to dive in after her.

I looked at Jake, realizing he'd asked a question. "Yeah, she did, but she had underwear on. Look, that's not the point. Bad enough I've got to deal with my friends." I was flustered. "Look, Jake, I'm just a local kid, a year-rounder. I'm not in Amy Federico's league. I'll be

lucky if she ever says another word to me."

"Don't sell yourself short, Herbie."

I just shook my head, laughed. For an old guy, sometimes Jake didn't know very much.

But neither did I. After another full day of work, mostly out in the hot sun, I got home weary, worn out, and just plain wasted. I showered and changed before dinner—cold salmon, salad, a huge pitcher of lemonade—but just as I was sitting down to eat, my mother nodded at the answering machine.

Got to give my mom credit; if she'd deleted that message I would never have known. "Going out on the *Splendara* tomorrow," her voice said. "Come with me."

I had a glass of lemonade up to my mouth, and it froze there as I looked over the rim at my mother. The expression on her face was unreadable. But I did know this: she didn't approve.

As for me, I was already figuring out how to tell Covey and Remy.

Kids like me, we don't go "out" on luxury motor yachts. We go fishing. If we have a friend with a boat, we get some line, maybe we try our hand at a little water-skiing, water-boarding, or just plain messing around. If we don't have a boat, we push each other off docks, jetties, somebody else's boat. We hang out. We dive off bridges we're not supposed to. We waste time, when we're not busy, that is, but working this summer had put a real crimp in our wasting time together.

Covey, he had a boat, a little inboard that technically belonged to his grandfather. We took it out sometimes, but he was working in the marina with his dad this summer, cleaning up other people's boats. Remy, he had his paper route and worked at an ice cream shop. As for me, I was up at sunrise, worked all day in other people's yards, then fell into bed when the sun went down.

Except for that Sunday. Wear the khakis again, my mother told me. And a light-colored shirt. Take a swimsuit. Sneakers and a hat for sure. And a jacket because "sometimes it gets cold on the water, even in July." Though I doubted it would. The morning was starting out a scorcher; it was nearly eighty by the time I walked out to South Beach. There were people everywhere at the Federico place, laughing, talking, arguing, chasing children. A couple of Amy's sisters were married; they had their husbands and kids with them. Maybe it was going to be one huge family affair.

Not that the *Splendara* was any small boat. Technically, she was a custom-designed, fifty-four foot luxury motor yacht with a flying bridge, electronic radar, and just about every amenity you could want on a boat that size.

"Herbie!"

Amy was running down the flagstone steps that led to the huge wrap-around porch. Her arm was in mine, and she was dragging me back across the wide lawns. "You must meet my father. He insists. He always needs to meet all the boys I—well, it's a family thing,

we're Italian. He needs to approve, but he will, won't he? Because I already have."

"You're so spoiled, Amaline." One of Amy's sisters was laughing at her, or at me perhaps. "You with your beautiful boy." This set up a sudden wave of laughter from a virtual bevy of young women and girls. They were everywhere, sprawled on towels or in chairs under umbrellas or sitting on the porch with their children.

"Pay no attention to them," Amy assured me. "They're all jealous." She turned to one, snapping, *"Gelosa!,"* which caused several of them to erupt in laughter again.

We walked down to the seawall and along it to the dock, where a little runabout was waiting. It would take us to the *Splendara*, moored out in the bay.

I made only a couple of missteps on the way, reaching down for a cooler and a pair of knapsacks left lying on the raft at the end of the dock. It was natural for me to help out, to give a hand whether asked or not. But Amy tugged my arm closer to her, saying, "No, no. Let Dieter do it," indicating the muscle-bound fellow following close behind us. "It's his job, Herbie. Here you are my guest."

Of course I got to meet Salvatore Federico. He was standing up on the bridge deck dressed in an immaculate white polo shirt, dark gray leisure pants (or what a man of his class probably thought were leisure pants). They looked like silk. He was as tanned as Amy, a fairly short man but imposing with slightly graying hair, perfect teeth, a huge smile, and dark, piercing eyes. He was abrupt, too, every gesture quick and sharp as he spoke on the cell phone pressed to his ear. Apparently Amy's father was upset with someone, speaking angrily in a combination of English and Italian, something like "How *did* he get hold of it? This can ruin us. You know it can ruin us." Then he turned to us, nodded grimly. As he did, I recognized the make of his phone, and with that came a little shock. Of course, I thought. These are *those* Federicos.

He found a moment, however, while finalizing deals—or raking someone over the coals by the sound of it—to reach out and shake my hand as a somewhat bored Amy introduced me. Then she pulled me away, her arm linked through mine again. "He's busy," she muttered to me. "He's always busy."

I was wrong. Amy's family wasn't all going on the boat, just me and her and her father and someone she called a client who wanted to "go out fishing in the bay," though the two men spent most of their time having drinks on the lower deck while Dieter captained the *Splendara*.

"If we moor someplace near a beach," she told me, her hand in mine, "perhaps we can swim, yes? We passed some islands when we came in that seemed—" she lowered her eyes, looked at me through thick, dark lashes "—deserted."

"The outer bay islands?" She was leading me up toward the bow, where I had probably seen her two

weeks ago as the *Splendara* came into Manamesset Bay, lounging there with her sisters and cousins. "A lot of gulls nest out there and other birds." I kind of made a face, and she understood, turning on the deck ladder to look down at me. She was wearing dark blue shorts and a kind of white halter top that was barely there.

"Are those them?" she asked, turning as the *Splendara* increased its speed suddenly. It was as if she'd signaled Dieter at the helm to change the boat's heading. "The outer bay islands?" She paused on the ladder suddenly, leaning back against me. For a moment I couldn't think, couldn't answer; then I looked out across the waves to the harbor islands, which were uninhabited for the most part. On one island could be seen a tiny dock, a boat tied to a piling, and farther up, against the beach itself, a small cabin. From the cabin came the sound of music—strings, horns. "That one is not deserted. I see a house." Her eyes raked across me so intently I could almost feel them.

"You're right," I said as the *Splendara* cut through the water like an immense dolphin. Outside of a Coast Guard cruiser, I'd never been aboard a boat so smooth, so powerful. "That one isn't, but most of those islands were bought up years ago by the government. The deal is—" we were close enough to Black Gull Island to hear a voice rising over the violins, someone with a deep and powerful operatic voice "—when the present owners die, the land will revert to the government. A national park will be made from them, oh, in 2010, I think. Manamesset National Wetlands or something like that."

"Or something like that?" she mimicked. She smiled; she knew absolutely the effect she had on me as she pulled me up onto the bowsprit behind her. Then she spun around, practically pushing into me as she did; the wind blew out her long, dark hair, slapping me in the face. The spray came up off the water; the sun was high and the skies a vivid blue. It couldn't have been more perfect.

"That music. We heard it when we sailed in three weeks ago. It came from that shack. Who is it? Who lives there?"

"On Black Gull Island?" It was a wonder I could answer; she was pressed against me; the boat was jumping over each swell as Dieter increased the speed. "An old man. We just call him Old Guy."

Her hand fell on my chest as though she needed to steady herself; her face was aglow. "Old Guy?"

"Yeah. I guess he has a name." I braced myself against a sudden lurch of the boat; we must've been running at least twenty-four, twenty-five knots. "He's kind of a hermit, a loner. He plays that music all day. Doesn't bother anybody; nobody close enough to bother."

"And there?" Losing interest in Black Gull Island, she pointed ahead to the largest of the harbor islands as we swung across the channel opening into the canal and moved north toward Smiley's Island. "With the big house? Is that another island that will go to the government?"

"No, that one's owned by some nuns."

She was pointing at the huge white and gray stucco house that had once belonged to Smiley Corrigan, a notorious rumrunner in the 1920's. I'd heard it had been quite a showplace in its day, a villa, a mansion where Smiley had entertained his friends, family, and business cohorts. Though still grand in an Old World kind of way, it had deteriorated into a sea-weathered place, the windows on the first floor boarded over, those on the second broken out. One of Smiley Corrigan's nieces had inherited the place, had later given it to the religious order she'd joined.

"Nuns?" She shuddered. "I hate nuns." She moved away from me, her interest in this place fleeting, too.

So I said, "I've been up there."

She turned around, eyes showing some renewed interest.

"The house is up on a rocky bluff." We were coming around the island from the southeast. "But it's deserted. I kind of know the caretaker. He's a family friend who—" I shrugged, trying to be nonchalant, not show off. "He was a friend of the head nun, the mother superior, I guess, and when her order closed, he was hired to keep an eye on it. You know, check it now and then and make sure no freeloaders moved in. I think it's going to be sold." I wasn't sure of that, so I quickly added, "It's empty now." I felt her eyes move up and down my face; she was quiet, thoughtful. So I added, "I know where the keys are."

For a moment her dense, dark eyes seemed lost, or hollow, but they grew bright again and she came right up to me, both hands pressed flat against my chest. Her entire face was beaming. I had quite honestly never in my entire life met such an affectionate, uninhibited, beautiful girl. "You have the *keys* to that place?" There was absolute awe and wonder on her face.

"I know where my friend—" I almost said "hides them" "—keeps them. He stops by now and then if he's out fishing. If I could borrow a boat, maybe we could take a ride out sometime . . ." Was this me, trying to make a date with her? Was I actually asking Amy Federico . . .

She broke into my thoughts like a whirlwind. "Take me now, Herbie! Take me there! I have a boat!" Then she flew away from me and down the ladder to the deck below, leaving me to catch my breath.

"You do not know these waters, Amaline," Salvatore Federico was saying to his daughter as two of his muscle-bound henchmen stood in front of the small rescue boat hanging from the davits on the rear deck. Amy's father had already given the order for the yacht to come around and slow down. The expression on his face was uncertain. But on his daughter's face? Sheer exasperation.

Then suddenly the two of them launched into a full-scale argument, back and forth, partly in English, partly in Italian, with Salvatore Federico finally saying in frustrated English, "We are too near the canal. The currents, the

shoals, it is too dangerous. Brant or Dieter will drive you out—"

"I know these waters. I can handle a small boat," I said. "Besides, you pilot a boat, not drive it."

Federico turned back to me, an unreadable look on his powerful features. Suddenly he broke into a grin and laughed, slapped both hands down on my shoulders, and giving me a quick shake said, "Of course you do! *Pilot* a boat! Of course! Local boy, you know boats, yes? And these waters, where the unpredictable currents are, the quick waves? You will let nothing happen to my Amaline, will you?"

I didn't even answer, just glanced at Amy, already skipping away as the two large men got ready not the rescue boat, no, it was the little Chris-Craft runabout, the *Splendida*, which was being towed behind us, that I was about to have the privilege of piloting.

Maybe a lot of things I can't do. Compete with them, this extravagantly wealthy family. Maybe I haven't gone to the best schools, traveled around the world, entertained the rich, the famous, or the notorious. Maybe I don't have a yacht or servants ready to pick up my shirt, my shoes, the moment I drop them, but this I can do: take a runabout out to Smiley's Island.

The *Splendida* was a small inboard, a sixteen foot, four-seater, custom Chris-Craft, practically an antique. But whoever had owned the *Splendida* before the Federicos (some guy who went bankrupt, Amy told me when I asked) had known how to maintain a boat. The little runabout was in nearly pristine condition, constructed of varnished mahogany and teak with polished bronze brightwork. She'd probably been originally designed for inland lakes and rivers like the Great Lakes region. But she handled just as well in the bay, slipping over the water like an eel toward the little salt water inlet that Smiling Joe Corrigan had widened and deepened seventy years ago to moor his deep-keeled sailing craft.

This was something I could do.

I turned off the motors, let the rising tide push us in. Cautioning Amy to stay put, I jumped over the side. The water was cold, which came as a shock, but we were near the canal entrance and it was always cold here. In nearly up to my waist, I towed the runabout as close to shore as I could. There were a few broken-off pilings here that were covered only at full moon high tide.

This was an entire island that was slowly being destroyed, eaten up by the waves, the drift from the canal, and the slow effects of erosion. Seventy years ago Joe Corrigan had dumped sand everywhere, hoping to slow the gradual destruction. But such efforts had not been meant to last forever; the longshore currents that swept to the south and north were slowly devouring the sand, carrying it away and redepositing it on the smaller, reed-choked islands to the south. Black Gull, Lighthook, and Barrows Islands were all actually growing as the sand from Smiley's was left on their shores. Only this

large rocky outcropping, about four acres in size, if that, remained of Smiley's Island.

It was no problem to tie a bowline, slip it over a piling, and go back for Amy. She had a woven bag with a long strap slung over one shoulder. "Dieter packed us lunch and put in a blanket to spread on the sand," she explained.

"Great." Marveling at the warmth of her, the smoothness of her skin, I helped her out. She screeched as her legs hit the cold water, and she jumped away from me.

"I would have carried you," I told her as she laughed and splashed water on me and ran up to the rocky beach.

"I think you would have!" she shouted in delight; then she was up and away, eager to explore . . .

Well, to explore whatever it was she wanted on Smiley's Island.

As I said, it was an island of rock for the most part, its soil meager, nearly nonexistent. There was hardly any sand except for a stretch here and there between outcroppings of rock. On one of these tiny, narrow beaches was a building stretching into the water. It was a small one story shed, originally a boathouse. With each high tide it came closer and closer to vanishing altogether. She pointed it out at once. "What's that?"

"A boathouse originally, but it was used, or so I've heard, for cocktails, like a little party house. There was a dock out front, but it's gone now."

"But why is it in the water?"

"Eighty years ago there was a much wider beach here. Now high tide covers the front of the house, only the back sticks out. And twice a month—" I paused; was she really interested in all this? I knew where she wanted to go, to the mansion above us, sitting on the highest point of Smiley's Island, the stucco house that Joe Corrigan had built, occupied for a mere ten years, then deserted when he was carted off to jail on racketeering convictions. "Twice a month," I repeated, "the boathouse is completely under water, at full moon high tide."

She was interested. She was listening, standing there looking at me.

"But it's fallen forward, you see." I pointed it out to her as I explained how "the land slumped, oh, fifty, sixty years ago. I guess the sand and rocks underneath just gave way, maybe during an earthquake, or when they were blasting and dredging for the canal. So that part, the front, is always in the water except at real low tide. It's slowly rotting away. It'll be gone someday."

"But why doesn't it just float away into the sea?"

"Smiley—Joe Corrigan—planned for that, too. He knew the occasional storm or hurricane could come in and float it out, so he had the whole thing bolted to the rocks like you would a permanent dock."

For a moment she just stared at me; then, smiling, she swung about, pointed up above the trees on the bluff—a few cedars, a cypress, a couple of giant oaks, all planted by Smiling Joe himself—and said, "Take me up there, Herbie. I want to go inside."

There had once been a grand verandah here, a kind of outer courtyard with huge plaster columns painted white, but now the verandah was broken up into pieces and the columns were crumbling from the effects of the saltwater, the dampness. Under a crumbling windowsill beside what had once been a beautiful oak door was a small hole where Mr. Hornton had hollowed out a place to hide a set of keys. I worked my hand into it and, while Amy watched, pulled out a small key chain with two keys on it. One for the house, the other for the boathouse.

"He put new locks on both, although I don't know why he bothered. There's nothing in the boathouse now. Nothing to steal."

"To keep out curious local boys, of course," she admonished me. "A crumbling house is a dangerous thing, no?"

God, how I loved the sound of her voice, her slight accent. "Of course," I agreed, never having thought of it that way. Two years ago, when this property had fallen into his care, Mr. Hornton had installed a heavy deadbolt lock on the doors and boarded up the windows of both the main house and the boathouse. He'd done so not only to deter trespassers or local kids who might quickly turn both places into hangouts, but to keep out younger children who might get in and hurt themselves.

Perceptive girl.

I slid the key into the huge, brass lock, twisted it. The door creaked; I pushed it open. Smiling Joe Corrigan's once-elegant home was waiting for us.

I'd been here before, come with Mr. Hornton to help get rid of the debris of nearly seventy years of neglect, vandalism, and animals (mice for the most part). I'd carried out to his boat over forty bags of trash as well as old furniture, books and magazines, and other odds and ends, even a few antiques. It had taken us the better part of a summer to clean out the place and shore it up. We'd found signs everywhere of earlier occupation, just as one might at an archaeological site: forties-era matchbooks, magazines, old newspapers. From the fifties an old phonograph, broken vinyl records, and fishing gear. Someone in the sixties or seventies had left psychedelic-patterned curtains in the upstairs windows and the scattered remains of drug paraphernalia in the huge slate-countered kitchen.

And from the fairly recent past we'd found portable cooking stoves, cans, and beer bottles. Squatters of every kind and every decade had used Joe Corrigan's house as their own, but today the rooms were swept clean, emptied of clutter and debris. The huge, marbled center room, which rose two stories to broken skylights, was empty, its tiled floor covered with a few leaves and nothing more.

Amy was disappointed. Standing there beside me, looking around at the crumbling plaster columns, graffiti-covered walls, and boarded-up windows, she shook her head and said, "It's not what I expected."

I didn't think so. A girl like her,

she must have seen many luxurious homes, many grand villas. This was an empty shell, a broken-down house. It had probably been a mistake to bring her here.

"But what is up there?" She pointed to the marble colonnade above us; around the perimeter were dark openings leading into even darker rooms. They were bedrooms for the most part, guest accommodations for Smiley's many houseparties, but each was as empty as this great hall.

"A lot of rooms, nothing in them."

"And no one comes here?" She looked at me. "Not local people?"

"No reason to. It's locked up pretty good." I looked overhead. From one of the doorways light could be seen. That room faced the southeast and the water. It had once been the artist's loft of one of Smiley Corrigan's girlfriends. Mr. Hornton and I hadn't bothered to board those windows, they were up so high up. The glass in most of them had been broken out years ago.

Suddenly Amy spun around in a circle, seeking out . . . the stairs at the far end of the hall, and without a word, she was skipping off that way.

I followed and found her in the loft, its great casement windows all gone. Someone had put up curtains, mere lacy shreds of cloth now, and they were whipping in the slight breeze. Amy dropped her bag, ran to the middle window, and stopped. The windows ran from floor to ceiling, and with a one more step she would have walked right out into the sea some thirty feet below.

She turned and looked at me with the light against her back.

"This—" she said with a gasp in her voice "—is gorgeous. Perfect." She looked up at the skylights overhead, only one still slightly intact. Light cascaded into the room and onto the plank floors. Probably constructed from a dark pine or mahogany, they had been bleached by decades of sun to a pale gray that looked almost white.

"Perfect," she said again, coming forward to me, extending her hands.

Perfect, yes, and though some details are necessary, what came next is not. Just suffice it to say that Amy and I stayed there for a little while and had a good time.

A very good time.

I mowed lawns the next day and again the next and then . . . again the next. Painted a garage. Helped strip an old boat. Covey came around and we went to a movie, but I didn't take much interest in it. Usual midsummer action flick. No dialogue. All special effects and gore. I couldn't have told you later what the story had been about, or even if it had had a story.

I was somewhere else all that time. On the seawall, on the wide green lawns in front of the Federico house, or in Smiley Corrigan's house on the island, up in the artist's loft where the floorboards were bleached nearly white.

Three days went by like that, me playing the waiting game, waiting for Amy to call. I went by her house every day after work, but things

were strangely quiet there. No beautiful dark-eyed sisters rushing in and out, no beautiful women teasing me on the lawn, no men wearing gold chains and lush Italian suits getting out of Jaguars and Ferraris and Mercedes.

So for the first time in my life I really knew how it felt to be lost in something I didn't understand. Not only didn't I understand Amy Federico, I didn't understand me. Three days I'd been with her. Talked with her. Been shown around and introduced to all her family, gone out on her boat with her, showed her Smiley's Island . . . and more.

So what did it all mean? And was it even supposed to mean something?

Three days of constantly checking my phone messages throughout the day, of racing home at night to find nothing there but calls from potential customers. Messages about painting fences, tearing down sheds, repairing roofs. Nothing else. It took me to Wednesday to figure out what had happened. I had been the in-between boy, the fill-in kid, as Amy moved from one fantastically rich, goodlooking, famous, or talented guy to the next. In my imagination I could see her playing tennis, going sailing, taking in summer concerts with whoever.

It made me sick. It made me depressed. It made me question myself. A beautiful girl had given me a few hours of her life, and that's all it was ever going to be?

Thursday Remy wanted me to go out for pizza; Friday Covey asked me to go "bridge-jumping" with him and some of his friends. I passed on both, stayed home to watch the Red Sox on TV with my mother, went to bed early.

And mowed lawns. Painted sheds and trimmed shrubs. Moved bushes and put up fences.

Then Saturday came, and the big house above the seawall was still quiet, just a large black Lincoln Continental in the driveway, license plates FEDRI-1, a reference to Salvatore Federico's company. So they were still there.

It had taken me that entire week to get up the courage to walk to her front door and knock on it.

For a moment I thought the house was empty even though I could hear music from inside. Opera music again. Some guy with a huge voice bellowing for all he was worth. Then the door swung open, and there stood Amy's grandmother, the woman I'd met a week ago standing over a pot of saffron-rich paella.

Behind her a woman in a plain gray dress and apron rushed forward, but Mrs. Federico fluttered her hands at her. "Find something to do, Debra," Mrs. Federico said. To me, her face breaking into a beautiful smile, she said, "Herberto. How good to see you. Come in. Come in."

Holding a tall thin glass filled with a bright red liquid, she invited me into what she called the "deck room," which was quite literally just that, a dining room that extended through sliding glass doors onto a deck at the far side of the house. No magnificent water view from here, just a beautiful sweep of marshland and a partial view of Long Jetty Lighthouse in the dis-

tance. There were a pair of blue herons in the marsh.

"You come to see Amy, of course," she said to me. A bottle of ginger ale and a tall elegant glass were presented to me by the maid; I decided to take it straight from the bottle. "But she is gone, all week she is gone, and today now, I am alone. No family. No, no, they have important party out on the *Splendara.*" She gave an exaggerated shrug, and I realized she was a little drunk. She waved a hand in the hair. "I do not like the water, which is why Salvatore rents this house for me. Still, they give me no consideration; they go out to Westfleet, wherever . . ." Another extravagant wave, then she seemed to remember I was standing there.

"Amy has gone to see *him*. I do not approve. I've never approved," she said to me with a little shake of her head. "She does not listen, not to me, not to her father, oh, she is so disrespectful to my poor Salvatore! But what can he do? I say to him, Salvatore, you have all these beautiful daughters! But no mother! No, and am I to be mother to all your beautiful daughters? At my age? Don't I deserve some peace, some quiet, some respect?"

I set the ginger ale down on an alabaster table. "I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mrs. Federico—"

She cut me off with a wave of her hand. "Amy is too smart! Even the nuns said so! And wild! And reckless! She makes the same mistake I made! And does she listen? Does she listen to her old grandmother, me with the years of experience, of knowing what it is to have the family honor and loyalty! No! She turns seventeen, and the nuns want her out! They say there is no controlling her! What can be done, I say to Salvatore? What can be done? Amy's seventeen." She wasn't listening to me by then; it didn't matter.

"I give you a piece of advice," the old woman said, coming right up to me, her hard, dark eyes blinking. I saw Amy in her face for a split second. "Forget my Amaline. She is no good for you. I say this even as I love her, my own granddaughter, she is no good for you."

So Amy was seventeen, two years older than me. That really didn't matter so much as did the fact that she was seeing someone else, someone her family didn't approve of.

No, what mattered was that I'd been right. I'd been a distraction for her, a convenient distraction.

I didn't do much after that, didn't feel like working, so I sat on the seawall and watched the waves, the empty place where the *Splendara* had been moored. As the afternoon wore on, I walked out on the public dock, leaned on the railing, and watched while the local kids played in the waters of low tide, catching crabs and small fish in their fine-mesh nets.

I didn't notice the people going by, out to the raft at the end of the dock, some speaking to me briefly in passing. So it was with a little shock that a hand came down heavily on my shoulder. "Hey, Herbie, doing anything tonight? Look, I met these two girls—"

Remy was standing there with a foolish grin on his face. "They're not

great-looking." He shrugged, kind of; the foolish grin never left his face, "But they'll *do* anything. Told them you and me, we'd meet them at the Clam Shack around seven. What do you say?"

"I say no thanks."

"Hey." The foolish grin evaporated. "Come on, Herb, I kind of told them that—well, the only reason they said yes was I said I'd bring you. One of them, she thinks you're real hot."

I glared at him,then turned and walked down the ramp leading out to the raft.

"Herbie!" Remy was right behind me. "Hey, come on! Is it her?" He jerked a thumb back to the white house past the seawall. "Some rich girl who plays around with you, then dumps you? She's not worth it, Herbie. No girl is worth it."

"Shut up, Remy," I warned him.

"I'm not going to shut up," he said defiantly. "She used you, didn't she? Girls." He spat into the water. "You got to use them right back, that's what you got to do."

"I told you to shut up."

Then he did it: "Amy Federico, she's just another rich ——," calling her a name not fit to print here.

I gave him a shove into the water and walked away as he found a few good names to call me while he sputtered around in the bay.

Monday came and I was back at my usual routine: mowing lawns, helping a neighbor patch a hole in his garage roof. I saw Amy as I was climbing down his ladder in the hot midafternoon sun.

"Think we can quit for now, Herbie," Mr. Jackson had just called up to me. He was pushing ninety but still insisted on doing all his own yardwork, with occasional help from me or a neighbor. "Damned if that sun ain't gonna kill us both."

"Hello, Herbie." And there she stood, white shorts edged in gold, blue halter top with a white anchor on it. Her long dark hair was drawn back with a band that made neat, narrow ridges where it was held. She looked at Mr. Jackson, smiled her beautiful smile, and said hello to him, too.

I think the old guy nearly died without any help from the sun.

"So, where've you been?" I asked as she watched me clean up. I'd taken off my shirt, was using Mr. Jackson's outside shower, bending over into the spray.

"I don't owe you an explanation," she said. She was leaning against Mr. Jackson's house watching me and playing with a bit of vine that had grown up the siding and into a downspout.

Before I could think of a comeback (she had come looking for me, after all, had to have called my house, gotten a list of everyone I was working for, checked them out one at a time), she said, "Sorry. I had family business to take care of. And—" She hesitated just slightly. "Things to do in Boston. I'll have to earn my living someday, you know. I'm not as rich as people think." Her tone was self-righteous, even indignant.

"No?" I looked at her in surprise, and though I didn't ask her to explain, she did.

"My father's company, FedriFone, is practically bankrupt."

"Bankrupt?" I grabbed a towel off Mr. Jackson's line, followed her around to the front of the house. Mr. Jackson was putting away his tools but stopped long enough to stare at us—at her.

She gave a shrug, indifference poorly hidden. "You haven't been out to South Beach today, have you? His creditors came this morning and took the *Splendara* away." Her beautiful dark eyes were scowling. "My father—" her face held pure disdain "—blames it on the competition, the international marketplace. Never his decisions, of course. He trusted the wrong people, people who turned on him, and for it he may lose the company. But truth is, he has no loyalty, no sense of honor, not to us, not to his family. Do you understand?"

"No."

She sighed petulantly, muttered something in Italian under her breath. "I am a Federico. I breathe, eat, sleep who and what I am, my family, my name—but my own father?" She made a guttural sound as though she'd like to spit, but didn't. "He'd rather see us live like peasants, like little people than—" Her eyes fell on the still gawking Mr. Jackson, who abruptly and with some embarrassment, turned away with his bucket of tools.

I was glad he was hard of hearing.

"I mean no insult," she said to me, swinging her thick hair back over one shoulder. "Even if you are . . ."

"A little person?" I thought I'd help her out. "Or do you just mean poor?"

"No, not poor." A clever grin creased her lips. "Economically disadvantaged." Her eyes glowed almost cruelly. "Now, that is, but will you always be? No, you are bright, Herbie, and ambitious; you work long hours in the hot sun, yes? You are like my grandpapa, working so hard to build an empire, and stability and security for his family. *He* would never have let anyone take it all away from us. Never. But my father?" She shook her head. "My father is a very smart man; he can do many things—" She seemed to freeze up. "He could save the company if he really wanted. I am not like my father." She tossed aside the bit of vine she'd been playing with. "I will work like Gino Federico did, and I will—" She bit her lip, shuddered, then turned aside as I walked toward her. "Didn't you wonder why we're summering here and not in Westfleet or Hyannis?"

"Yeah, I did kind of wonder why you were slumming around Manamesset this summer." I was finally fed up with her snobbish attitude. I flung my dirty shirt over my shoulder, waved to Mr. Jackson, and started to leave.

"Herbie!" She flew up beside me, seizing my arm, rubbing against my side. It was hot even though it was getting late, the sun still burning down over us, but her skin felt cool, and then her face touched mine as she reached out to kiss me. For a moment, with her pressed there against me, I tried to remain angry and offended but couldn't. I felt my resistance melt as she mold-

ed her hand into mine and pressed her lips against the side of my neck.

The rest of the afternoon was perfect. We went for a swim. Then for pizza. And ice cream after that. Walked all over town with her hand in mine. Made sure everyone saw us, even Covey riding by on his bike, which he nearly fell off of, seeing Amy and me walking back from the ice cream shop, her arm around my waist.

We walked along the seawall as far as it would take us, crossed Long Pier, Stony Jetty, and the white sands of Near South Beach. The only place we didn't go was out to South Beach, to the house her family was renting; she'd shaken her head, claiming she "couldn't," and it was "too painful to look out into the bay and not see the *Splendara* there."

So we ended up on the opposite cove, where the boats were moored practically in the marshes. We watched an osprey fly long and low across the water, diving for fish. The docks here were smaller; the houses packed in more tightly, cheap rentals for city people. It was here that we watched the sun go down over the salt marshes in the distance.

"My mother's name was Dara," she said at last, after falling silent for a long time. "He bought the *Splendara* for her. He renamed her. That's supposed to be bad luck." She dropped my hand and walked the length of the dock, pausing to watch some kids who were trying to launch a dinghy from the muddy, clay-banked shore.

"I'm sorry, Amy," I told her. "That your family's got problems."

"Problems," she snapped. "A problem is when your cell phone won't work or the satellite is down or some crazy thing like that. That," she smiled at me, "is a problem."

"I wish I—" I had never felt quite so ineffectual, so unimportant.

"You can do nothing, no." She dropped her eyes, then they flashed back up at me. "You *have* helped. In a way you cannot imagine, Herberto." She came up to me and winding both hands around my neck, kissed me.

A few hours later I was slumped on my living room sofa, half-asleep, exhausted both from work and from being with Amy. We'd spent some time on that dock until a family went by, staring at us, making us feel uneasy. And though I hadn't wanted her to leave, she insisted she needed to spend some time with her grandmother and would see me the next day.

I had just finished some cold tunafish, was drifting off to sleep, when I felt someone grab my arm, shake it.

"Herbie, wake up." It was my mother. She had the TV remote in her hand, was turning up the volume. "Isn't this the family of that girl you—" she sighed "—have been seeing lately?"

I pulled myself up, faced the television set as a Boston news station ended a story with "Company spokesmen predict that as many as five thousand jobs will be lost, with at least a thousand in this area. It will be a cruel blow to the lo-

cal economy that has so depended on small entrepreneurs like the Federicos to keep high-skilled jobs in southeastern Massachusetts."

I looked at my mother. "What was that all about?"

"Apparently Fedri-Fone is going through one of those re-management phases," she explained. "I don't know much about it. Downsizing. Restructuring. It all adds up to a lot of jobs lost."

"Yeah." I stretched my legs out. "They took her father's boat this morning. Things don't look good for them." I turned around; it was going on eight o'clock, but the sun was still pouring into our kitchen. Maybe Amy had spent enough time with her grandmother; maybe I could go to South Beach, see if she wanted to go for a walk, or wanted to talk, or . . . do something else.

I jumped up, reaching for my sneakers. "I'm going out for a while. Don't expect me back until after dark."

"She goes off." The old woman waved a hand at me. In her lap she held a glass of red wine.

"Pardon me?"

"She takes her things, her heavy black suitcase, the little TV, and just goes off! She had to have Dieter, she says, to help her. What do *I* do? I need Dieter, too! I have my bingo tonight, and who will drive me? He will be back, she says, but *she* needs Dieter now. So I am alone. Again. They come here, oh yes, when they want their grandmama to make food for them, throw the big party! But now she is gone."

"Gone where, Mrs. Federico?" I kind of crept into an old wicker chair across from her.

"In the boat, of course! This has happened before! She packs up all her 'gear' as she calls it, and then she is gone! I do not approve." She leaned forward, scowling at me. "The nuns said Amaline was very talented, can do more than they can. Amy helped the nuns for a while when it suited her. She made for them a—" She shook her head with distaste. "Something to do with spiders. I cannot keep up with it. Computers."

"A Web site." Boy, was I running slow. "Amy helped her school build a Web site?"

"Yes! A Web site! As if that matters to anyone anywhere. Who cares? I know my Amy is good at math. Ever since she was a little girl, very, very good with figures. So they say she is good with computers? Salvatore says it, too, but now she packs everything up and goes? And she takes Dieter?"

I stared across the room to the dining room, where the windows looked toward the marsh. Amy had gone, taking a black suitcase and a television—a computer monitor?

"When did she leave?"

"Half hour, twenty minutes, I do not know. It is all *his* influence, all his. I told Salvatore it was wrong to let her see him. Now look at what she does? Back tomorrow, she says, maybe. Out all night. Do you think that proper, Herberto, that a seventeen-year-old girl should be out the entire night? In my day . . ."

"Who is she with, Mrs. Federico? Does her her friend have a boat?"

She stared right at me with her small, raisin black eyes, totally puzzled. "What friend? What friend is this? Amy has no friends!"

"Then who is she with?"

"Dieter! I tell you that already! Just when I need him!"

"But you said—" I couldn't put thoughts together quickly enough. "She's gone in a boat?"

"*Her* boat! Her boat she takes! Like before!"

"The *Splendara?*"

"Of course not!" she nearly shouted. "The *Splendara* was taken away this morning!" She muttered something very uncomplimentary, I am sure, in Italian. "I am talking about Amy's boat! The *Splendida!*"

"The *Splendida.*" Then I was up, thanked her quickly, and flew out the door.

Nothing fit together into a credible whole. Nothing as I ran along the seawall, thinking, reasoning, puzzling it all out. Where the *Splendara* had been moored was a white buoy but no boat. So the *Splendara* had been repossessed, or whatever, but not the small wooden runabout, the *Splendida.* Amy had told me several days ago, "*I* have a boat." So the *Splendida* was Amy's.

Amy's boat. And the man Amy was involved with, whom her family did not approve of? Dieter, the big bulky blond guy who worked for Amy's father? No, it didn't make sense, didn't fit. If he were messing around with Amy—and the family knew—he would have been fired long ago.

Maybe at about this point I should have just given up, walked away, decided this wasn't my business. It didn't seem that Amy was in any kind of trouble; she'd even done this before, according to her grandmother. She must have a friend, a male friend, whom Dieter helped her meet maybe.

But then why take all her "gear," which sounded like computer equipment. Where would she be taking computer equipment in a boat?

Of course I knew I risked looking like a complete and utter fool; I knew it as I ran down to the seawall, then out to the dock where some kids were still swimming around though it was getting late. As the sun was starting to sink in the west, the moon would start to rise behind me, to the east. Tonight was the full moon.

And the kids knew it, were already anticipating the advance of the huge tide that would sweep against the seawall, obliterating the beach for a few hours.

"Hey, you know that little runabout, the wooden boat that's been tied up to the big yacht?" I approached a kid I knew. "Did you see it moored out there?" I pointed out to the bobbing white buoy.

"No," he said and my heart sank, and then, "It was tied up to the dock. The girl who's staying up there—" he pointed to the Federico house "—she took it out a little while ago. Her and one of those real big guys."

"You didn't notice which way she went, did you?" This was hopeless; it was a huge bay. Why would this ten-year-old kid notice?

Except that almost everybody noticed Amy when she came and went, down to the dock or back, and

especially at this time of night when the beach was fairly quiet. Not many people went out on the water this late.

The kid shrugged, then pointed out into the water, south, toward the entrance to the bay and the opening to the canal. "I don't know for sure," he said. "I think maybe they went that way."

I really had no choice. I didn't own a boat, and if I could have borrowed Mr. Hornton's boat (doubtful, this late at night), it would have taken too long to go to his house, get the keys, work up a plausible explanation. Instead I ran down the beach to the private dock where Covey Harrington's grandfather kept his boat tied up. It was a little beat-up no-name all purpose utility craft with an inboard motor that some days refused to turn over. But I'd seen Covey coming up the beach.

I also knew he probably wasn't happy to see me. I'd stood him up too many times the last two weeks. Just the same, it was no time to haggle. Direct means were best.

"Covey, I need your boat." There, right in his face, standing deliberately in his way.

"Ain't got a boat," he said sourly. "And you're not taking my grandpa's boat." He spat in the sand at my feet. "B'sides, what do you need a boat for?"

"It's important. I know you've got the keys. I need the boat. I can explain later." I put my hand out.

"You got some nerve," he snarled at me, once again using his somewhat limited vocabulary. "I heard what you did to Remy, pushing him off the raft when he's only trying to be a friend."

"Look, Covey, so I'll owe you one. I just need your boat."

"Go —— yourself," was his response to that, so I reached out, grabbed him by the shirt, and twisting it up in a knot, pulled him toward me. Covey was no lightweight and only about an inch shorter than me, but he was easily taken by surprise. He also knew I never threw my weight around, not unless it was serious. And though Covey had the meaner mouth—most of the time—he was also the smarter of my two friends. He didn't try to push me into the sand like Remy might have. Instead, he said, "Hey! Okay! All right!," then fished in his pocket for the small ring with its set of keys. "If it's that important. Just don't let anything happen to it, okay?"

"Thanks." I was already halfway down the beach.

There was the *Splendida,* tied up as it had been two weeks ago to the broken piling. For a moment I wondered why I was really out here, and then something else occurred to me: Amy knew where the keys to Smiley Corrigan's house were kept, and if she . . .

I didn't want to think this all the way through, but I did. If she were at Smiley's Island, there was the probability she was meeting the guy her grandmother didn't approve of.

But that didn't explain the computer gear. I still hadn't figured out what that was all about. Still, Amy

had gotten so wound up inside of me I had to know for sure if I were just a distraction for her or if I meant anything more.

So I tied up Covey's boat, made my way up the beach, tide still coming in. I glanced once at the boathouse, the front end of which was entirely submerged, then turned to the path leading up to Smiley's big house. Maybe I had no right to be doing this, barging in on her (and the thought of what I might barge into wasn't exactly appealing). But somehow I felt Amy had violated my trust. I'd shown her this house; I'd told her no one came here. She had no right to turn it into a place for her, what was the word, assignations. Yeah, never thought I'd use that word, let alone think it.

At the front door I reached under the windowsill and into the hole. Nothing. No key. I knew it. So even though it was a stupid thing to do, I went to the door and kicked it, and it flew open. She hadn't even bothered to lock it. And why should she? No one came out here.

Inside it was dark, full of shadows, the moon rising as the sun went down. Soon this hall would be flooded with moonlight. I went to the stairs, my heart thudding. I was mad, but I didn't know at whom or how I'd react or what I'd do if Amy's boyfriend were bigger than me. It didn't seem to matter.

Not until I walked into the empty artist's loft and found that it was no longer empty.

There was an entire wall of electronic equipment and computers, including a laptop open on a folding table, a small camp chair in front of it. Sitting on the chair, fingers suspended over the laptop, was Amy.

I was speechless. She and I just stared at each other, then I said, "What is all this? What are you doing?"

Her face had that hollow look in it for a moment; then she swung her hair back, whipping her fingers down through it from her forehead. It was the gesture of either a vain or a beautiful girl. Amy was both.

I walked across the room. The sun had nearly vanished, and directly opposite, the rising moon could just be seen.

"What are you doing?" I asked again because nowhere in my comprehension of things, of the possibility of things, of even the remotest possibility of things, did this make any sense.

"I am doing—" she went back to her laptop, fingers moving rapidly over the keys "—what my father refuses to do. Destroying the competition." She looked at me defiantly.

"But what . . ." I walked farther into the room. She ignored me, intent on what looked like a map, a kind of trajectory tracing across her screen. "I don't get it."

"What is there to get, Herbie, or Herberto as my grandmother calls you?" She continued typing, then with a dramatic flourish threw her head back, looking up through the broken skylight. "In thirty-two minutes a satellite will move into position overhead, a geosynchronous satellite."

"What are you talking about?"

"It moves with the Earth," she

said sharply. "Do you learn nothing at school? Tonight the satellite is being repositioned, will sit right over Cape Cod, over Manamesset Bay."

"Wait." I was getting a glimmer. "A communications satellite? Telephone communications? Not your father's company—"

"No," she said, pushing back in the chair, spinning it around facing me. "You silly, stupid boy. Why would I want to do anything to my father's satellite? This one—" Her face became dark and hard, no longer the face of a seventeen-year-old girl but that of a much older and very determined woman. "—belongs to one of his competitors. A man who was once a trusted friend, who helped build my father's company but, when he left, took with him the encryption secrets my father—" she paused and for emphasis thumped her hand on her chest "—*my father* spent ten years creating. They call it industrial espionage." Her entire face lit up as though it were on fire. "But I call it betrayal!" Her eyes flashed upward again. "But it does not matter, the details of things now, only that they pay for what they have done."

"You're not planning to—come on, Amy, get real. You can't be . . ." I looked at the line of computers, then turned and saw positioned on the wall a small dish antenna, a receiver-transmitter. ". . . serious?"

"Do I look like I am not serious? I am deadly serious. The same codes they stole from my father will allow me to interface with the satellite and knock it out for at least twenty-four hours. Hundreds of thousands of calls will be affected as well as entire communications networks. All down. All dead."

"You're kidding. Come on, Amy, who got you mixed up in this? Because this is crazy; no, it's a joke. I mean, you're just a—"

"Just what, Herbie?" She glared at me. "A girl?"

"No, I mean, you're only—"

"Seventeen!" she snapped. "Oh yes, you stupid American boy! If I were, say, a twelve-year-old *boy,* you might believe me capable, yes? And if you heard that a twelve-year-old boy had hacked his way into a national defense site, *that* would not astonish you! But because it is me, a stupid Italian girl, you cannot believe it?"

"Amy, this is crazy. It's insane. You can't possibly—"

"I can! And I have before!" she shot back. "Oh, that company, they insisted it was a 'solar flare,' as will this one, but the clients they stole from my father will not care what caused the malfunction. All they will know is that they could not place their very important calls when they wanted, and perhaps they will think of Salvatore Federico and his company and his satellites, which do not have such problems. So it is revenge, Herbie; it is the way Gino Federico, my grandfather, handled his competition. It is the way I, Amaline Federico, will handle it."

"Gino," I whispered. I remembered her grandmother's words: "Amy makes the same mistake I made."

"Of course. Good as I am, do you think I could manage this on my

own? My father will not accept my grandfather's help, so I do it instead for him. I will ruin the men who tried to ruin my family."

"Amy, this isn't just—" I swallowed hard, looked up through the broken skylight "—industrial espionage, it's sabotage." I looked at the equipment, her blinking laptop, the trajectory map that must have shown the path the satellite was moving along until it was stabilized and aligned with Earth's orbit. "Those privately owned satellites sometimes handle weather broadcasts, and even the government sometimes leases them—"

"Do you think I care? Perhaps they too will think better who they do business with!"

"You can't get away with this. All this equipment and—"

"And what? The equipment is here only for this one night. No, I tell you too much already." She looked at someone in the doorway behind me. "You should not have come. Tomorrow it will be as though nothing happened here, and no one will ever know. Unfortunately, *you* know."

I turned my head just enough to make out Dieter's huge shape.

"It must be done carefully, Dieter," she said to him. "It is a pity, too." She glanced once at the open windows running along the outer wall of the house.

"Amy, you can't be—"

"I told you, Herbie, my family comes first. We have been wronged by those we trusted; they will pay for that over and over again. I will destroy them. But you . . ."

She looked past me at Dieter. "Scuttle his boat. Sink it out in the bay. As for the other, it must appear an accident." Another glance at the windows and then her eyes grew large and hollow, and she turned to look to the east, where the moon, a huge silver ball, was slowly rising over the bay. "Put him in the boathouse."

There was no place to go; no way to run. When Dieter tied my hands behind me with a length of cord, I think I was in a state midway between confusion and absolute disbelief. Bad enough I was having a hard time seeing Amy as some kind of computer hacker set on punishing her father's competitors, but I could not see her as a murderer.

She went down with us, keys in her hand, and as she walked ahead of us across the narrow beach to the collapsed boathouse, I think it really hit me: she was planning to kill me. Lock me in the boathouse and when the tide came in—just as I'd told her, at full moon high tide—the entire building would be under water, and I would drown. For sure I would with my hands tied like this and with the door locked, the windows all tightly boarded over.

Dieter took my arm, pushed me forward. She was unlocking the heavy door Mr. Hornton had put on, wrenching it open; then her eyes lifted and she saw what had perhaps been my only hope: in the high, peaked roof was an opening where the rafters had given way.

The only problem was that I would need my hands to get up and out through that hole.

"He can't be found with his hands tied," she said. "We'll have to untie them, but then—" In the dim light her eyes looked black. "—he might be able to climb out." She paused, then said, "Break his arms."

"Amy, I'm going to tell you this," I said quickly. "You can't get away with it. I know people, cops, who won't believe that I—" I didn't say anything else; Dieter had just snapped my left arm like it was a chicken bone.

And then he did the other.

"You must be in such pain," she said to me softly. "For that I am . . . a little sorry." She stepped away from me, winding the cord around her hands. She had just untied me, I guessed.

I only guessed because I kind of blacked out for a moment, then came to in a dark building with a faint, silvery light streaming down through some cracks in the ceiling above. The boathouse. I remembered.

"I checked all the windows. You and the friend who boarded up this place did a very good job. I think your friend will regret that he did it so well, when they find you, that is. It's too bad you came in here, that the door shut and locked behind you, that you dropped the keys somewhere outside. Like I said, it was necessary to do a very good job, yes? To keep out the curious local boys?"

"Amy . . ." I couldn't even speak, was dizzy, sick, in pain. I tried to turn to my side, couldn't.

"And then you tried to climb up into the rafters and slipped. Broke both your arms. Such a tragedy. I will come to your funeral, Herbie—if they find you this summer, that is. I will bring my grandmama. She likes you."

I heard a hum then, a sound like distant violins, and though in too much pain to panic, I thought I was passing out again until she said, "How lovely. Bocelli across the water." She looked at me a final time. "Music to die by, Herberto."

I did pass out, or for several minutes slipped between consciousness and a kind of dull, dead torpor. The pain in my right arm seemed to have stopped, but that in my left was a steady, throbbing ache. I wanted to throw up; I wanted to shut my eyes and just let the slow, steady seep of water through the cracks in the floorboards rise around me. But the touch of it was a shock. This was water sweeping in through the canal, icy cold even in July. I managed, at last, to roll over onto my right side and, as I did, realized I had some use of my right arm.

I had heard my left arm snap when Dieter twisted it. No question he had broken the humerus. But the other arm perhaps had sustained only a crack, a slight fracture. I didn't remember hearing anything when he twisted it back. So, gingerly, I pushed myself over and looked straight up through the crooked, twisted rafters.

They might as well have been twenty stories overhead. Twelve feet or twelve hundred, I wasn't going to pull myself out of that hole with a broken arm.

I could hear the water slopping under me, could feel it creeping across the floorboards, which took a sharp nosedive where the boathouse had slumped forward forty or fifty years ago. It had been submerged like this for only the last decade or so and would've washed away long ago if it hadn't been bolted and cemented to its stone foundation. Smiley Corrigan had planned for the occasional hurricane, winter storm, nor'easter. What he had not counted on was the slow erosion of the island itself.

What *I* had not counted on was that the girl I'd gotten mixed up with could do anything like this. For I was dead already. I knew it as I managed to sit up slowly and face the flickering gray image in front of me. I was dead or hallucinating or both.

"You're not going to let a girl like that do you in, are you?" the image said as it resolved into a shape, a vaguely human outline. "When all you've got to do is think—and know this, you're far smarter than she is, yes, you are, my boy. She put you in the boathouse. Smarter of her to tie you to a stone and sink you in the bay! Look around, Herbie my boy, look around! Do you see any boats? Do you see any *signs* of boats? This was never a *boat*house, although that's the name I gave it."

I started to smile though I was ready to pass out again and drift away to sleep in the murky water licking my sneakers and the cuffs of my pants. But before I did, I was going to be mocked by the ghost of Smiling Joe Corrigan.

"But you cannot wait long, my boy. The water's cold off the canal and will be over your head before long."

"I can't swim out. Not up there," I told the ghost, or dream, or whatever it was, life's last paradox. "By the time the water's that high I'll be dead of the cold, or drowned. Pick one."

"You're a fresh-mouthed boy, now aren't you? Laughing at those who'd give you advice, and in this your hour of need? Well, I tell you this, if you'd but think, and think like I did, Joseph Cassidy Corrigan, why and how this boathouse came to be. There was once a dock at its end, with a pretty place to sit and wine and dine the lovely ladies before escorting them up to that big house on the bluff. I built too big a place for me, my boy, too grand a mansion. I was a poor farmer's son, and so I remained at heart till the day I died. So think, but think quickly, boy, before the water sucks the very life out of you."

By then the water was covering my legs, and I had to push back farther, to the locked door, my back against it. A fine, pale silvery light was coming down from above, the reflection of the moon against the clouds. Everything else was silence except for the slap of water inching its way over me through the cracks in the floor.

The floor. So the ghost wanted me to think? Yes, probably the floor was rotted in places, but what good would that do me? This building was bolted down. If I broke through the floor, now mostly underwater, I'd drown even quicker, falling into a crawlspace below.

"You are a stupid boy, just as she said, so I'll tell you one last time: I was not a stupid boy, nor a stupid young man, and when I wooed the ladies, this they all said of me: that I chose the lovely view, the perfect view. Think."

Then the fog, hallucination, delirium, whatever, was gone.

Perhaps I started to drift into unconsciousness again; perhaps the cold of the water kept me alive although I knew in the end it would put me to sleep before I froze to death. And perhaps one thing that Smiling Joe Corrigan said took hold: "I chose the lovely view, the perfect view."

I opened my eyes. The moon was higher now, the light coming down through the hole above brighter. I could see forward where the front of the boathouse was submerged, saw how the timbers had fallen and then collapsed so the building was like a long cardboard box, crushed at the front. The water there was deep and dark and full of wavy things, sliding back and forth in the moonlight. Eels. Wonderful. I would die in the cold and the water with the eels.

Not eels. Eel grass. I crouched forward, slipping on my broken arm and diving headfirst into the water, then struggling up and out of it, gasping for breath. It made no sense that there would be eel grass growing in the boathouse. No sense. No soil here, no sand, just rock beneath, so it must be coming in from . . .

"I can't do this, Smiley," I said aloud. "I can't go under in there. I can't. I don't even know if I can swim with one arm."

"Then you'll die, my boy."

I shook my head; I was wet, cold, shivering, in pain, now nauseated, starting to panic, wondering if they were looking for me yet, searching out my friends, asking where I was, who'd seen me last.

No, none of that. I'd been out late before. No one would think to worry for several hours yet. My mother was probably ironing, watching the Red Sox, with Jake, maybe.

And maybe it was worth it, to give it one try, suck in a lungful of air and dive through that murky water, open my eyes, and . . .

See what Smiley meant about the perfect view. Of course. There had been a dock attached to this boathouse, a place for small parties and cocktails, which meant another door, or windows, facing the direction of that view, the setting sun. We hadn't boarded up that end of the building. It was crushed down on itself and always underwater except at extreme low tide. But could I get through like the waving blades of eel grass?

I sucked in air and dived under the water, swimming through the eel grass with my one good arm, the other dragging painfully behind me. I reached out, hit solid wood, broken timbers, some of them crumbling under my fingers. Soft wood, pulpy wood, but no way out. I turned around to go up for air, and as I did my foot kicked against something, breaking through it. Glass.

I let my heart slow down, my

breathing even out as I sat up as high as I could. For a moment I didn't think I could go down through that black water again, find the place my foot had touched, break the rest of the glass, and swim out of the boathouse. If I'd had a piece of wood, a rock, perhaps part of an old boat hook or oar to break the glass out—but I had nothing. I would have to feel around with my feet, protected as they were by sneakers, and kick out what remained of the window. Then come up one more time for air before making a final dive . . .

Into what? What if the collapsed dock were on the other side of the window? Broken pilings, wooden planks, or rocks? Maybe I'd swim into a maze I could never get out of. Maybe I'd find myself in the currents that came off the canal, the great whirling eddies that would suck me down and into the canal itself. But I had no other chance. I was getting ready to pass out again, would have heaved if there'd been anything in my stomach to heave. So I went down again, found the window with my feet, and kicked it, feeling something give once more as I did. Maybe there was more than one window. Maybe I had kicked out two separate panes of glass. Maybe I would dive down and through that opening only to cut my throat, rip my arms and chest to shreds, and bleed to death under the collapsed dock.

Maybe I had too much imagination.

This time I dived straight down and under, reaching out with my arms to where the eel grass had floated in, and swam out of the boathouse and into the bay.

At first I thought I was dead again, that the music signified I was somewhere else. The light above was silvery-gray; then the clouds parted, and there was the moon. The music was coming across the water, from Black Gull Island. A distance of about two hundred yards separated Smiley's Island and Black Gull, six hundred feet of current-driven water rushing in at full moon high tide. I could do nothing but swim back to Smiley's and drag myself up on the rocky shore.

For a few minutes I had a kind of hope: Covey's boat. I still had the keys in my pocket. But when I got to the other side of the island, it was gone; so was the *Splendida*. When I couldn't find the key to Smiley's house—the hole was empty—I thought I could kick the door in again. But this time it was locked, bolted. There was no way I was going to get in and find an old blanket, or some matches to light a fire with, or to signal for help.

So I went back down to the boathouse, sat on the rocky beach, and considered my remaining options.

I could lie on the beach and die from hypothermia. Or pass out from the pain and also die from hypothermia. I hadn't cut myself on the window glass, so at least I wasn't going to bleed to death, but the pain had returned, was more intense; my left arm was just hanging, my right arm was too weak even to hold onto the left.

Across the water was the music,

a man's rich baritone rising and falling. I knew voices carried well over water, so I stumbled out to the waterline and shouted, but it hurt then just to breathe. I was exhausted, running out of energy, ideas, maybe hope. I looked at the boathouse; only the high, pointed roof was out of the water. I would have drowned by now.

Could I swim the distance to Black Gull Island?

I'd been in predicaments before and for the most part relied on others' courage, resources, intelligence to get out of trouble. This time there was no one but me. No passing boats to wave down, shout out to—and over the chugging of a motor, who would have heard me?

It was getting late. I probably sat on the beach for fifteen or twenty minutes, willing up the courage to tackle the swim. I wasn't a bad swimmer but had never made the swim team either. I was at best a capable swimmer. Besides, the distance wasn't the only thing: I'd have found it a challenge with the sun out and two good arms. This was channel water, coming off the canal, heavy with currents. The tide was still coming in. I'd be fighting the tide and probably the current as well. If I could wait for the current to turn, it might help steer me toward Black Gull, though it still wouldn't be easy.

But I couldn't wait, not for the tide to spill out, not for the current to turn. I was cold, I was hurting, and if I passed out . . .

I stood up and walked down the narrow beach to the water, stopped once to take off my sneakers and drop my khakis on the beach, then went in.

Looking back, I don't remember much about that swim. Just that my right arm pulled with every stroke, and now and then I'd turn onto my back, let the swells take me whichever way they wanted, always praying that the tides were washing me toward Black Gull and not into the canal itself. If I drifted that way, I was dead. I remember this, too: swimming toward that music, imagining it was getting louder with each stroke of my one good arm, my thudding heart. I was so cold that I started to lose feeling in my legs though I kept telling my legs to kick, which I think they must have or I'd have dropped like a stone to the bottom of Manamesset Bay.

Then the music got louder and louder, and I hit something heavy, hard, wooden, with my head. I had banged right into the dock at Black Gull Island. There was a rickety old ladder there; one of the rungs broke off in my hand. With what strength I had left, which was damned little, I heaved myself up on the dock, falling over on my back, gasping for breath, struggling to stay awake. The music was rising out of the little house in waves. Old Guy was never going to hear me call out over that; he was probably deaf, too, the way he played the music so loud. I turned over again, wondering if I could walk another fifty feet to Old Guy's house. It'd be really ironic if I'd gotten all this

way just to die from shock and cold on Old Guy's dock. Then I saw the bell. An old brass bell was stuck to the railing. That I could make. Four, five, six steps and I grabbed the rope it was attached to, crumpling down against the railing as I did. I pulled on it, then again and again, and collapsed once more on my back.

Not twenty seconds later I heard a door slam, running feet pounding up the wooden dock. I had shut my eyes but opened them to look up into the end of a double-barreled shotgun. A somewhat blurry face and pair of dark eyes were glaring down at me.

"Don't worry, old man," I said, trying not to laugh. "I'm not going to hurt you. Could you—" I turned my head, coughed out a lungful of seawater "—call the harbor police?"

The next day I pushed myself up in bed, not an easy thing to do with one arm in a full cast, the other wrapped in fiberglass. Left arm, broken humerus, snapped straight through; right arm, fractured radius. I'd slept a good nine or ten hours straight, dealt with both a distraught mother and an upset Mr. Hornton, and given my statement to Jake and one of his officers while lying in bed. When the request by the next visitor had come in, the nurse cautioned me, "You don't have to have any more visitors if you're not up to it."

I looked at the business card the nurse had handed me. My mother and Jake had left briefly to get some lunch. If they came back and saw who wanted to visit me, there was a good chance they'd send him away, so I said to the nurse, "Send him in."

Salvatore Federico in an immaculate, pale tan suit, white shirt, gold cufflinks walked in, came straight over to the tray beside my bed, and placed a slip of paper, a check, next to an empty plate. He glanced at the bouquet of flowers his family had sent that morning, an extravagant display of lilies, carnations, and chrysanthemums. My mother had been appalled, wanted to throw it in the trash; I hadn't let her.

"For lost wages," Mr. Federico explained, a strange, almost angry grimace on his face as he looked down at me. "You will not be mowing any more lawns this summer, Herberto."

"You don't know that," I told him, trying to reach for the check. He picked it up, put it in my right hand. The amount was nearly four times what I'd expected to make this summer, but I wouldn't refuse it. I dropped it on the bedcovers.

"I come today, Herberto, to tell you that the Federico family will never, never be able to compensate you for what you endured. We shall always be . . ." He clasped his hands in front of him, bent his head briefly. "In your debt. Always. And although I come to ask of you something you might not be able to grant, I come to ask it anyhow." He lifted his head, his dark eyes staring straight into mine. "It is not easy for me to ask this after all that has happened, but I do so anyhow. I ask you to drop your complaint against Amaline and let our family deal with her."

"You've got to be kidding." What else could I say to the man?

"I felt that would be your first response, and perhaps it will be your last. But I ask you to consider all the facts, Herberto. Amaline has no criminal record. She is only seventeen. If she goes to trial for attempted murder, she will claim she was coerced, that she had no choice but to participate in what happened. For, you see, there is a part of this that you as yet do not understand. Despite my objections, she is being represented by—" He said a name, a law firm, that meant nothing to me. He saw that and explained, "My father's lawyers. They are already preparing a defense for her, part of which will insist that Amaline was in fear for her own life, that Dieter threatened to put her too in the boathouse with you if she did not cooperate. Do you understand now?"

"It's a lie, Mr. Federico," I said. I was tired, and the pain was returning, but I was angry, too. "I'll stand up in any courtroom and testify that she's lying."

"Amaline is a beautiful girl as well as an accomplished actress. Who will a jury believe, Herberto?"

I started to protest again; he spoke right over me.

"She fooled *you,* didn't she? You thought she liked you, perhaps even more than liked you?"

I had come forward in the bed, both frustrated and angry by the helplessness of lying there so weak, so tired, so hurt. But he was right.

"If you drop the charges, agree that it was Dieter who tried to kill you—" He paused, looked aside a moment. "—then it is he who will take the blame." A casual shrug. "He is not happy about this but is amenable. What choice has he?" And then, as though it explained everything: "He once worked for my father."

I shook my head. I wanted to say something, protest . . .

"And Amy will plead guilty to a lesser charge, receive probation, perhaps. Then—" his eyes returned to me "—her family will deal with her in a far more appropriate way than can the courts of this state."

I remembered Mrs. Federico's dark eyes, her anger. I realized then, too, that the man she had not wanted Amy to associate with had not been a boyfriend but Gino Federico. The old mob boss himself had manipulated this entire family through Amy. "What will you do to her?"

"In the old days, Herberto, a girl like Amy who behaved in so outrageous a manner would have been taken—" He lifted his head, looked toward the sunlight streaming through the one high window in the small hospital room. "—to a tenement building, one owned by the family in Boston or perhaps Providence. There she would have been walled up in a small room, a closet or fireplace, walled up alive, and left." He looked at me. I was shaking my head; he expressed surprise. "Is that any worse than what she tried to do to you?"

"I don't think I can do what you're asking," I told him. "I'll take my chance with the courts."

"Let me make one thing absolutely clear, Herberto, we will stand

by you, and your decision, no matter what it turns out to be." He sighed deeply. For a family who so valued honor, loyalty, pride (on the small television set in my room I had watched her grandmother shout "Vergogna" at Amy as she had been taken off to jail)—none of this could have been easy for him.

"So . . . what would you do to her," I asked, "that is, if I . . ."

"What we will do is give Amy to the nuns."

"That hardly seems fit—" What word was I looking for? Punishment? Justice? Retribution?

"Not the nuns she was with before but a different order. Sisters of the Gray Silence they are called, a small order in the north of Italy, high in the mountains. They do not speak, Herbie; theirs is a world of total and perpetual silence. There will be no music, no voices, nothing for Amy to hear but her own heart beating, her own conscience. She will dress as the nuns do in a plain gray smock and spend her days in silent study and prayer. She will have absolutely no communication with the outside world. I can arrange for her to remain with the sisters until she turns twenty-one."

"I don't know," I said, not doubting this man's integrity and honesty. "I . . ."

"Do not decide in haste," he said to me. "As for now, is there anything, anything at all, that I can do for you, for your mother, for—"

"Are you trying to bribe me, Mr. Federico?"

"No. I told you, you will own the loyalty and respect of the Federicos forever. Believe that. Now, is there anything . . ."

"Yeah, Covey. They—I guess they punched a hole in his boat, his grandfather's boat, and sank it. If you could—"

"I will take your friend Covey and let him choose a new boat to replace that which he lost." A sharp nod of his head. "It is a very small favor you ask."

"Just make sure it's a small boat. Anything bigger than what he had will just go to his head."

Another nod. "Nothing else?"

"No." I looked at the check. "Nothing."

He nodded again, almost sadly, but with a strange kind of respect as though he knew what my answer had to be. He started for the door, had his hand on it, then looked back at me. He reached inside his suit jacket, into the inside pocket, and pulled something out, a small set of keys. He walked back and held them out to me. At first I didn't recognize them, and then I did.

"The *Splendida*. I give her to you," he said. "Gratis."

The keys dropped into my hand. "But the *Splendida* must be worth —" I started to say, then understood.

He shook his head. "Not worth more than what our Amaline tried to take from you."

I said no more; I just clenched my fingers into a fist.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

The War for Independence was not going well. Somehow the British seemed to know our every move in advance. Our battered Continental Regulars encamped in the town of Nollyburg, awaiting reinforcements from Pennsylvania.

General Washington had chosen Nollyburg because its perimeter was protected by palisades. Its only exits (and entrances) were the six gates called Gott, Indigo, Jay, Keystone, High, and Long, which could be easily guarded and defended.

Our food supplies running low, six enlisted men, including Corporal O'Toole, had been excused from other duties to forage the countryside for wild game. Their first names were Andrew, Brian, Carl, Daniel, Edwin, and Frank.

As personal aide to General Washington, I was expected to keep him informed of current rumors and news in the vicinity. On a chill November morning of that year of '77, I roused him with a steaming cup of tea and reported, "Sire, a certain farmer, Fritz Hochmüller, is asking to see you. He waits outside."

"Dear old Fritz!" exclaimed the general. "I remember him well from the French and Indian campaigns. A true patriot! Show him in!"

The farmer entered bearing his broad-brimmed felt hat in his hand. General Washington embraced him, saying, "We have weathered some perilous times together, old friend."

"I bear unwelcome news, I fear," declared Hochmüller. "It's about one of your foragers. We farmers have gotten to know them well."

"Out with it, Fritz."

"One of them is a traitor, 'pon my word. Yesterday, when he was out hunting, I saw him meet with William Tolliver, a notorious Tory, and accept gold coins from him."

"Money!" declared the general with much feeling. "Some do put it above honor. And the British have a heavy purse wherewith to hire spies. Tell me all."

Whereupon Fritz Hochmüller reported:

(1) No two soldiers on foraging detail left Nollyburg at the same time. Each departed from one gate and returned by another. The one named Andrew left just after another left by Long gate and just before Private

Parker left. These three returned through High, Indigo, and Keystone gates. The one returning through High gate was not a sergeant.

(2) The soldier who returned through Jay gate left the town just after Corporal Moore and just before another soldier left by Jay gate. Their first names are Brian, Carl, and Frank.

(3) Brian (who is not a private) left just after the soldier who later returned by Indigo gate and just before another soldier left by that same gate. They included Private Parker, Corporal Moore, and Sergeant Rankin.

(4) Sergeant Nash departed immediately after Daniel.

(5) Neither Private Quinn nor the man who returned by Gott gate was the last soldier to go foraging.

(6) The soldier who left immediately after the one who left by High gate was either Carl or Sergeant Rankin.

(7) The traitor, who left by Keystone gate, was not a sergeant.

"General," I said, "now we know who is the viper in our midst, the one who informs the enemy of our intent. Shall I arrest him?"

"Nay," declared the general. "Let us use this knowledge to our advantage. Circulate the rumor that we will encamp here for the winter. Told this by their spy, the British will become complacent. Next week we will strike suddenly at Colonel Marlowe's dragoons encamped across the river and quickly retreat southward to join the Pennsylvania Second Regiment."

Tuesday evening we arrested the traitor and, after a brief court-martial, executed him. That same night we embarked against the British dragoons. Our brave Continental Regulars met with great success and withdrew without a single loss.

Who betrayed his country for British gold?

See page 140 for the solution to the March puzzle.

A Civic Duty

William T. Lowe

Illustration by Winifred Way

"All right, here's where we are. You, the Edward Stacey family, are ready to sue Judge Ira Hickerbee for violating the civil rights of your son Carl Stacey. You have suffered mental anguish, loss of income, the whole nine yards. My firm is handling the case pro bono, and I've explained what that means. Any questions?"

The woman from the Albany law firm stood in the center of the living room facing the family seated against the wall. This was her second meeting with the Staceys. In the first she had been sympathetic and understanding to gain their confidence; today she was direct and even officious.

"Any questions?" asked Sarah J. Todd again.

"How much do you think we'll get?" asked Big Ed Stacey. Big Ed had wanted to be the outraged citizen, waving his arms and pacing the floor, but after several minutes the lawyer lady had pointed at the couch and asked him to sit down.

"Too early to tell," Sarah answered. "We asked the judge to change his sentence; he's got a few days to make up his mind. If he decides to stick with it, we'll hit him with the suit."

Norma Stacey, Ed's wife, held up her hand. "You sure we won't get in trouble? Suing a judge this way?"

"I'm sure. And chances are the case will be settled out of court after they hear our speech about constitutional rights."

Sarah turned to Carl slouched against the wall. It was his loutish behavior that had led to this pinnacle in the family's history. Like his peers in high school, Carl wore oversized clothes, sleeves hanging below his knuckles, pants trailing on the ground, the inevitable cap backwards on his head.

"Now, Carl, let's pretend I'm a reporter again," Sarah said briskly. "Tell me about your family."

"We don't go to church," the boy mumbled.

"Why not?"

"We don't believe in going to church."

She shook her head. "Get with it, Carl. Again now. Why don't you go to church?"

"Because we're a-he-gists."

"No, Carl. Pronounce it like I told you. A-the-ists."

"A-the-hiss."

Sarah turned to JamieSue, the Staceys' daughter, a plain, self-assured young woman about to finish high school and apply for a scholarship in nursing. "JamieSue, you work with him, all right? And make him do something about those grungy clothes."

Sarah turned to face the family. "Now listen up, everybody. I know the phone has been ringing off the hook since the story was in the newspaper, but from here on don't talk to anyone about the case, understand? Just say your lawyer told you not to. All right?"

The Staceys nodded mutely. "And, Carl, no more fighting, you read me?" Carl nodded.

Sarah stepped over and stood in front of Big Ed. "A news team from Channel 5 is due here sometime tomorrow or the next day. You *will* shave, won't you?"

"All right."

"Say again?"

"I'll shave."

Ready to leave, Sarah glanced around. The house was a double-wide trailer, crowded with furniture. A porch had been added in front. There were windowboxes with plants and a small vegetable garden. Your typical underprivileged family, she thought. Poor but proud. A jury will love them. "Don't worry, folks, we'll take care of you."

The family came out to watch her drive away. This woman had appeared out of nowhere, bossed them around, told them they had a legal case that would bring them money and recognition in the community. They wanted to believe her.

"The first thing we're going to do," Big Ed said to his wife, "is buy a new car."

It was past harvest time for the local marijuana growers. This summer I had spent a lot of time searching out patches of pot plants hidden along the banks of streams, in the middle of cornfields, any secluded place that provided sun and water. For the last few weeks I'd been working with agents of the DEA and the state police to cut down and destroy the mature plants. And arrest the men who planted the plants and hoped to cash in on them.

Now I was concentrating on old barns. Ever since Prohibition, barns here in northern New York have been used as transfer points for contraband. First it was illegal liquor, then firearms and pot, now cocaine from Florida and Colombia, heroin and designer drugs from Canada. Local men serve as warehousemen and contacts between the out-of-town couriers and the local distributors. Some of these barns are less than twenty miles from our high schools and colleges.

Where do I find the time? My name is Hank Sessions; I'm a retired deputy. I live alone, and my ambition is to see drug-free schools in the Adirondacks. Everywhere, for that matter.

I had just got home when I first met Sarah J. Todd. The doorbell rang, and there stood this nice-looking woman on my porch. I judged she was close to forty, with long black hair and dressed in a tailored two-piece suit. I learned later she was one of thirty partners in a law firm that specialized in civil cases.

She gave me her card and informed me that she would be representing the Stacey family in a suit against Judge Hickerbee. "We think his

ruling on the boy Carl Stacey was unconstitutional," she said. "Are you familiar with the case, Mr. Sessions?"

There was a no-nonsense expression on her face, but I thought she looked tired.

"Yes, I am," I told her. "Ms. Todd, I just put the coffeepot on," I said. "Would you like to have a cup with me?"

She agreed and waited on the porch while I went back inside to find a tray and think about what this stranger had just told me.

I knew Judge Hickerbee slightly, and had always thought he did a pretty good job as town justice in a small Adirondack community. Now a law firm from downstate was ready to give him some grief.

I remembered the case. After repeated warnings about fighting on school property, the boy Carl Stacey had been brought into Judge Hickerbee's court. The judge gave him a choice. Carl could attend Sunday school and church every week for eight weeks, or he could receive a misdemeanor citation and be fined three hundred dollars.

The story got one paragraph in the local paper, and there was no follow-up. But now, a week later, a big city lawyer sat on my porch and told me, "You can't make a person go to a church against his wishes. He's got a right to choose for himself."

"Because maybe he's a Hindu or a Muslim?" I asked. "He can choose his own religion? That's what you mean?"

"That's the size of it." She leaned forward in her chair. "We petitioned the judge to change his sentence. He took it under advisement; he's got a few days left to give us his answer.

"Meantime, my boss and I want to be ready if we go to trial. I found out that the Staceys are not members of any local church. I've told them to say they are atheists when somebody asks. That's the easiest. They won't have to remember any details, no beads, no robes, no candles. They just don't believe in anything, period."

She stopped and smiled at me. I thought she was expecting a compliment. "Good plan," I said and poured more coffee. "How do you think I can help you, Ms. Todd? I don't know the Staceys well at all."

"Call me Sarah." She looked at me directly. "I came to you because you're a retired deputy. You know most of the people in this part of the county. I'm not interested in gossip, but you may know things I don't." She set down her cup.

"Here's what I've got so far. Ed Stacey doesn't have a police record. Has been on welfare for years. Something of a blowhard. He thinks this suit will be a real money tree. The wife is scared, thinks suing a judge could be trouble. The daughter is intelligent if you can see past the rings in her ears. The son is what they politely call an underachiever.

"An innocent, backwoods-type family," she finished up. "The kind that gets lots of sympathy from a jury."

I didn't comment right away. The strained look had left her face; she

seemed more relaxed. She was watching the sunset beyond the Sentinel range. I'm the first to admit it; I've got a five dollar farm, but it's got a million dollar view.

We sat in silence for a moment. As the poet says, dusk is a steady tide that swallows up the afternoon.

I poured more coffee. "Social Services has found a dozen jobs for Big Ed, but he never holds one for long," I told her. "Always some excuse. Bad back, needs glasses, no transportation. But he always seems to have money to spend." I didn't add that the Stacey family might not be all that innocent, that I suspected Big Ed might be involved in a drug ring. The big city lawyer hadn't earned my confidence yet.

"Now I've got a question," I said.

"Shoot."

"Who brought you in on this? I know Ed Stacey wouldn't go all the way down to Albany to find a lawyer even if he thought he needed one. And I know this case didn't hit the wire services. Somebody had to get a big firm like yours stirred up about a minor matter of fighting in a schoolyard. Who was it?"

She glanced at me. "You know that's confidential."

"So is this whole conversation, Sarah," I said. I sat back and waited for an answer. Her eyes were a light brown, a striking contrast with her jet black brows and hair. I noticed a dimple in her chin when she smiled. No ring on the left hand.

The daily paper was lying on the table by the door where I'd dropped it earlier this morning. Sarah stepped over and picked it up. I watched as she opened it and scanned each page. She stopped and pointed at one of the news stories.

"What?"

She didn't answer. She moved her finger down from the headline to the byline of the person who had written the article. I read the name aloud. "Patti Baldwin."

Then I understood. The reporter had contacted Sarah's firm. She knew it specialized in civil suits. Maybe she thought the judge was wrong and should be challenged. Or she wanted to see the case kept alive, get more publicity over her byline.

Sarah watched me silently while I put these pieces together. Then she leaned forward. "All right, Hank, here's why I'm here.

"Civil rights cases are always big, and this one involves a minor. If the judge hangs tough, the Stacey case could generate some publicity, be one my firm likes to handle."

"Suppose it does get to be important," I asked. "What will happen to Sarah J. Todd?"

She gave me a little smile. "I'll do the spadework, and if the case goes anywhere, one of the senior partners will take over, somebody with network connections."

She paused for a moment. "Hank, we want to retain you as a consultant. You don't have to do anything, just keep your eyes open."

That rubbed me the wrong way. "You mean you want me to spy on the Staceys?"

"Not spy. Observe, just like you did when you were a deputy. My people won't want any surprises if we're going to put a lot of manpower behind this."

She could see I was undecided about her offer. She stood up. "Think about it, Hank. Please?"

She was down the steps and gone before I could walk her to her car. It was almost full dark as I went in the house to see about supper. I saw something lying on the table. It was Sarah's business card. I left it there.

I didn't want to see the judge held up to ridicule over some murky legal question. Maybe he had stretched a point, but he was trying to help this kid. I knew the judge did a lot of counseling with young people. I knew he had kept some kids out of jail, from getting a record that would follow them for life.

And I didn't want to see the Stacey boy and his family turned into some kind of cardboard heroes. Big Ed couldn't handle a cash windfall; he would blow it in a week. And there was the daughter, JamieSue. The publicity might wreck her chance at a scholarship.

Fountain is a small mountain town; we're not grown up enough to cope with the kind of exposure that would come with talk shows and news programs.

Face it, I told myself, you can't let this happen. It's your civic duty or something.

Sarah phoned me early next morning, and I told her yes, I would be her local bird dog. I didn't tell her I would try to find her a good reason to go somewhere else to defend the Constitution.

Given time, I felt sure I could tie Big Ed Stacey into the local narcotics pipeline. That would show Sarah Todd that the Staceys were not the innocent, oppressed family she thought they were. But since I didn't have time, I would work backwards.

Whatever Stacey did, he would have to be paid in cash. I would concentrate on how and where. When you're on welfare like Big Ed, you're not supposed to have a secret source of income. You have to report any and all income and assets.

You could stash illegal money in stocks or a distant bank account, but anything tagged with your Social Security number won't stay a secret for long.

The welfare fraud division of Social Services investigates such abuses. Most of the inspectors have law enforcement backgrounds. One of them is a friend of mine, Brent Higgens. We were in the military police together three wars ago.

I caught him in his office in Plattsburgh.

"Yes, we keep an open file on Edward Stacey," Brent told me. "Always seems to spend a little too much money. That big pickup he drives is in his brother's name. Bought a new computer this spring. Told a neighbor it was money his wife took in sewing. Plays the lottery all the time.

"Stacey knows we'll nail him if we catch him with any outside income. He does get some dough every two weeks or so from a relative or somebody downstate. Nothing big, a money order for fifty or sixty bucks. Ed takes it right to the bank there in Fountain and puts it in his account. He calls it his haircut money."

Brent and I moved to the corner where they kept the office coffee machine. As a friendly gesture I had brought along a dozen assorted doughnuts from the shop over on Margaret Street. From the window we could see part of Plattsburgh Bay, where a little American fleet defeated the British in 1812.

"You ever see one of those money orders Big Ed gets?" I asked.

"Yep. He showed one to me once."

"They come by certified mail, you say?"

"Right."

"He could be getting big currency bills in the same envelope," I said. I was thinking out loud. "If Big Ed is warehousing hard drugs for a syndicate, he's got to be taking down a couple of hundred a week. Did you ever see Ed with a C-note?"

"No. I doubt anyone else has either," Brent said. "Hundred dollar bills are mighty conspicuous. Ed's not bright, but he's smart enough not to flash big bills around."

Brent frowned and took another swig of coffee. "He's not working steady, has lots of time, has transportation, has big bills he wants to make into small bills. What does he do?"

"Let me guess," I said around a mouthful of Boston Creme. "He goes to the Mohawk casino in Hogansburg."

It's not that far from Fountain, about an hour on Route 374 to Malone, then another hour on 37. The beautiful new Akwesasne casino is on the right, and is open twenty-four hours a day. "Big Ed could buy a hundred dollars' worth of chips, make a few bets, have lunch, cash in, and head for home or do it over again."

"Sure he could," Brent said, "but our department doesn't have the manpower to put a tail on Stacey, to follow him around to catch him handling large amounts of money. Which he may or may not get through the mail."

He shook his head. "We can wait until he gets another certified letter, but we can't make him show it to us. We've got no basis for a stop and search."

"Hold on, friend," I said, "one thing at a time." I stood up and headed for the door.

"Thanks for the doughnuts," Brent called after me.

Frankie Tillman owns the Blue Ax, a small tavern on Lakeshore Road. I know him from when I was on active duty. The time to talk to Frankie is early afternoon before the bar gets busy.

I accepted a soft drink and waited for him to finish stocking the beer cooler. Frankie is an habitual gambler; he hosts a poker game in a cabin out back and haunts the Mohawk casino. Before it opened, he was a regular in Montreal.

"You ever see Big Ed Stacey at the casino?" I asked casually.

Frank sensed this was a leading question. "Maybe. Lot of people go over there."

"Come on, Frank, I wouldn't be surprised if you two shared a ride once in a while."

"Yeah. Once or twice."

"What's Big Ed's game?"

"Blackjack." Frank warmed to the subject. "Saw him stand on fifteen twice last week. Lucky bastard won both times. Me, I like poker and faro."

"You ever see Ed have some C-notes to play with? A hundred dollar bill or two?"

He began wiping the bar. A question about money could lead to trouble for somebody. "I don't remember."

"You sure?"

He kept his head down. "I don't remember."

I glanced around. "You know, I think I'll just stick around here tonight. There are some teenagers who hang around the boatyard down the road. They might come in here and get in trouble . . ."

Frankie knows that I know the Blue Ax sometimes sells beer to minors. We both know he could lose his license if it were reported.

"What was that question again, Hank?"

Next morning I was back at Brent's desk. "All right," he said with a grin. "We can put Stacey together with serious money—money he's not supposed to have. It won't be hard to build a case for felony welfare fraud." He looked at me seriously. "But we still don't know it's drug money."

"No," I answered, "but every little bit helps."

I had been thinking about the suit against Judge Hickerbee. I hoped anything that would discredit the Stacey family would be in his favor. I was planning to talk to some people the judge had helped. Somebody said compassion is in the heart, not in books.

Brent made another point. "Maybe Stacey *is* getting payoffs by mail, but if we rock the boat on that, the syndicate will just set up some other way to pay him."

He drained his cup. "Surveillance. That's the ticket. Keep an eye on Stacey. Work with the DEA people in the field."

"Right," I said. I stood up to leave, but Brent stopped me with a question. "What's the scoop on this new soft drug that's turning up on the campuses? Supposed to taste better than pot and be cheaper. What's it called?"

"Ecstasy," I told him.

"Come again?"

"Ecstasy. Like the movie."

"What movie?"

"Never mind." Poor guy probably never heard of Hedy Lamarr. "The drug is made, not grown. Originated in Holland, got popular in Canada, now it's coming down the drug alley into the States. We call it a step-up drug, like marijuana. Kids get hooked on it and go on to the hard stuff like cocaine. Problem is, sniffer dogs can't detect it like they can heroin or cocaine."

We looked at each other for a moment. I sat back down.

"Cocaine," Brent said.

"Dogs," I said.

The boss of the Fountain post office is an old friend. Thelma Otis and I have known each other since high school. "Just hold the letter one day, that's all I'm asking," I said. "I need some time to make arrangements. Phone me the day it comes in, and then put the pickup notice in his box the next day. No big deal, Thelma."

"We're not supposed to play games with certified mail," she informed me stiffly.

"Not a game," I assured her. "It's police business. And don't let Ed Stacey's wife or children sign for the letter."

"Don't tell me how to run my business."

I phoned Brent. "The DEA has a team ready to go."

"Good," he said. There was a pause. "This is a long shot, Hank."

"So was Korea," I said.

Three days later I was in the Fountain post office reading the notices on the bulletin board when Ed Stacey came in. He opened his box, took out his mail, and found the pickup notice. He walked to the counter and signed for the certified letter.

I watched him as he went outside and stood by the flagpole in front of the building. He tore open one end of the envelope, glanced inside, and grinned as he stuck the envelope in a pocket of his jacket.

The grin faded as he suddenly realized he had company. He looked around to see me standing on one side and Brent Higgins on the other. Stacey knew Brent was an inspector, and he knew me slightly as a former deputy. A look of alarm crossed his face.

"How you, Ed?" I asked pleasantly.

"Fine, Mr. Sessions, thanks." He turned to Brent. "How you, Mr. Higgens? Nice day, isn't it?"

"Real nice," Brent said casually. "You get another certified letter just now? Another money order?"

"That's right, yes, sir. Another money order," Stacey answered. "On my way to the bank right now." He took two steps away; we moved to keep up.

"We're blocking traffic here on the sidewalk," I said. "Why don't we step over here?" I took Stacey's arm and steered him into the parking lot between the post office and the drugstore on Main Street.

Brent turned to face Big Ed. "Stacey," he said, "I've got an order here that says I can look in that envelope you just got. Hand it over."

Big Ed stepped backward, alarm on his face. "You got no right to search me," he blustered. "I'm not under arrest—"

"No, you're not," Brent said patiently. "I just want that envelope." He held out his hand. Ed looked back at me and saw the gun in my belt. As a retired officer I carry it sometimes.

"It's my property," he said in a weak voice.

"Yes, it is," I agreed, "I saw you sign for it in the post office just now."

I held out my hand. Ed drew the envelope out of his pocket and hesitated, looking from Brent to me. "Take out the money order," Brent told him. "Put the money order in your pocket." Ed did as he as told, and handed me the envelope.

I blew in the end of the envelope to open it and glanced inside. I saw four one hundred dollar bills. I showed them to Brent. I tried not to grin, but I couldn't help it.

An unmarked van was parked on the other side of the lot. From it a uniformed officer had walked over to where we stood. He carried a small case and wore hospital-type latex gloves.

He knew what we wanted him to do. He nodded to Brent and me and then opened his satchel and spilled some waste paper on the ground, stationery, envelopes, bills, adding machine tapes. I handed him the envelope; he shook it so the bills were exposed and added it to the litter on the ground.

Then he stepped back and waved at the van. The rear door opened, and a German shepherd on a long leash came bounding out. His name was Buddy, one of the dogs in the Peru K9 squad trained to detect narcotics. His handler led him over to where we stood.

Buddy gave each of us a passing sniff, then rooted around in the paper litter. When he came to the envelope with the hundred dollar bills, he wagged his tail, sat down, lifted one front paw, and looked up at his handler with a big dog-type grin.

The dog made me think of a kid in class who knows the answer to a tough question and wants to get the teacher's attention.

The first officer had recorded the whole scene with a hand-held camera. Now he picked up the envelope and the bills.

"No question about it," he said to Brent and me, "the currency in this envelope has been in close proximity to cocaine. A high grade of cocaine."

He drew a plastic bag from a pocket. "Shall I bag this as evidence?" he asked.

"Yes," Brent said, "please do."

"Ms. Todd is on her way up there to Fountain," a secretary in Sarah's office told me on the phone. "She left about noon. I know she is planning to see you, Mr. Sessions."

"Thanks," I said and hung up. My news would have to wait.

Thinking she might phone at any time, I stayed around the house all afternoon. Swept the porch, dusted, filled the birdfeeders. I wasn't trying to make the place look good, I told myself, just passing the time.

I remembered the little dimple that appeared in her chin when she smiled. I wondered whether she would be smiling after she got here. How important was this case to her? If it fell apart, would it cost her a promotion? She *had* asked me to get involved, hadn't she?

It was late afternoon when Sarah pulled into my driveway. She looked just as trim and attractive as I remembered. I had planned what I wanted to say and began as soon as she was seated on the porch.

"I'm sorry to rain on your parade, Sarah," I said, "but I don't think your atheist claim for the Staceys will hold up."

She raised her hand, but I plowed on. "Norma Stacey sometimes bakes cakes for the Baptist church when they have a sale. And the girl, JamieSue, sometimes sings in the choir . . ."

Sarah was on her feet and shaking her head. "I've got something to tell you, Hank."

"I'm not finished," I said stubbornly. "Here's the big item. Ed Stacey is under arrest for welfare fraud and conspiracy. That won't look good if you go to trial—"

Sarah held her hand in front of my mouth. "My turn! Sit down!" I sat down. "Now, here's my news. You ready?" I nodded.

"Judge Hickerbee conceded. He canceled the sentence against the Stacey boy and ordered him to do fifty hours of community service." She gave me a little smile. "Like it or not, we haven't got a case."

We looked at each other.

"So that's the end of it," I said.

"The end of it," she echoed. We sat there in silence for a moment. I'd been worried about the judge; I was relieved now that there wouldn't be any suit against him. I glanced at Sarah and noticed again the contrast of her brown eyes and her midnight hair. What was her reaction?

"Are you disappointed?" I asked as casually as I could.

"You mean because we didn't get to put stories in big papers and on

the networks, and have some celebrity wave the flag on a talk show?" She shook her head. "Not really. We'll do it all again."

She ran a hand through her hair and looked out across the valley. "Chances are, there's another civil rights case out there right now." Almost to herself she murmured, "Sometimes they all seem to run together."

I kept quiet for a few minutes; then I said, "Sounds like you're ready to make a change."

She nodded. "Been thinking about it."

We watched a covey of small white clouds slide behind the ridge. A blue jay came to check one of the feeders for sunflower seeds.

"Blue jays usually come visiting in the mornings," I told her. Then I said, "Plattsburgh's growing. Could use another lawyer."

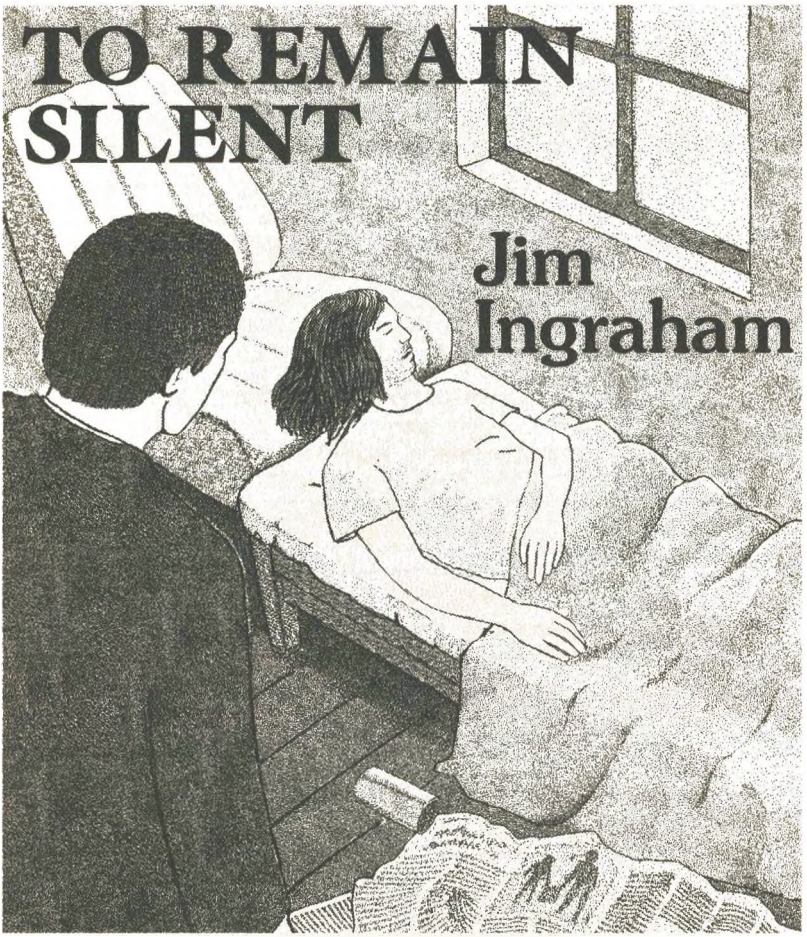
She smiled. "Plattsburgh's a nice town," she answered. "Thank you, Hank." She reached down to pick up her briefcase.

"Wait!" I didn't mean to say it so loudly, but I couldn't let her leave, not now. "There's no big hurry, is there?" I tried to sound casual. "I've got some fresh coffee on."

She put down her case. "No," she said, "no big hurry."

TO REMAIN SILENT

Jim Ingraham



A phone call from Johnnie Levine woke me up that morning after I'd had less than four hours of sleep. I had spent much of the night comforting Claire Butler, whose husband's body had been found in a part of town he once said he wouldn't be caught dead in—the District where you could usually find a male or female prostitute leaning on a lamppost waiting to be hired.

Although there were seven deep stab wounds in Wayne Butler's neck and face, there was no blood on the concrete under the body. The "crime of passion," as the police labeled it, evidently had occurred somewhere else. That hadn't meant anything to Claire, but it suggested to me that the murderer wanted to take not only his victim's life but his reputation as well. And that notion was fortified by what I was about to learn.

Yesterday I had gone to Johnnie

Illustration by David Fielding

looking for gossip about Wayne Butler, but Johnnie, usually a good source, had never heard of him, or so he thought. That was before the news got out. Now everybody in town had heard of him.

I got dressed, stopped for coffee at Burger King, and hustled my Jeep over the cobblestones, paying little attention to the sights and odors of this old New England seaport. Because Johnnie's shop was on a one-way street and I was going the wrong way, I drove around back and squeezed into a parking space in Cleeve's Alley. Easier to walk to the shop than make all those turns.

I stepped over broken concrete slabs past a greyhaired woman in a doorway flicking curled pieces of orange peel at a drainage grill.

"How are you this morning, Eveline?" I said.

"Same as I was the last time you asked," looking past me at a man in a soiled apron at the back door of Mike's Cafe banging crumbs out of a steel pan, a squadron of pigeons waddling toward him.

I went out into Hancock Street and into Johnnie's glass-fronted store, called Boone's Loans, tripping a warning bell that brought annoyance to the face of the black man in a white shirt who sat upright in a wheelchair behind a jewelry case, head tilted back, eyes closed, listening to what I believe was a Beethoven quartet.

"Duff Kerrigan," he said. "Took you long enough," not looking at me—probably saw me go past the window although I'm sure he wanted me to think otherwise: he believed he had acquired a sixth sense in compensation for the loss of his legs, a religious man. I had known him since fourth grade when he got run over and my father, a police sergeant, had lugged him up Cargill Hill to the hospital, both of us crying.

Standing in odors of disinfectant under an air vent, I watched him put out a thin hand to touch something that stopped the music.

He said, "You looking for Gilley Thomas?"

"Should I be?"

"Only if you want to help him."

He activated something on the arm of his chair and moved down the counter, head held stiffly above the display cases, gliding like a sail beyond trees on a river, a little humming sound accompanying him. He rummaged through things down there and came back with binoculars, which he set on the glass jewelry case. "He brought these in yesterday afternoon around two."

"And?"

"I sold them a year ago to the man you told me about, the one got stabbed over in the District."

"I thought you'd never heard of him."

"I don't know everyone comes in here but I know Gilley, and you and I both know he wouldn't kill a louse if he caught it crawling up his leg. But the cops might disagree. He said he found it in a trashcan behind the Olympic Theatre."

"Still draining bottles?"

Johnnie nodded. "One of his hells. I didn't connect the name Butler to it until this morning when I looked at the numbers, or I'd've called you yesterday."

"Gilley." Shook my head. "Tell me why I care."

Johnnie grinned. "He'd be dead a dozen times it wasn't for you. You the white knight, man!"

The patois was comedy. Johnnie was a university graduate. He owned and ran a pawnshop because it provided leisurely independence—at least that's what he said. Maybe there were other reasons.

"The cops been here?"

"Not yet. But you know they will be."

"And you'll have to give them Gilley."

"Trouble's what *you* look for, not me."

"You know where Gilley is?"

"If he's not on a needle in an alley, he's probably in that crib they let him use down on Commercial Street. You know the place—Robarge's?"

"Maybe he's home."

"Yeah, he still goes there once in a while but says it depresses him—the poverty, I guess. Hates to see his mother suffering. Blames himself."

Johnnie and I had known Gilley since grade school. He was the kid cowering against the fence, while other kids threw snowballs at him. He was bigger now and in his mid-thirties but still a child and still a victim.

Johnnie returned to Beethoven while I went out to my Jeep and headed back to the waterfront, listening to bleating boat horns in the harbor, smelling salty ocean and creosote, car exhaust and dead fish.

I pulled into the parking lot next to Robarge's warehouse and went in a side door near the loading platform. The smell of rotting produce hung like smoke in the air. It was cool inside the building. As I walked past piles of orange crates, I slipped on a cabbage leaf and skidded down the plank floor into a stack of bagged potatoes.

"We charge extra for skating in here," said a man in a green undershirt, voice bouncing around the roof trusses, big man with fat arms and tattoos, hardly any hair in the fat of his armpits. He was holding a crate of broccoli over his head, tossing it into a pile on a forklift, the forklift backing up, guy on it looking over his shoulder, steering his machine down an alley of crates.

"Seen Gilley Thomas?" I asked.

"Not this morning," forearm streaking dirt through beads of sweat on his forehead. "Might find him out back."

I glanced at men outside in sunlight on the loading deck. They were watching me, more curious than I liked. I didn't think they knew me although my name and face had decorated the media a few years back. As a rookie cop I had caught a sergeant taking bribes from drug dealers. Nailing him earned me praise from the city council but hatred from the men I worked with. That's when I decided I wasn't a company man. I quit the force and went private.

I walked down a narrow aisle to a wall where I pushed open a door into a small room that smelled of sweat. Gilley was on a cot under a dirty window. His brown unwashed hair was spilled like a girl's over the car seat he was using as a pillow. He was lightly snoring.

I nudged him awake. He sat bolt upright, scared, so accustomed to being a victim he probably thought I was there to abuse him. When he recognized me, his sallow face blossomed into a smile.

"Hi, Duff." in a soft voice, sitting up, covering his thighs with a soiled blanket, straining to hold a nervous smile on his face, a gentle man no more dangerous than a prayer.

"You pawned some binoculars yesterday," I said.

"Yes!" with surprised but worried innocence. "I told Johnnie. They were in a trashcan. I didn't steal them. You know I wouldn't—"

"Did you know they belonged to a man who was murdered yesterday up in the District?"

His sallow skin turned white as chalk. "Murdered?" dragging the word out as though in awe of it, in terror of it.

"Get dressed," I said. "I want to see the trashcan."

"You don't think I—"

"I'll wait outside."

I leaned on a wall in fresh air until he came out. He was taller than he had looked on the bed, round-shouldered, gaunt, a kind of religious air about him. No way I could imagine him driving a knife into a man. If you kicked him, he'd apologize.

I left the lot the back way and drove up Casco Hill to a field of gravel and weeds behind the theater—candy wrappers and torn newspaper and beer cans strewn among the pigweed and dandelions. The District was just below there—an old section of town given over to karate studios and fortune-tellers and tattoo parlors. What was once an Episcopal church was now Murphy's Bar and Grill.

Gilley showed me the lidless oil drum he had found the binoculars in. Nothing there now except a bunched-up newspaper and an empty Pepsi can.

"Were they resting on top or pushed down inside?"

"Right on top."

"You often check this barrel?"

He gave me a silly look of apology. "Every day, I guess."

"And people know it?"

"They don't care. What's in there is only stuff after they've swept out the theater."

"Where were you night before last?"

"I don't know. Walking around. I don't remember. Really, Duff. I don't remember where I go," accompanied by a silly, simpering smile and a plea for understanding.

At about that moment a green Cavalier came into the yard and a man in a grey suit and tie hopped out yelling, "Don't move!," running at us. It was Paul Maynard, a homicide detective I'd once had a run-in with. He was followed by a squad car that skidded to a stop right behind Gilley, two uniformed cops leaping out.

The driver of the Cavalier, a vice-squad cop named Roger Cunningham, sat behind the wheel watching us. Maynard and Cunningham in the same car, working together? They had been separated three years ago after being accused of beating up a man. I didn't believe Maynard would do that, but Cunningham? He was bad news.

"What's this about?" I asked Maynard.

"Shut up!"

"Come on, what the hell is this?"

A cop from the cruiser was pulling my arms behind me, wrapping plastic around my wrists, the other cop doing the same to Gilley.

"What's going on?"

"You have the right to remain silent," Maynard said. "Use it." As I was pushed into the culprit cage of the cruiser, I could see Cunningham talking on his portable, probably reporting in. Although I had seen him around the station house, I didn't know him except by reputation. He'd spent almost his entire career on vice, an odd-looking gink with a busted nose and hound-dog eyes. He lived alone in a small apartment in the District, never married, no dependents. He was said to have packed away every penny he'd ever earned. Hard to believe a rich man would drive a Cavalier. According to rumor he spent all of his time in the District, even his days off, cadging half his meals from intimidated cafe operators. No one knew the "combat zone" more intimately than he, it was said.

As we rode downtown, I tried to ignore the whimpering sounds Gilley was making: "Why are they so mean to us? Why didn't they just ask us to get in? Why did they have to be so rough?"

They were even rougher when they pulled us out of the cage and shoved us in the back door of the police station.

"I don't know what this is about, Gilley. But they'll separate us. Don't tell them anything. Give them your name, nothing else. And ask for a lawyer. Don't try to be nice to them." Like telling a bird not to fly.

With one hand on Gilley's arm and the other in the center of his back, Cunningham pushed Gilley into an interrogation room while Maynard cut the plastic thong off my wrists and hustled me upstairs on the service elevator.

Maynard was a close friend of the sergeant I had informed on. It was he, on the courthouse steps after his friend had been sentenced to prison, who was caught on camera scolding me for having "broken the code" by "betraying" a fellow police officer.

He said I had disgraced the uniform. He never threatened me, but the media caught the moment on camera and used it to imply that I was some kind of marked man. Less dedicated cops than Maynard did growl at me a few times, enough to take the fun out of showing up for work, leaving dead fish in my locker.

Going up on the elevator he didn't say a word. Everything about him looked disciplined—his clothes, his polished shoes, his neatly combed grey hair. He had pale blue eyes under thin brows, looked something like that old Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry except he wasn't bald. Like Landry he was average-sized, maybe five nine, a hundred seventy pounds. There was a chronic nervousness about him, a dedicated workaholic suffering from emotional anemia. I didn't think I'd ever seen him smile.

On the elevator he just stared at

the floor, never said a word. Any other cop might have gloated. He just waited for me to step off the elevator ahead of him and walk ahead of him down a long corridor to a bench outside Captain Proud's office—all business, everything according to the training manual.

"Wait here," he said, pointing at the bench. He knocked on the captain's door, stuck his head inside, said something, then without looking at me walked away.

I watched him go down the hall, puzzled by this—not just the pickup but being brought to Captain Proud's office. I thought about the men watching me from the warehouse loading platform. Maynard and the other three were probably out there waiting to pick up Gilley. They couldn't have been looking for me. The captain must have heard what was going on and told the desk sergeant to send me upstairs. It couldn't have been planned. I wasn't under arrest.

"So what's this about?" I said the minute I got into the captain's office—paneled walls, fluorescent lighting, a framed American flag behind the captain's head. Next to it a collection of ribbons and medals he'd earned in Vietnam.

"Sit down, Duff."

We had known each other ever since I was a kid playing on a PAL baseball team with his son Royce, who was now a lawyer somewhere in Ohio. Proud and my father had once been partners. He was one of the few cops in the city who didn't hate me. "I'm glad you did it," he'd told me after the hearing. "We don't need scum like that in the department." A local newspaper columnist had once referred to him as "Mr. Integrity," maybe with sarcasm, I don't know. He seemed okay to me.

"Gilley didn't kill Wayne Butler," I said.

"We can put him in that alley."

"At the time of the murder?"

He had a way of holding his gaze on your mouth when you talked, waiting a few seconds, then responding, as though playing back a tape he'd only been half listening to. He came across as an intelligent man who'd carefully built a pleasant persona around a very private inner self, what my father used to call a "far-away guy."

"It's like he's not there when you're talking to him," my father once told me. "But he's okay, a good cop. You can trust him."

"Why'd you go to Robarge's warehouse? What's this Gilley to you?"

"I've known him since we were kids."

"Why'd you bring him up Casco Hill?"

"It's where he found the binoculars."

That stopped him. "Binoculars?"

I said, "Your men followed me up there. They had to know about them," surprised the captain didn't.

"What do you know about them?" he said.

"Just what Gilley said. He found them in a trashcan."

"So?"

"Wayne Butler was a bird-watcher."

The captain sat back processing that, watching me with a kind of absent stare.

"You got that from his wife?" When I didn't respond, he said, "A witness said a 'big rangy man' came to the Butler house in a green Jeep the day before the murder. And the same man, the witness said, was there last night. Sounds like you."

"Could've been. She was worried about her husband."

"She hired you?"

"She wanted to know why her husband was getting jumpy."

"Not that he was missing?"

"She didn't say he was missing. Said he was scared."

He toyed with the spacebar, ran his tongue over his bottom lip, studied something across the room. "Where are the binoculars now?"

"In a pawnshop."

"And how do you know that?"

I hadn't wanted to mention Johnnie, but it was going to come out so I explained what had happened. "Before notifying the police, Johnnie asked me to check Gilley's story."

The captain gave that some thought, then said, "Stay out of it, Duff."

"He's harmless."

"Nobody's harmless." He sat up, elbows on the desk, yawning into his hands. "I want you to stay out of it."

"I've known Gilley since we were kids. He wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Stay out of it." He reached for his phone, talked briefly, lowered the handset. "They had your car towed out to the lot. You'll need a ride."

"No, thanks. One was enough."

"They were just doing their job."

As I reached the door, he asked, "Has Maynard stayed clear of you?"

"Harassed me, you mean? No, we're okay. Read me the code, that's all. I haven't seen him since—"

"Cunningham got it in for you?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

He didn't explain, just waved me off.

I made my way down the hall to the squad room—rows of desks under fluorescent lights, jackets on the backs of chairs, detectives in white shirts hunched over computer keyboards. In my day the room would have smelled of cigarettes. Now it smelled of Lysol.

A blonde with short hair stopped me at the front desk, fortyish with rhinestones like jeweled eyebrows on her glasses.

"Lieutenant Kadish," I told her, pointing at an office along the inside wall, walking past her protesting hand.

Mike saw me coming and gave a back-off gesture to someone behind me, maybe the woman. I didn't look.

The white Venetian blind on the door clattered against the glass when I went in. "One more sentence," Mike said, pointing at a chair. While he fingered the keyboard of his PC, I admired a child's watercolor of pink rabbits in a garden of purple and lavender trees. It was next to a framed photograph of Mike's wife Laura and their two daughters.

"Which one is the painter?" I said.

"Whitney." He pointed at an awkward-looking clay figure. "Bethany's the sculptor." He leaned back, yawned, put his hands behind his head, big guy with a soft, deep voice. "So what's happening?"

"They picked up Gilley Thomas."

"I heard."

"Why's Cunningham riding with Maynard?"

"Cunningham knows the District."

"So does Maynard," I said.

"Not the way it is now. He was put on harbor patrol after that thing, remember?"

"And Cunningham wasn't?"

He laughed. "Harbor patrol wouldn't take him."

The "thing" was the death of a drunk outside the Club Adonis. An anonymous tipster phoned in that two cops were in the alley beating someone up. Since Maynard and Cunningham were there on assignment, they were the obvious suspects. Neither was charged because no witnesses came forward, not even the tipster. The victim died in the hospital without naming an assailant, giving the captain no choice but to put Maynard and Cunningham back on duty.

I asked Mike whether the captain was worried about Maynard.

"He sent him to counseling last week."

"Burnout?"

"Probably. Overly conscientious. That can be fatal in this business as you know."

I told him about Johnnie's call and about the binoculars. "Seems funny they followed us up the hill if they didn't know about the binoculars. Why not grab us at the warehouse?"

"Maybe you caught them flat-footed going out the back way. Maybe they wanted to see what you were up to."

"If they didn't know about the binoculars, why go after Gilley? He couldn't have put the body in that alley. And you know the crime wasn't committed there."

"Why are you worked up over this?"

"I wish I knew."

He laughed. I told him about my conversation with Claire Butler.

"That was when?"

"The day before he was killed. She wanted to know why he was getting jumpy."

"You find out?"

"If I lived the way he did, I'd be worse than jumpy. Among other things he was a day trader. He lived on Maalox. Rumor said he dealt in drugs, maybe even women."

"I don't know about women, but we had him a couple of years back for growing weed. He had a field of it on state-owned property in Standish. And there's cause to believe he was once irtvolved in extortion. He was a sneaky animal."

"But his wife's the kind you see dishing out beans at the church supper, a Sunday school teacher."

"And they live in a Sunday school kind of house in a nice neighborhood, all of it a front, including the wife. I'd say she's a fraud or stupid or unhappy. Maybe all three. How can you live with a guy and not know he's a crook?"

"She strikes me as okay," I said, wondering how he knew so much about Claire. "It's Maynard I worry about. If he's out to get Gilley—"

"You watch television too much," he said. "Maynard's got problems, but vindictiveness or cruelty isn't among them."

"Maybe so, but I'm staying with it."

"Not where you can be seen. I'll keep you current. Just don't come here for awhile. Makes us look bad."

"Thanks."

I went out the back way and caught a cab that took me to the holding compound. When a woman in jeans and denim jacket brought my Jeep around, I checked for losses—the audio tapes, my portable in the rack under the dash, and papers in the glove compartment. Everything was intact.

"No .45 in a secret compartment?" the woman teased.

"Just my AK-47 under the floorboard. You know me?"

"Guy told me brought it in, said keep it up front you'd be calling for it."

"Why didn't they leave it at the station?"

She shrugged. "I don't ask, and they don't tell."

As Mike had said, Claire Butler did live in a nice neighborhood—neat green lawns and picket fences, red geraniums under picture windows, street-side mailboxes with flowers painted on them.

Claire was expecting me. She was in a white mesh chair under a parasol at a white table on the patio behind the house. She looked freshly laundered. I could see no duplicity in her—naivete, maybe. Whatever Mike might think, I didn't take her for stupid.

A brown Lab lying on tiles at the edge of the pool looked up at me, flipped his tail a few times, got up and wandered over to smell my hand. "Wayne won him in a poker game," Claire said, turning, calling to someone inside to bring me an iced tea. "It's what you wanted yesterday, right?"

"It's fine," looking at Canadian hemlocks that screened the cyclone-fenced enclosure, the white steeple of a church poking above a tree, puffy clouds in a blue sky beyond it.

A tall woman came out of the house in an apron, the kind my mother used to wear, little blue and pink freckles on it.

"My sister Zippy," Claire said.

I got a big smile from Zippy. I figured her for a librarian or a schoolteacher but was told she ran a home-based shopping service. She gave me her card. "In case you need anything," and smiled coquettishly and went back into the house.

"Something might come on the news about your husband's binoculars," I told Claire. "They were found in a trashcan."

"The same one who came here yesterday is coming back."

"Maynard?"

"I didn't catch his name," she said. "A cop. They're all alike. He probably wants to ask about them. You find the place?"

"I think so. A woman at the newspaper told me where the golden eagle had been spotted. It's over toward West Buxton. Did he keep the binoculars with him?"

"Only when he went birding. The cameras. Have they been found?"

"Not that I know of. May be in his car."

"If he hadn't hocked them," she said.

That surprised me. "He needed money that bad?"

She looked away for a moment, bitterness sliding into her expression. "That damned day trading. It swallowed a second mortgage on this house. He became foolish about it, sweating and swearing over that machine. He was desperate for money."

"Maybe that's reason enough for the nervousness."

"It's not why he was scared. Something happened. He didn't scare easily. He could figure a way out of no matter how bad a thing was. But this was different. He couldn't keep a meal down, couldn't sit still. I know it's connected to why he was killed."

"You tell the police about it?"

"I hate the police. I want you to find out." She looked down at her hands when she said that, avoiding my eyes. Something going on I should have known about, but I let it go. Mike was right: a crook's wife has to deal with a lot of complications, especially if she's a decent person. She probably had a lot of reasons to mistrust the police.

"You're sure he went out looking for a bird?"

"He said being in the woods relaxed him."

"Would he have gone into the woods with the field glasses but not with a camera?"

"He'd use a camera only if he found the nest. There was a tripod and some kind of sighting thing. He wouldn't lug those around."

So the car and camera might be in the woods, if that's where the killing had taken place. Although I knew little about Wayne Butler and less about bird-watching, I had trouble believing a search for a golden eagle could provoke a "crime of passion." It could have been a random killing on a chance encounter or—any number of things. But a chance encounter wouldn't have delivered the body to the District. And the profile I had on Butler wouldn't make him an ornithologist. So who knew?

"One thing I do know," Claire said. "He wouldn't have stayed in the woods after dark."

And, I thought, the body wouldn't have been dropped in that alley until the streets were empty long after midnight.

"Zippy's fixing me a tuna salad sandwich. Would you like one?"

"Love it," I said, and managed to eat half of it before a police detective called saying he was on his way over, driving me and the sandwich out of there. Before I left, I told Claire I didn't want the cops finding me in the woods. "If you can stall them—"

"You sound like my husband," she said.

A mile west of town I got on my portable and called Cynthia Brightwater in forensics. We had dated when I was in the force, and she thought I had been badly treated. She was now married and had a son.

"You know I'm not supposed to do this," she said.

"Like I'm going on television with it."

"Well, I know you won't do that. Two things, and keep it to yourself, please. One knife wound killed the

man. It was inflicted from behind by a right-handed person who was at least as tall as the victim. And all the other cuts were made several hours after the heart stopped beating. It was not a crime of passion. Someone just wanted it to look like one.

"The other thing: the body was on its side for hours before it was put on its back in that alley. From fibers we haven't identified yet I'd say the body was on some kind of carpet, maybe the floor of a car. And there was woodsy debris on the victim's clothing, matted with blood—leaves and sticks. I'd guess the death occurred in the woods."

"I love you."

"Why didn't you say that three years ago?"

"I'm shy."

I drove toward West Buxton remembering the laughter.

Although I was born and reared on city streets, I've always enjoyed seeing cows in open pastures, junipers and red cedars in big fields, tall pines on the high ridges, water flowing over pebbles in little brooks, long stone walls entangled in ivy, abandoned barns.

It was more than an hour before I found the woods road described by my newspaper friend as the most likely entrance to where the golden eagle had been seen. The Jeep took well to the rutted road, and I drove to a small clearing at a gravel pit, a likely parking spot. It was quiet there, and the air was cool and still.

After wandering around for nearly half an hour, I found what I had been looking for on a patch of grass in a stand of white birch trees—blood and a bloody baseball cap. I got back in my Jeep and followed the road down a long slope through the woods to an abandoned granite quarry. Small trees were growing among blocks of granite forming a jagged wall alongside a road that ended at a shelf. The shelf dropped off to a flooded pit. The edge of rock had recently been scraped. I could see the car-wide reflector on the Intrepid's stern, the license plate no more than two feet underwater.

On my way back to the city I stopped at a country store and phoned Mike Kadish.

"There's no way Gilley Thomas could have done it," I said.

"He admitted the earring belonged to him," Mike said.

"What earring?"

"It's what they found near the body in that alley. It's what connected them to Gilley."

"How'd they know it was Gilley's?"

"Maynard had a picture. Pretty distinctive—a gold scorpion on a little chain. You ever see him wearing it?"

"No." I had never paid much attention to Gilley's jewelry. He got most of it, he once told me, from his mother's bedroom. "Will you let me know if the blood matches the body?"

"First I'll have to tell the captain I got this anonymous tip."

Mike was a good friend, and I didn't want to cross him. Both he and the captain wanted me to stay away from Maynard, but I couldn't. I had to try talking him into letting Gilley go.

He lived in a massive apartment complex on Cumberland Avenue not far from the cathedral where I used to sit every Sunday morning with my father, kneeling when he knelt, standing when he stood, inhaling the incense, intrigued by the guy up front in the colorful costume.

"You alone?" Georgette Maynard said, sticking her face into the hallway. She was in a terry cloth robe and pink, maybe silk, pajamas. She was barefoot, a forty-year-old one-time model for a local ad agency. "You can't carry it by your lonesome, honey. It's too big, even for a guy your size. But come in." She leaned past me and again looked up and down the hall. "Where's Paul?"

I walked through a fragrance of cologne into an apartment unlike any cop's living quarters I'd ever seen—Impressionist prints on the walls, polished pale Scandinavian furniture, a bone-white rug, as neat and sterile as a hotel room. There were ice cubes in a glass of pink liquid on a coffee table, smoke rising off a burning cigarette in a crystal ashtray. There was a newspaper on the sofa cushions opened to the story of the Butler investigation.

"You helping him with that?" she asked, noticing my interest in the newspaper.

"Unofficially," I said, following her across the room to a small kitchen. She pointed at the stove. "It's probably got to be unscrewed or something so you can pull it out. But you can't do it alone."

In a far room I could see tennis trophies on shelves above a display case. "Yours or his?" I asked.

"Both. He could've been a pro. You didn't know that? He never tried, but what the hell," she laughed, "I never got to Atlantic City. How come you don't know he played tennis?" She led me back to the front room.

"You must be new," she said, crushing the cigarette out in the ashtray, lifting the drink. "Fix you something?"

"No thanks. I just came to find Paul."

That puzzled her. "You're not here for—" pointing toward the kitchen. For a long moment she stared at me, then at the tabletop, a face clouded with regret. She suddenly fixed her gaze hard on me. "You from Internal Affairs?"

Before I could deny being a cop, she said, "He told me you might come snooping around. Damn! I'm so stupid!"

Withdrawn into herself, angry at herself, she got a pack of Marlboros from a side pocket, fitted a cigarette into rouged lips, got out a lighter, snapped it nervously, hand trembling, couldn't get a flame. I took the lighter, made a flame, and held it to her cigarette, watched her suck smoke into her face.

"I don't want to talk to you," she said, grabbing the lighter, starting toward the door. "I don't want you in here."

"I'm not a cop. I just want to talk to him."

"Please leave. And for your information he was in my bed all that night. He didn't feel well. He got into bed right after supper. He was nowhere near that man in the alley. God, isn't he sick enough? Why

don't you stop harassing him? Why can't you leave him alone?"

She avoided my gaze as I went into the hallway. As she closed the door I caught a glimpse of a face collapsing into sobs.

Why did she think her husband needed an alibi for the night of the murder? Had he been accused? Is that why Mike and the captain were so into this?

So the burnout had reached the wife, I thought, riding the elevator to the downstairs lobby. As I was leaving the car, I almost bumped into Maynard. He stepped back, crowding Cunningham into a third man, a guy in denim coveralls. "What are you doing here?" Maynard snarled. "You talking to my wife?"

"I was looking for you," I said. "I wanted to—"

"You stay the hell away from my wife!" Murderous anger in his eyes.

"I'm not interested in your wife. I came here to see you about Gilley Thomas."

He didn't want to listen. He reached past me, crowding me aside, stopping the doors from closing. Cunningham put a hand on Maynard's arm and urged him into the car. "We don't need trouble," he told Maynard, not looking at me, wanting to distance himself from me. The guy in the coveralls slid past me and stood next to Maynard studying the floor, looking a little scared.

"I can prove Gilley had nothing to do with it," I said, half the words bouncing off the closing doors.

I wanted to go upstairs, but it wouldn't have helped Gilley. It was late. I was hungry. To hell with it. I decided to go home.

But not yet. There was someone I had to visit.

Just before sundown I pulled up to the curb in front of an old clapboard house in a poor section of town just north of the District—houses in need of paint, frost-heaved sidewalks, patches of grass growing in the cracks, sagging picket fences, telephone poles that leaned toward the broken pavement.

There was a doll with its wig torn off lying in a dog's dish on the porch. Five feet down from the dish there was an old mongrel asleep with its chin on its paw. I watched the dog as I rapped on the screen door. The dog lifted its head, made a small woof, stirred a little, scratched its belly with a hind foot, then went back to sleep—an old dog, probably an old trick.

The door opened a crack, and a plump woman in jeans and faded blue blouse poked her face into the crack.

"Mrs. Thomas?"

The door narrowed slightly, the eyes narrowed.

"I'm a friend of Gilley's," I said.

From inside the room I could hear what sounded like television voices, then a movement of chair springs, someone getting up. Finally a small man in a stained sweatshirt came to the door, unshaven, thick grey hair, eyes bulging like they could pop out of the sockets, scary-looking. "It's got nothing to do with us," he said in a high voice. "He don't live here."

"I'm his friend," I said. "I'm trying to help him."

The man edged the woman aside and widened the opening, looked around, maybe for television cameras. I was getting a whiff of bad breath and boiled cabbage.

"He never killed nobody," the woman said.

"And that's why I'm here," I said. "I want to prove it."

The woman tapped the man's arm. "Let him in. I think I know you," she said to me. "You helped him—"

"We've been friends since he was a small boy," I said, stepping into the room half holding my breath against heavy kitchen odors. Everything in the room looked brown.

"What I'm looking for is an earring," I said, watching the man sink into a large chair, apparently no longer interested in me.

"An earring?"

"A gold scorpion on a small chain."

"The one he lost. What about it?"

"Do you have the mate?"

She gave the question a lot of consideration, a mild look of pain coming into her face. "Why?" she said.

"When did he lose it?"

"More than a year ago. Said a cop stole it. They found it?"

"In the alley where that man was found."

"Planted evidence!" the man yelled, jumping up. "By God, I knew it! Emma, didn't I say so?" Looking at me he said, "I told her that."

"I never heard you say it," the woman said, looking to me for sympathy.

"Well, I did," going back to his chair. "You just never listen."

The woman went into another room and came back holding the mate to the earring. She dropped it carefully into my hand.

"I'll trust you to get this back to me. Broke my heart when Gilley lost it."

The dog was still pretending to be asleep when I crossed the porch and went down the broken steps to my car. The man in there was not Gilley's father. Gilley didn't know who his father was. He said his mother didn't know, either.

I drove down the hill to the wharves, parked my car behind the ship chandler's shop, and went up the back staircase to my loft. I had hoped to spend a quiet evening watching a Red Sox game. Instead, while I was thumbing open the carton of a frozen spaghetti dinner, I got a knock on my door.

Because I don't get many visitors, I considered going for the gun I keep in my bedroom. But I didn't. I stood aside from the door and yelled, "Who is it?"

"Cunningham. I want to talk."

He was in jeans and a green and white Celtics T-shirt, grinning self-consciously as he slid into a kitchen chair, his arms dropping on the Formica like slabs of wood. He was one of those guys you know are quick and strong although they don't look muscular. Something in his manner made you distrust him, like he was examining you for weaknesses to exploit.

"You use the whole loft or just this end of it?" he asked, looking

around, a smugness in his manner, a crude arrogance.

"I own the building," I said.

"The guys downstairs, they rent from you?"

"Something like that. What brings you here?"

He studied the cabinets, the wall clock, the doorway into my office.

"Pretty nice," he said. "Comfortable looking."

I waited.

"I gotta apologize for Paul. He ain't himself lately. Thinks the brass are out to get him."

"Why? What's he done?"

"Damned if I know. Probably nothing."

He kept blinking his left eye, touching it with his knuckle, looking at me with a meaningless smile.

"So why're you here?"

He sat on that for a while, looking around, in no hurry. "You came to Paul's house to tell us something."

"I went over there to get you to release Gilley. You know he couldn't have killed that man. You know the man died somewhere else. Gilley doesn't have transportation. No way—"

"Oh, Gilley did it. No question about that. All's we're after now is his accomplice."

He rode on that awhile, a glimmer of laughter in his eyes.

I waited. "You took Gilley to that trashcan where somebody planted the binoculars," he said.

"And?"

"You told him you knew about them from some guy at a pawnshop. If that's the truth, how come you never told the captain about them? When we talked after you left, he never heard of any binoculars."

Never heard? Interesting. "You think I planted them?"

"You tell me."

"When we left the warehouse, how did you know we were going to the trashcan?"

"Just followed you."

"I don't think so. I'd've made you. There was no car in my rear view mirror coming up that hill."

A broad smile. "Maybe you don't see good. Why'd you go there?"

"Gilley needed a ride."

"He said it was your idea."

"Are you suggesting that somebody helped Gilley commit a murder and then planted evidence that would focus attention on Gilley? Are you that stupid?"

"I'm not suggesting anything."

I got up and went to the sink for a glass of water, stayed there a while staring out the window across rooftops at the buglight in the harbor. I put my hand in my pocket and fingered the earring.

"Did Gilley's 'accomplice' plant the earring?"

Apparently I wasn't supposed to know about the earring. The question rattled him. He seemed to sink lower into the chair, his eyes narrowing, a streak of hatred flitting across them.

I had no idea why he had paid me this visit, but I had had enough of him.

"Look," I said. "It's been a long day. Why don't you get the hell out of here. You know Gilley Thomas had nothing to do with that mur-

der. I don't know what you're trying to pull. I don't care. I just want you gone."

For a long time he sat there looking up at me, something happening in his head I didn't want to think about. He finally scraped back his chair, got up, and walked slowly to the door. I stood at the top of the stairs and watched him go down to the alley, watched him pause, turn, look up at me, maybe considering saying something. I didn't wait. I went back inside and locked the door. I wasted the rest of the evening on an old Clint Eastwood movie and went to bed listening to the rumble of a freight train moving past the warehouses out on Commercial Street. Six hours later I woke up coughing.

I sat up, suddenly wide awake, scared.

The room was filled with smoke. I stumbled to the window, raised it, and stuck my head out. There was a firetruck coming into the alley, the shrill whine of a siren out on the street.

I watched flames breaking through clapboards near the back stairs, smoke flowing up the outside of the building. I got clothes on, grabbed my wallet and car keys, started out of the room, then went back for the earring. I took a framed photograph off the wall and stuffed it inside my shirt and ran to the front of the loft and down a rarely used staircase, where I had to break a window to get to the street.

When the flames died down, I got my Jeep from the back of the building, then waited near a firetruck until the captain told me the damage was mostly confined to the lower part of the house in back.

"Until we've checked for structural damage I can't let you go back in," he said.

I spent the rest of the night in a downtown hotel, woke up after ten, and sat a half hour in a coffeeshop trying to find an intelligent reason behind Cunningham's suggestion that an accomplice had used the binoculars to implicate Gilley. Maybe I was missing something, but to my mind the only person who would have wanted to lead the police to Gilley was someone Gilley couldn't connect to the murder. Like the one who planted the earring.

And that is what I took to Mike Kadish.

Because he didn't want me coming to the station, we met on a park bench near the bandstand on the Eastern Promenade, looking out at islands in the harbor. Except for a halyard banging on a steel flagpole, it was pleasant there, a little windy.

I showed Mike the earring. "His mother said he lost it a year ago, said a cop took it from him."

Mike fingered it, gave it back to me. "Yes, it's a match," he said. "But it probably doesn't help. A lawyer could blow it away—a mother lying to save her son, blaming the cops. What we need is probably inside Cunningham's car—trace evidence to match what we found on the body. We need substantial evidence to get a warrant against a cop, especially the way the courts are going these days."

I asked, "How long you been looking at Cunningham for this?"

"For this and for the killing three years ago outside the Adonis Club," he said. "We know he did it. We know Maynard watched it happen. We just can't prove it.

"The cop who discovered Butler's body in the alley went straight to the captain and swore there was no earring next to the dead man's head. When Cunningham got there, the cop had seen him lean over the body, put something next to the head, then call the cop over and give him hell for not mentioning the earring.

"We took that to the district attorney's office. He said it's not enough. We need a bloody hand on the knife that cut Butler's neck. Or something that strong."

"You've got enough to clear Gilley."

"Oh, he's in no trouble. We've got a social worker trying to get him some help. He was never a suspect. Cunningham tried . . ."

We waited while a little kid came by bouncing a rubber ball.

I went back to what Mike had told me when getting out of his car. "Did Maynard actually throw up in Proud's office?"

"He threw up blood. Puked it all over the desk, then collapsed on the floor."

"What brought it on?"

"Guilt. Anxiety. He's been holding that stuff in for a long time."

"I know the feeling."

"The difference is you brought it in right away. He didn't. Probably out there on harbor patrol he could put it out of his mind, but when he stood with Cunningham looking at another body in an alley—he had to know Cunningham was trying to frame Gilley Thomas—it just busted his gut, literally. Now he's on a table fighting for his life."

I said, "I suppose he could think the Club Adonis thing came from frustration. But this was murder."

"And if he holds it in, he's guilty of obstruction."

"You have a motive?"

He leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, patting his hands together, glancing out at the harbor.

"It's why I'm talking to you," he said.

"I don't—"

"Why did Claire Butler hire you?"

"Let me ask you a question," I said. "Why does she hate the police? How come you know so much about her, where she lives, what kind of person she is?"

"We leaned on her husband a few times. I was at her house maybe five times. I wasn't exactly courteous. He was dealing drugs. You know how I feel about that."

"So she comes to me because she hates you guys."

He nodded sadly. "She's looking for help."

He got up, stood with his hands in his pockets. "I'd go to Maynard's wife for answers, but she knows her husband's in legal trouble and she knows we can't make her testify against him. I'd bet my salary Claire Butler knows why Cunningham went after her husband, but she'd laugh in my face if I asked her."

I could tell from his expression what was coming. "You want me to find out."

We walked all the way back to where we had parked our cars before he said, "I'd be grateful if you'd try."

"What do you think the agency can do for Gilley?"

"Maybe nothing more than get him a medical exam and a few good meals."

"I'll see what I can do," I said. "Would you call the fire marshall or whoever and find out if they suspect arson?"

"Will do."

There was a panel truck from the local TV station parked at the curb in front of Claire's house, three people and a cameraman watching me get out of my car, the cameraman maneuvering to get a shot of me coming up the driveway.

A girl I saw frequently on the six o'clock news shoved a microphone at my face and asked why I was there.

I gave her a big smile and went into the house. Claire was in the kitchen.

"They still out there?" she asked.

Zippy went to the counter and got me a cup of coffee. "Cream and sugar?"

"Regular milk if you've got it," I said. "No sugar."

"Can you make them go away?" Claire asked.

"Probably not."

Apparently the news about her husband's car in the granite quarry and the bloody spot near the birch trees had been on the news all morning. She said the police had called for permission to open the trunk.

"They'd do it anyway," she said.

For a long time we just sat there looking at each other. I sipped at the coffee, glanced at the flowerpots on the windowsills, at the canary hopping around in its cage. "Show it to him," Zippy said.

Claire frowned, laid both hands flat on the table, looking at her splayed fingers, looking at me.

"Show it to him," Zippy said.

Claire got up and left the room, came back and handed me an envelope that had been sealed at the post office, registered mail addressed to Wayne Butler.

"Notice the date," Zippy said. "It was mailed three years ago in April. It was in the pencil drawer in Wayne's desk."

"I saw it a long time ago," Claire said. "He always kept it in his safe. He said it was his 'ace in the hole' if he ran out of tricks."

I asked, "You know what it is?" I couldn't feel anything inside, maybe a few sheets of paper.

"It's important," Claire said. "And I know it was in the safe until maybe three days ago."

"You want it opened?"

"Whatever's in there he wanted people to know had been there, untouched, for three years."

"If I open it here," I said, "it will prove only that the envelope was mailed three years ago."

"Could you take it to maybe the district attorney and have him open it while you watch?"

"Tell me what you think it contains."

She shook her head. Either she knew and didn't want to tell me or she didn't know.

She was crying when I left the house. "She knows he was a rat," Zippy told me, "but she loved him."

I waited to say what was on my mind until I got permission from Captain Proud to go with Mike Kadish to the prosecutor's office.

"Blackmail," I said. "And when he threatened to use it, Cunningham killed him." It was a guess but a reasonable one.

Rachel Moody, an assistant district attorney, opened the envelope and read aloud a two-page description of the incident of three years ago in the alley behind the Club Adonis. After relating what he'd witnessed, Wayne Butler identified himself as the "anonymous tipster," saying he hadn't dared reveal his identity for fear of reprisal.

According to the narrative, Roger Cunningham had pushed the drunk out the back door of the club and knocked him down and then kicked him "viciously" until long after the man was unconscious. Paul Maynard came out of the club and pulled Cunningham off the victim. Neither cop had seen Butler, who was hiding behind a parked car. According to Butler there were no other witnesses.

"And when Butler threatened to show this letter to the police," I said, "Cunningham agreed to buy the letter. Instead he followed him to an out-of-the-way place and killed him."

"Because the damned fool revealed himself as a witness," Mike said. "He really must have been desperate for money."

A letter like that written the day of the event could be used by the captain to force Maynard to talk although it might have little probative value in court, especially if Butler weren't alive to back it up.

"What I find compelling," Rachel said, "is that the public didn't know about the anonymous tip when this letter was sealed. Nobody knew except the tipster and the police. This guy *must* have been the one who made that phone call."

"So do we get a warrant?" Mike asked.

"Draw up the affidavit," Rachel said.

I was picking my way through charred debris with an insurance adjuster assessing the damage to my building when Mike called.

"Good news and good news," he said.

"Give it to me. I can use it."

"We got all the evidence we need out of Cunningham's car. He's in the tank awaiting arraignment, and your boy Gilley's on his way to becoming eligible for rehab and welfare."

"And Maynard?"

"Kind of an irony, isn't it? With his wife watching, I stood over him in the hospital room and told him he had the right to remain silent."

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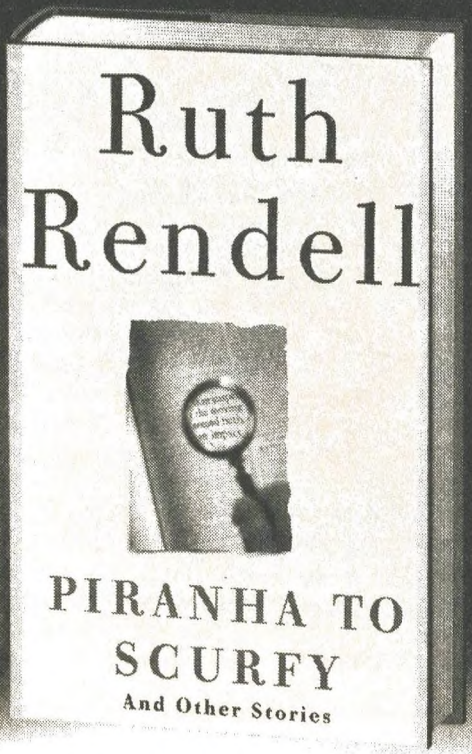

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A NOSE FOR THE KING

Jack London

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

In the morning calm of Korea, when its peace and tranquility truly merited its ancient name Cho-sen, there lived a politician by name Yi Chin Ho. He was a man of parts, and—who shall say?—perhaps in no wise worse than politicians the world over. But unlike his brethren in other lands, Yi Chin Ho was in jail. Not that he had inadvertently diverted to himself public moneys, but that he had inadvertently diverted too much. Excess is to be deplored in all things, even in grafting, and Yi Chin Ho's excess had brought him to most deplorable straits.

Ten thousand strings of cash he owed the government, and he lay in prison under sentence of death. There was one advantage to the situation—he had plenty of time in which to think. And he thought well. Then called he the jailer to him.

"Most worthy man, you see before you one most wretched," he began. "Yet all will be well with me if you will but let me go free for one short hour this night. And all will be well with you, for I shall see to your advancement through the years, and you shall come at length to the directorship of all the prisons of Cho-sen."

"How now?" demanded the jailer. "What foolishness is this? One short hour, and you but waiting for your head to be chopped off! And I, with an aged and much-to-be-respected mother, not to say anything of a wife and several children of tender years! Out upon you for the scoundrel that you are!"

"From the Sacred City to the ends of all the Eight Coasts there is no place for me to hide," Yi Chin Ho made reply. "I am a man of wisdom, but of what worth my wisdom here in prison? Were I free, well I know I could seek out and obtain the money wherewith to repay the government. I know of a nose that will save me from all my difficulties."

"A nose!" cried the jailer.

"A nose," said Yi Chin Ho. "A remarkable nose if I may say so, a most remarkable nose."

The jailer threw up his hands despairingly. "Ah, what a wag you are, what a wag," he laughed. "To think that that very admirable wit of yours must go the way of the chopping block!"

And so saying, he turned and went away. But in the end, being a man soft of head and heart, when the night was well along he permitted Yi Chin Ho to go.

Straight he went to the governor, catching him alone and arousing him from his sleep.

"Yi Chin Ho, or I'm no governor!" cried the governor. "What do you here who should be in prison waiting on the chopping block?"

"I pray your excellency to listen to me," said Yi Chin Ho, squatting on his hams by the bedside and lighting his pipe from the firebox. "A dead

From When God Laughs and Other Stories, *Macmillan, 1911.*

man is without value. It is true, I am as a dead man, without value to the government, to your excellency, or to myself. But if, so to say, your excellency were to give me my freedom—"

"Impossible!" cried the governor. "Besides, you are condemned to death."

"Your excellency well knows that if I can repay the ten thousand strings of cash the government will pardon me," Yi Chin Ho went on. "So as I say, if your excellency were to give me my freedom for a few days, being a man of understanding, I should then repay the government and be in position to be of service to your excellency. I should be in position to be of very great service to your excellency."

"Have you a plan whereby you hope to obtain this money?" asked the governor.

"I have," said Yi Chin Ho.

"Then come with it to me tomorrow night; I would now sleep," said the governor, taking up his snore where it had been interrupted.

On the following night, having again obtained leave of absence from the jailer, Yi Chin Ho presented himself at the governor's bedside.

"Is it you, Yi Chin Ho?" asked the governor. "And have you the plan?"

"It is I, your excellency," answered Yi Chin Ho, "and the plan is here."

"Speak," commanded the governor.

"The plan is here," repeated Yi Chin Ho, "here in my hand."

The governor sat up and opened his eyes. Yi Chin Ho proffered in his hand a sheet of paper. The governor held it to the light.

"Nothing but a nose," said he.

"A bit pinched, so, and so, your excellency," said Yi Chin Ho.

"Yes, a bit pinched here and there, as you say," said the governor.

"Withal it is an exceeding corpulent nose, thus, and so, all in one place, at the end," proceeded Yi Chin Ho. "Your excellency would seek far and wide and many a day for that nose and find it not."

"An unusual nose," admitted the governor.

"There is a wart upon it," said Yi Chin Ho.

"A most unusual nose," said the governor. "Never have I seen the like. But what do you with this nose, Yi Chin Ho?"

"I seek it whereby to repay the money to the government," said Yi Chin Ho. "I seek it to be of service to your excellency, and I seek it to save my own worthless head. Further, I seek your excellency's seal upon this picture of the nose."

And the governor laughed and affixed the seal of state, and Yi Chin Ho departed. For a month and a day he traveled the King's Road which leads to the shore of the Eastern Sea; and there, one night, at the gate of the largest mansion of a wealthy city he knocked loudly for admittance.

"None other than the master of the house will I see," said he fiercely to the frightened servants. "I travel upon the king's business."

Straightway was he led to an inner room, where the master of the house was roused from his sleep and brought blinking before him.

"You are Pak Chung Chang, head man of this city," said Yi Chin Ho in tones that were all-accusing. "I am upon the king's business."

Pak Chung Chang trembled. Well he knew the king's business was ever a terrible business. His knees smote together, and he near fell to the floor.

"The hour is late," he quavered. "Were it not well to—"

"The king's business never waits!" thundered Yi Chin Ho. "Come apart with me, and swiftly. I have an affair of moment to discuss with you.

"It is the king's affair," he added with even greater fierceness so that Pak Chung Chang's silver pipe dropped from his nerveless fingers and clattered on the floor.

"Know then," said Yi Chin Ho when they had gone apart, "that the king is troubled with an affliction, a very terrible affliction. In that he failed to cure it, the court physician has had nothing else than his head chopped off. From all the Eight Provinces have physicians come to wait upon the king. Wise consultation have they held, and they have decided that for a remedy for the king's affliction nothing else is required than a nose, a certain kind of nose, a very peculiar certain kind of nose.

"Then by none other was I summoned than his excellency the prime minister himself. He put a paper into my hand. Upon this paper was the very peculiar kind of nose drawn by the physicians of the Eight Provinces, with the seal of state upon it.

" 'Go,' said his excellency the prime minister. 'Seek out this nose, for the king's affliction is sore. And wheresoever you find this nose upon the face of a man, strike it off forthright and bring it in all haste to the court, for the king must be cured. Go, and come not back until your search is rewarded.'

"And so I departed upon my quest," said Yi Chin Ho. "I have sought out the remotest corners of the kingdom; I have traveled the Eight Highways, searched the Eight Provinces, and sailed the seas of the Eight Coasts. And here I am."

With a great flourish he drew a paper from his girdle, unrolled it with many snappings and cracklings, and thrust it before the face of Pak Chung Chang. Upon the paper was the picture of the nose.

Pak Chung Chang stared upon it with bulging eyes.

"Never have I beheld such a nose," he began.

"There is a wart upon it," said Yi Chin Ho.

"Never have I beheld—" Pak Chung Chang began again.

"Bring your father before me," Yi Chin Ho interrupted sternly.

"My ancient and very-much-to-be-respected ancestor sleeps," said Pak Chung Chang.

"Why dissemble?" demanded Yi Chin Ho. "You know it is your father's nose. Bring him before me that I may strike it off and be gone. Hurry, lest I make bad report of you."

"Mercy!" cried Pak Chung Chang, falling on his knees. "It is impossible! It is impossible! You cannot strike off my father's nose. He cannot go down without his nose to the grave. He will become a laughter and a byword, and all my days and nights will be filled with woe. O reflect! Report that you have seen no such nose in your travels. You too have a father."

Pak Chung Chang clasped Yi Chin Ho's knees and fell to weeping on his sandals.

"My heart softens strangely at your tears," said Yi Chin Ho. "I too know filial piety and regard. But—" He hesitated, then added as though thinking aloud, "It is as much as my head is worth."

"How much is your head worth?" asked Pak Chung Chang in a thin, small voice.

"A not remarkable head," said Yi Chin Ho. "An absurdly unremarkable head, but, such is my great foolishness I value it at nothing less than one hundred thousand strings of cash."

"So be it," said Pak Chung Chang, rising to his feet.

"I shall need horses to carry the treasure," said Yi Chin Ho, "and men to guard it well as I journey through the mountains. There are robbers abroad in the land."

"There are robbers abroad in the land," said Pak Chung Chang sadly. "But it shall be as you wish so long as my ancient and very-much-to-be-respected ancestor's nose abide in its appointed place."

"Say nothing to any man of this occurrence," said Yi Chin Ho, "else will other and more loyal servants than I be sent to strike off your father's nose."

And so Yi Chin Ho departed on his way through the mountains, blithe of heart and gay of song as he listened to the jingling bells of his treasure-laden ponies.

There is little more to tell. Yi Chin Ho prospered through the years. By his efforts the jailer attained at length to the directorship of all the prisons of Cho-sen; the governor ultimately betook himself to the Sacred City to be prime minister to the king, while Yi Chin Ho became the king's boon companion and sat at table with him to the end of a round, fat life. But Pak Chung Chang fell into a melancholy, and ever after he shook his head sadly, with tears in his eyes, whenever he regarded the expensive nose of his ancient and very-much-to-be-respected ancestor.

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon

The Secret Ingredient Murders (Delacorte, $22.95) is Nancy Pickard's newest in the Eugenia Potter series that was originated by the late Virginia Rich. Fans of both authors have delighted in the "collaboration," and they will not be disappointed with this one. Genia has rented a seaside home in Rhode Island to lend support to her niece, a single mother of bright but rebellious adolescent twins. The summer is going swimmingly—until the dark and stormy night Genia hosts a dinner party. Before dessert is served, it appears that the guest who never arrived may have been fatally delayed by one of the guests who did attend. Think of this one as great chowder: rich and creamy, it goes down smoothly, comforts with its familiarity, yet surprises with a few secret ingredients. The conceit is clever, and the recipes gathered at the end are a bonus.

Another old friend who often has food on the brain is Ellen Hart's Jane Lawless, restaurateur and leading lady sleuth in **The Merchant of Venus** (St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95). But it is the silver screen that is on everyone's mind. Jane's irrepressible friend Cordelia has dragged her to a Connecticut mansion on Long Island Sound for a Yuletide wedding—the unlikely union of Cordelia's sister Octavia, a beautiful Broadway actress, and a famous octogenarian film director. Hart sets her stage in cosy country-mansion style with gothic overtones, then casts her drama with colorful characters ranging from an aged movie goddess to a mysterious housekeeper to a young cyberwizard who has webcammed her suite to broadcast her life on the Internet. Jane's search for the identity of a killer leads her to one of Hollywood's secret histories. Readers get a jolly gossipfest peering over Jane's shoulder. Look to Hart for witty dialogue, themes of loyalty and betrayal, and dark secrets brought to light in an atmospheric and compelling story.

Cuban-American attorney Charlie Morell returns to team up with Mexican-American lawyer Rita Carr in Alex Abella's **Final Acts** (Simon & Schuster, $25). The beheaded bodies of young women found along the

Illustration by June Levine

California coast show signs of ritual murder involving Santeria. Morell (the hero of Abella's two previous novels) finds himself in the shocking position of prime suspect because of his past involvement in tracking a voodoo killer. So he turns to Carr, a sharp, independent attorney who tries to live in several worlds at the same time. Abella tells this story in jump-cut style, switching narration from Morell to Carr and back again. Added to the tension of catching a killer are the heady rush of power politics and the struggle both protagonists wage with their own inner demons. *Final Acts* is a very fast, very dark read.

Wisconsin bluff country may be more bucolic than Los Angeles, but it proved to be no less deadly for Deputy Sheriff Claire Watkins in Mary Logue's first entry in this series. Now, **Dark Coulee** (Walker, $23.95) finds Claire on the mend but still shaky from the events that left her widowed, then betrayed by a lover who turned out to be the widowmaker. For three months Claire has been casually seeing a quiet and likable man, Rich Haggard. When Claire takes advantage of her daughter's absence to attend a dance with Rich and invite him back to her house, the night is shattered by a scream. Outside a man is lying dead in the street of a knife wound, his two teenage children standing silently nearby. Logue presents an engaging heroine, well-drawn supporting characters, a fresh setting, and a gripping family drama.

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The most wanted criminal is using the name Alfred Sanders. He and his wife Dotty have a room on the 12th floor of the hotel.

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THE STORY THAT WON

Fox Photos / Tony Stone Images

The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Denis Woollings of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Honorable mentions go to Laurie Hill of Brookline, New Hampshire; David Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Diane C. Perrone of Franklin, Wisconsin; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Carol L. Du Bois of Skokie, Illinois; Kate Karp of Long Beach, California; M. Lilly Welsh of Oakton, Virginia; Patricia Bowker Williams of Portland, Oregon; and Ron Mayer of St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER by Denis Woollings

"The cat's out of the bag," the witch said familiarly. "And somebody has to answer for it." She raised a reproving finger as she prepared to read out her verdict. "Wipe those smirks off your faces. The evidence in the Scottish play, which lies open before you as Exhibit A, is incontrovertible." The Hex Advocate General was presiding personally. The Snitch Witch had testified and whisked away after draining her cup of Darjeeling tea.

The First Witch blanched. "But we thought the heath was deserted. How were we to know some nosy bard was snooping around?"

The Second Witch simmered. "Maybe I did sense a presence. Okay, so I could feel it in my thumbs. We figured nobody would ever read the guy's potboilers, anyway."

The Third Witch seethed. "Curse thee! It's not our fault. We even tossed a needless eye of newt into the cauldron, strictly as a red herring."

"All that did was kick it up a notch" came the reply. "Face it, you blabbed the whole recipe, and now everybody and her sister knows how to make a haggis. I'd like to say Not Proven, but I'm afraid it's Guilty as Charged.

"Sorry, girls, this bell's been rung. The book is closed, if you catch my drift. It's time to light the old candle. You were all aware that criminal negligence resulting in unauthorized publication of Wiccan intellectual property is a capital offense. Now, hurry up and drink your hemlock; my Orange Pekoe's getting cold."

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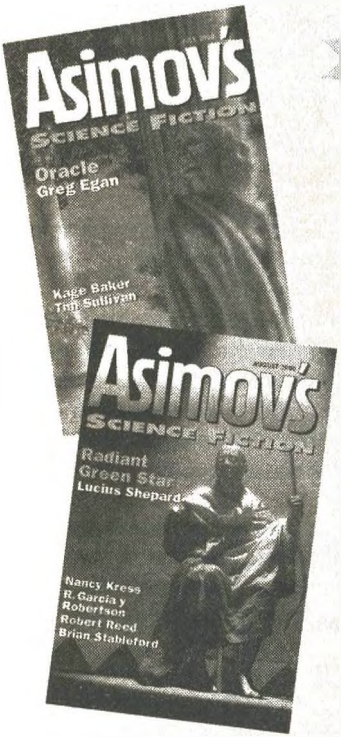

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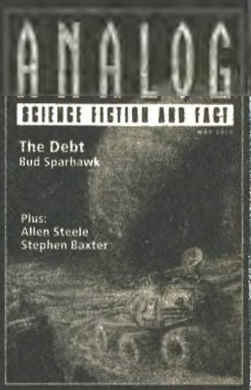

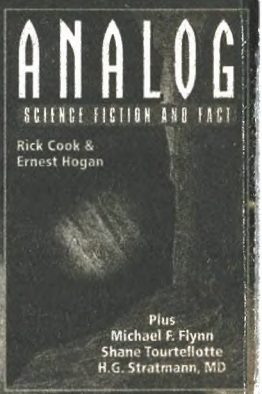

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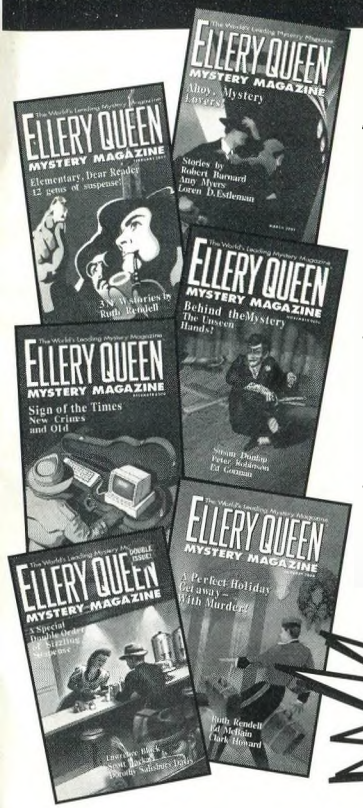

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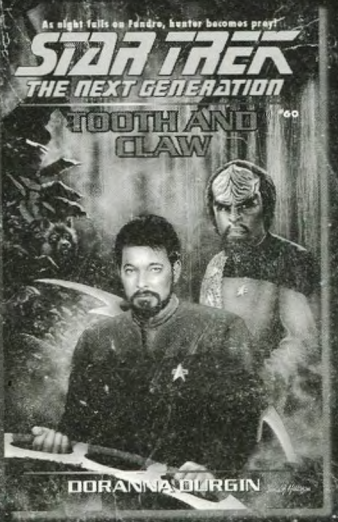

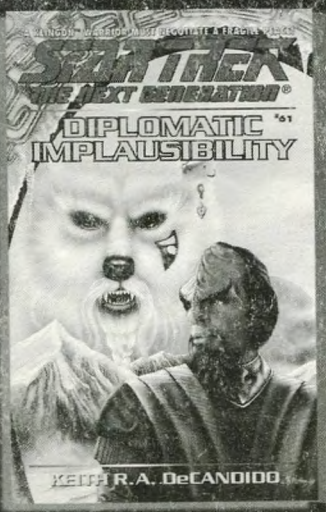

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