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JULY/AUGUST 2007

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Journey**

by **GILBERT
M. STACK**

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Crime & Detection by:**
Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Robert S. Levinson
Brendan DuBois

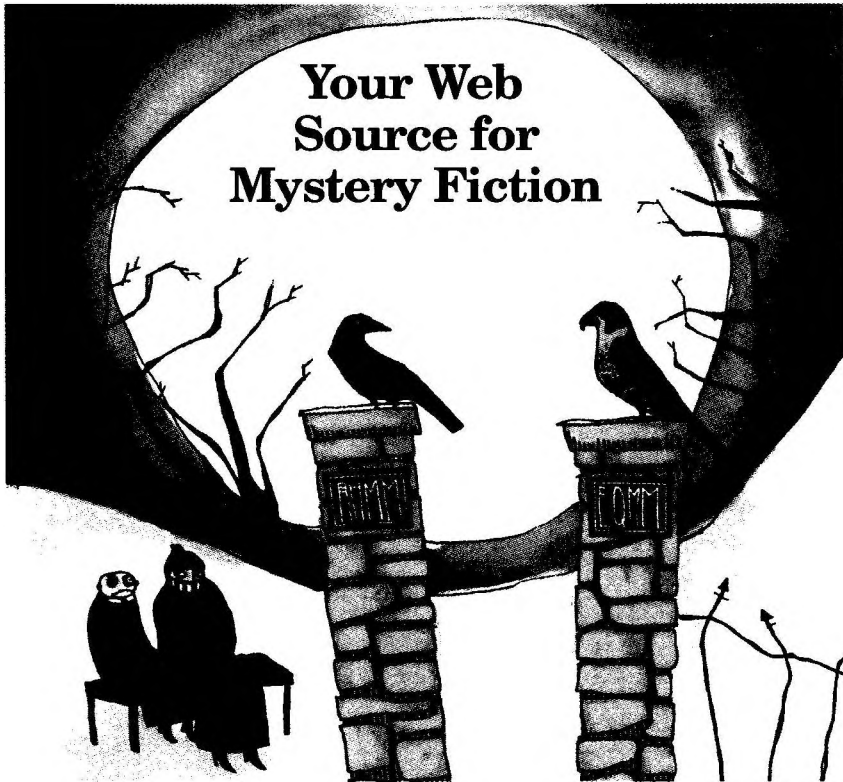
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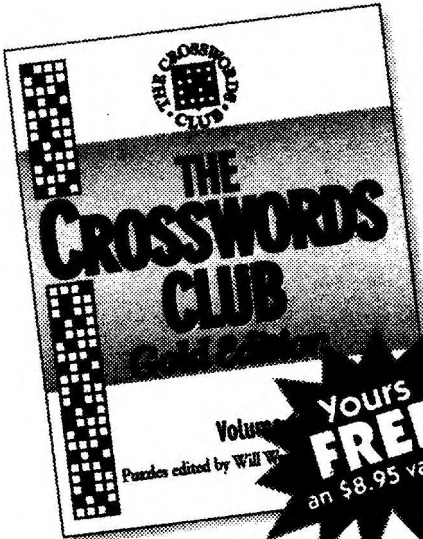
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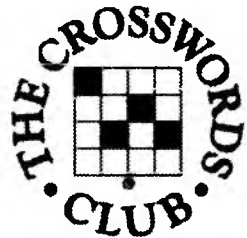
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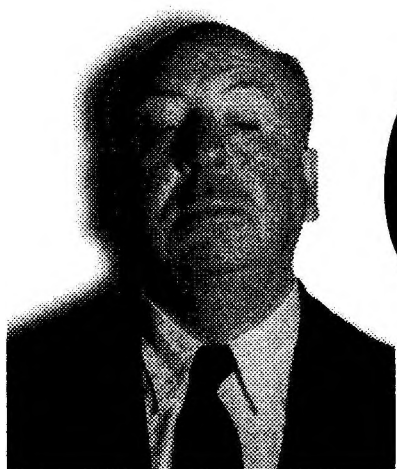
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

DETAILS, DETAILS

The devil, as they say, is in the details.

Short stories depend on the effective employment of well-chosen details, the details that reveal a place, a character, or an era.

For O'Neil De Noux, those details often concern the city of New Orleans, which he once again masterly evokes in his latest John Raven Beau story, "Down on the Pontchartrain." His depiction of the city is all the more poignant in this story, which occurs B.K.—before Hurricane Katrina wreaked its destruction. In the subsequent Conversation, Mr. De Noux talks a bit about his own connection to the Crescent City and the effect Katrina has had on his life.

Not all series are rooted in the same locale. Gilbert M. Stack selects just the right details to establish a new setting for each tale of his peripatetic trio: bare-knuckle boxer Corey Callaghan, his trainer Patrick O'Sullivan, and the lady gambler Pandora Parson. In "Pandora's Journey," the confines of a train make for a tight, tense crime drama.

Robert S. Levinson and Percy Spurlock Parker each place their characters in glamorous, deftly evoked locales, Hollywood and Vegas, respectively, and each shows us the more unsavory hazards of fame and fortune. In Mr. Levinson's "A Prisoner of Memory," an aging movie star is convinced she is being stalked. In Mr. Parker's new Trevor Oaks story "Death at My Door," the naïve granddaughter of a late mobster is blackmailed.

Jas. R. Petrin has established a thoroughly realized setting in his fictional End of Main stories, where the town's retired police chief, Robideau, has now turned reluctant private eye. In "The Palace Roxy," Robideau turns to the sundry and colorful characters of the Netley tavern to learn the secrets of a run-down movie theater.

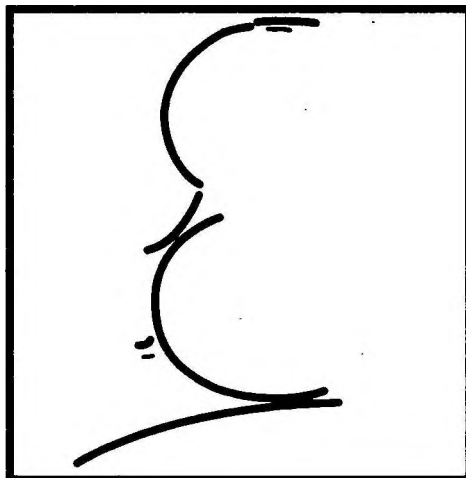
Kristine Kathryn Rusch sets her latest tale on the beautiful Oregon coast, but what makes many of her stories distinctive is her attention to the details of her characters' daily jobs. In "Incident at Lonely Rocks," Oscar, in the course of doing his job, comes across a grisly crime scene.

L. A. Wilson, Jr., also expertly captures his characters in their daily lives, just at the moment when events conspire to upset the delicate harmony. "German Johnson and the Lost Horizon" takes place in post-World War II New York, where racism and evil have descended from the world stage to a small table in a restaurant in Harlem. The Post-War era may likewise be the setting for Barry Baldwin's meditative tale, "Untying the Knot," but it is very much a post-9/11 story as well.

Anyone who's ever tried to decipher an instruction manual will appreciate the telling details of Neil Schofield's cautionary tale "Murder: A User's Guide." But if you're inclined to be an overly empathetic reader, well, you've been warned.

We welcome two new authors this month, Tim Maleeny and Melodie Campbell. Mr. Maleeny ("The Weight"), an advertising executive in San Francisco, is the author of the recently published novel *Stealing the Dragon*, from Midnight Ink. His second novel in that series, "Beating the Babushka," comes out later this year. The author of "School for Burglars," Melodie Campbell, of Oakville, Ontario, is a "director of marketing by day, crime writer by night." She's published numerous short stories and humor articles in Canada and the U.S. and also teaches humor and fiction writing at Sheridan College.

Correction: Due to a production error in our May issue, a paragraph was omitted from Eve Fisher's story "Sophistication." The complete story is now up on our Web site at <http://www.themysteryplace.com/ahmm>.



DOWN ON THE PONTCHARTRAIN

O'NEIL DE NOUX

MONDAY, 22 AUGUST 2005

The call comes over my portable police radio just as I step aboard *Sad Lisa*—Headquarters calling for Homicide . . . a signal thirty . . . parking lot . . . West End Park. I can't help thinking this is what I get for trying to knock off early on my squad's last night before we switch from the midnight shift.

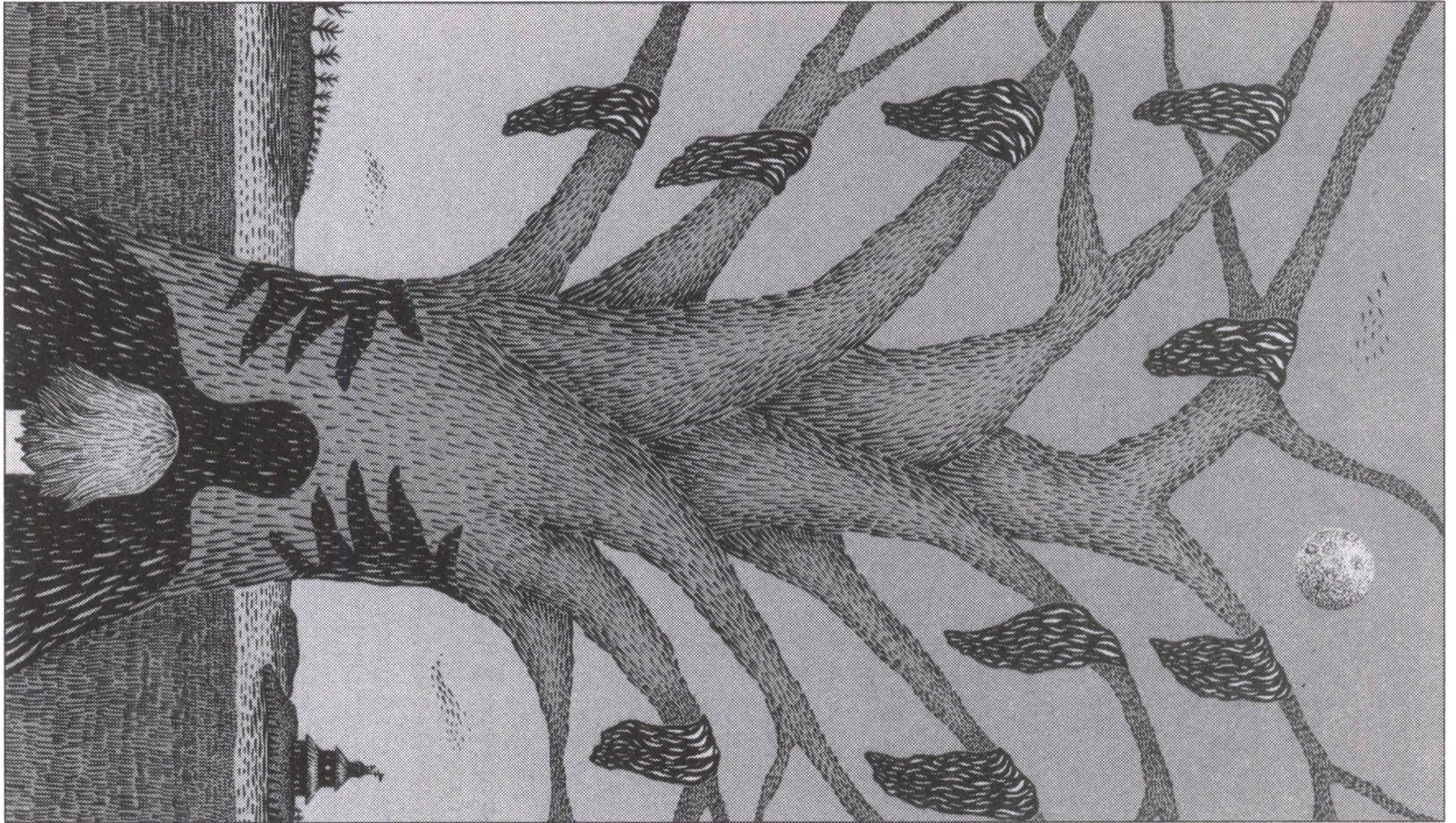
Moving to the side of my houseboat, I look across the 17th Street Canal at West End Park. Don't see much beyond the low seawall except the rear of the elevated wooden restaurants and the tops of oak trees bathed in soft yellow streetlight. I glance at my watch on the way back to my unmarked Chevy parked on Orpheum Avenue alongside *Sad Lisa*. It's five A.M. exactly. I lock my briefcase in the trunk but only after taking out my notepad and ballpoint pen, tucking them into the pocket of my navy blue suit coat. The night air is still clammy, still hot from the day's heat.

My sergeant calls me on the radio as I start across the new pedestrian bridge connecting Bucktown, where *Sad Lisa* is permanently moored, to Orleans Parish. I tell him I'll be at West End Park in two minutes. You see, it's my turn. I'm up for the next murder.

The new bridge is red brick with an iron railing painted dark green, about fifteen feet wide and maybe forty yards long, rising in the center to allow small boats from Lake Pontchartrain. A brisk breeze blows from the lake, and I watch waves slap against the rocky shoreline. They're not rocks, actually, but large concrete blocks lying at odd angles, keeping the lake from eating away the land. I lick the salty mist from my lips. A large orange cat perched on the bridge railing near the base of the bridge glares at me with yellow eyes as I pass.

Can't miss the crime scene. Two New Orleans police cars, red and blue lights flashing, headlights illuminating figures standing next to a large live oak and a figure on the ground. Three other

Anthony Mullen



police cars are also there, Levee Board cops and a Jefferson Parish Sheriff's unit, drawn to the crime scene like bugs to a lightbulb.

Stepping up, I recognize the big cop just as he turns his flashlight my way and announces, "Well, it's Sioux time, ladies and gents!"

I shake my head as I move through the assembled officers.

Sidney Tilghman, a sergeant now, continues my introduction. "This here's Homicide Detective John Raven Beau whose daddy hailed from the swamps of Vermilion Bay and his mama from the Dakotas. Don't remember which one." Tilghman sidles next to me as I ease to the right to let the dim streetlight illuminate the body. "How you been, old buddy?" he asks. "See you're still skinny." Tilghman has put on a few pounds, more than a few in a couple years. We're both thirty, but he looks more than a couple years older, with a hint of gray in his curly hair.

We were on the same platoon back in the Second District, the uptown police, both patrolmen before he made sergeant and I moved to the land of murder, suicide, and other negligent homicides. I shrug and turn to the other officer, a tall, thin woman with coal black skin, large brown eyes, and hair parted in cornrows. Her nameplate reads S. PANOLA.

At six two, I'm a good four inches taller than Officer Panola. I nod toward the body and ask her, "Shine your light on it, okay?"

She nods and focuses her bright flashlight on the dead woman lying on her side beneath an oak at the edge of the parking lot. The victim's skin glows pallid white. Over the radio, I hear a crime lab tech is en route, as well as another homicide detective.

I list the victim's vital stats in my notes: white female, about thirty, tallish, maybe five ten, thin build, light brown hair styled short, brown eyes, tattoo of pearls around her neck, tattoo of a heart on left forearm. Body pierced with four earring holes in each ear. I describe the silver- and gold-colored earrings as well as the stainless steel rod piercing the right side of her nose. Clothing: green tie-dyed blouse ripped in front, long tan skirt, brown sandals.

"He looks even more Sioux from the side," Tilghman tells the Levee Board cops. "You know. The profile." He starts talking about my hawk nose and slightly protruding brow, next will be my straight brown Sioux hair and how a former girlfriend told the guys, outside the district station, of all places, how she liked to trace her fingernails along my square jawline.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" I snap.

"Not really."

I turn to Officer Panola and ask, "No purse?"

She points to a red Nissan parked just beyond the police cars. "In her car."

"You still carry that bowie knife?" Tilghman asks.

"It isn't a bowie knife," I tell him, then ask Panola, "Who found the body?"

"It's big as a bowie knife." Tilghman again.

Officer Panola tells me a coworker found the body and points to her police car, where I see a figure seated in the back seat. "Both start working at five. They clean the restaurant before the cooks come in." She's looking at her notes now. "Victim is Monique Lewis, spelled like Meriwether Lewis. Witness is Shameka Johnson." She spells out Shameka for me. "When Shameka arrived, she saw Monique's car but couldn't find her in the restaurant, so she stepped out, figuring Monique was taking a smoke, and found her. Didn't see anyone else around. Went back in and called 911."

Panola looks up at me, and I ask, "Where's your partner?" NOPD beat units are usually two-man cars. I look over as another NOPD car joins us.

"He went home sick. Sarge came along in his unit."

Tilghman puts a friendly hand on my shoulder. "Come on. They don't believe you carry a backup knife instead of a pistol." He nods toward the Levee Board cops and the two JPs.

Jesus! I reach under my coat to the scabbard and pull out my black obsidian hunting knife, sharpened on one side only, like the true plains warriors of my ancestry. I slap the buffalo bone handle in Tilghman's open hand. "Don't drop it."

While the men gather around like kids leering at a new toy, I ease Panola closer to the body and ask her to focus her flashlight on the victim's neck. We both go down on our haunches.

Red marks ring her throat, bluish bruises across her larynx. Her neck seems distorted, swollen, her tongue purple and protruding, a line of blood seeping from her mouth. Death by strangulation. Three of her fingernails, painted light purple, are broken. I find one a couple feet from her, the other a little farther away. Can't find the third. Looking closely, I see they are real fingernails, not the glue-on type.

"She put up a fight. Probably scratched him."

I stand and Panola follows and wavers, so I take her elbow.

"You all right?" I whisper.

She nods.

"No ligature," I tell her as she stands more erect, and I let go of her elbow.

"Huh?"

"No ligature mark. A rope or like instrument wasn't used. Someone used their hands to strangle her."

"Damn."

"Exactly."

I step back and snatch my knife from one of the Levee Board cops who's trying to cut a strand of hair with it. Two pair of headlights close in on us, a crime lab van and another unmarked Chevy. I slip my knife back into its scabbard.

"She's a granola girl," Tilghman announces, looking at the victim again.

"Granola?"

"Yeah. Tie-dyed blouse. Tattoos. Body piercings. West Coast Oregon sandals. She's a New Age hippie."

"Oregon sandals?" I shake my head.

"Birkenstocks," Panola tells me.

I've heard of that brand name.

"Granola girl," Tilghman repeats. "Eats roots and stuff. Granola."

"Can you do me a real favor?" I ask my old friend.

"Sure."

"Go canvass. Take those two with you." I point at the two newly arrived NOPD guys. "Check if any of these restaurants have outdoor surveillance cameras, but leave Panola with me. I'll need her and her flashlight. Go see who's out there, maybe saw something." I wave at the line of restaurants, the dark parking lot, and the park beyond. "Keep an eye out for a broken purple fingernail."

"A what?"

The second homicide detective moves through the cops. Mike Borgo, a rookie detective without a permanent partner at the moment, came to our squad earlier this week. He'd been bouncing from scene to scene to get a grasp of what we do. He nods at me, and I ask him to get the names of all these cops—which will run the JPs off pretty quickly.

Then I give Borgo the rundown on the body and the witness in the car. Borgo's in a black suit, stands about five ten, husky, a big-boned Sicilian with brown eyes even lighter than mine, a thick mane of blackish hair, and a matching mustache.

"Damn," he says. "Strangled by hand. See this often?"

"Nope."

Panola gives me a weak smile.

"Which restaurant?" I ask.

She points to the nearest, Maxim's Crab Claw Restaurant. The crime lab tech arrives with his camera case and evidence bag. I nod to the body, telling him about the fingernails, and then point to the victim's red Nissan. Borgo will assist him with the mea-

surements, triangulating the body's position to fixed objects, the oak tree, light posts, while Panola and I go speak with our witness.

Shameka Johnson is twenty-two, five four, one-twenty pounds, brown and brown with caramel-colored skin. She wears a dark green sweat suit and jogging shoes as she sits with her feet up on the seat, knees pressed to her chest, arms holding them close. In a wavering voice she tells me how her boyfriend Eddie dropped her off at Maxim's and drove away right after. I get his name and contact information for follow-up. They live together on Mazant Street.

The restaurant was locked, but Shameka saw Monique's car so she went in but didn't see her inside, so she came back out and found her. No, she saw no one in the area. She knows very little about Monique except she was single, liked boys all right, toked an occasional joint. She knows no one who would have done something like this and no suspicious people in the area. Both had been working for Maxim's for only a few months. Monique about three months. I list the name of the boss, cooks, everyone she can name.

"What now?" Borgo asks as the strobe from the crime lab's camera flashes behind us.

I point to the car just arriving. "Those'll be the cooks for Maxim's. You know what to do." I remind him anyway to get their IDs, alibis, check for scratches, how well they knew the victim, if they know who would've done this, suspicious people in the area, the usual.

I stretch the kinks in my back as the sky is now purple and pink in the east. Two brown pelicans glide over the lake, dipping toward the water beyond Maxim's. Standing next to me, Panola tells me she's part Choctaw, on her father's side.

I nod and say, "Panola means cotton in Choctaw, doesn't it?"

She's surprised and gives me a shaky smile. "It sure does."

We go back to make certain the crime lab tech photographed the fingernails before dusting them for prints (partials more likely) and that he doesn't leave them by mistake. As the crime lab finishes, the coroner's van arrives and the coroner's investigator pulls on a pair of rubber gloves to touch the body.

"Doesn't appear to be a sex crime," Panola says. "Maybe he knew her."

"Could be a sex crime," I tell her. "Whatever enraged the killer could be sexual. A sexual hatred. He might have been interrupted before finishing. We have no idea if he knew her. Not yet."

"Only he knows why," Borgo adds.

I go on, "We don't focus on why she was killed. We establish what happened, when, where, and most importantly, who. Who is

she and who did this. Sometimes we find out why. Sometimes we don't."

After the tech dusts the Nissan for prints, we pull out Monique Lewis's purse, securing her driver's license for the coroner for identification purposes before they take her body. We also secure her apartment keys. Monique lived on First Street, right in my old beat in the Second District.

Officer Panola's shift ends at seven, and she and Tilghman depart. So do the NOPD men. The Levee Board cops and JPs long gone. Borgo and I finish up with the three cooks. All have alibis and seem genuinely shook. None has a scratch mark. We focus our interest on the cook who hasn't shown up for work this morning. Cedrick Smith lives in the Sixth Police District, better known as the Bloody Sixth, where there are more murders than the rest of the city combined. Smith is described on the police computer as "black male, thirty-eight, five nine, one-eighty, no tattoos, scars, or marks." A convicted felon, Smith is also a registered sex offender on parole after serving ten years of a twenty-year sentence for violating Louisiana Revised Statute 14:43—simple rape.

Before departing West End Park, Borgo and I go over the canvass notes. Two fishermen had been located, identified, and interviewed. Both saw a jogger in the area, a white male in a gray running outfit. A six-year-old son of one of the fishermen thought he saw two joggers, both white males. The license plate numbers of all cars parked in a two-mile radius is added to our notes.

At 6:32, Levee Board cops had stopped a jogger with gray clothing along nearby Lake Marina Drive, securing his pertinent data and checking to make sure he hadn't been scratched. The man lives at the Lake Marina Tower, one of the new high-rise condo complexes overlooking the lake. He's a lieutenant in the U.S. Coast Guard named Bruce Addams.

"What now?" asks Borgo.

"We search for Cedrick Smith, then go to the autopsy. But coffee is first on the agenda."

"All right. Where?"

"My houseboat. I'm gonna need my car."

"Houseboat?"

I tell him about *Sad Lisa* moored over in Bucktown. He knows how to get to Bucktown, but it'll take him a good ten minutes, skirting the marina to Old Hammond Highway to cross the 17th Street Canal into Jefferson Parish for a quick run up Orpheum Avenue into Bucktown.

Crossing back over the pedestrian bridge, I see the lake's calmed

down, the gray-brown water not so choppy. White seagulls squawk overhead while pelicans are perched on the remnants of a restaurant battered to pieces by Hurricane Georges a few years back. Three cats prowl the bridge, and I remember the feral cats back home, back along the swampland around Vermilion Bay. I like to see cats around. Cats mean fewer rodents.

My Cajun daddy loved cats, put leftovers out for them. Occasionally, when a coon came for the leftovers, my old man would peek out of our Cajun shack on Bayou Brunet and shoot the coon with his .22 for our supper. He'd shoot the possums, too, but we'd use that greasy meat for fish bait.

I grew up in an old Cajun daubed house my great-grandfather built by hand, its walls filled with swamp mud to keep out the weather. We went hungry some nights, when the hunting and fishing weren't good, feasted when it was good. We lived off the land, the great bayous, the brown water bay, the bountiful swamp.

Once when I was five, I heard the call of a swamp cat, a bobcat searching for a mate out in the marsh. The howl sent shivers through me, and I ran downstairs to tell my parents there was a swamp monster out there. My daddy laughed and set me straight. Later my mother mimicked the cry of the mountain lion for me, and that astounded me. She could mimic any bird—cardinal, oriole, hawk, even the multicalls of the mockingbird. But that was long ago, my father gone now, my mother back up in South Dakota with my relatives, the Oglala Sioux. You see, we're direct descendants of Crazy Horse's younger brother, Little Hawk. At least, that's what my grandfather tells everyone. To the Sioux, birth records go by word of mouth.

I put on a pot of strong coffee and chicory, warming milk for café au lait. Borgo arrives and I offer Hot Pockets, microwavable ham and cheese wrapped in a flaky crust. I'm so hungry, I eat two. Borgo eats four with three brimming cups of coffee. Looking around *Sad Lisa*, he tells me I must get plenty women with a setup like this.

"Not really. It's old, creaky, and drafty. Couple girls got seasick when the lake got choppy and the canal began to rise and fall."

"Couple? Hope it was one at a time." Borgo raises his eyebrows like Groucho Marx.

Cedrick Smith isn't home. His neighbors say he lives there all right, but he stays with a woman back-a-town in the Broadmoor section, off Claiborne and Napoleon. That doesn't narrow it down much, so we leave business cards and head for the coroner's office.

Getting there early, we position the black body bag containing

Monique Lewis at the front of the line so she'll go first. Sipping coffee we picked up from a nearby CC's Coffee Stand, pretty good coffee and chicory, we wait in the hall outside the morgue with the reeking smells of formaldehyde, dried blood, and cigarette smoke.

I put the pathologist's findings in my notes. Monique is exactly five ten in length (cadavers no longer have height, they are prostrate and therefore, long) and weighs one thirty-five. Cause of death, strangulation. Manner of death, homicide. The postmortem exam confirms no evidence of sexual assault. Beneath Monique's fingernails the pathologist finds blood and skin from her attacker. Monique has five additional tattoos and I list them.

The crime lab tech, who arrives late, will rush the blood from under the fingernails for typing and DNA fingerprinting. I push him on the subject, and he nods nervously. Late for the autopsy, he's got a lot of catching up to do, starting with breaking out the Duraprint spray to see if he can get fingerprints from Monique's neck. He tries but can't.

The Sioux believe in the spirit world, believe in vision quests, ghosts, and communicating with the dead. My Cajun daddy believed in purgatory, heaven, and hell, like a good Catholic. I don't know what to believe, but I let my mind tell Monique Lewis, as I stand next to her body, that I am Sharp Eyes of the Oglala, and I will catch who did this to her.

I can tell this white woman my secret tribe name because the words do not cross my lips. If there is a spirit world, she can hear me and know this plains warrior will track down her killer, no matter how long it takes.

"What were you mumbling back there?" Borgo asks as we leave.
"Mumbling?"

Monique Lewis lived in a garage apartment behind a three-story house in need of a new paint job. The garage could also use a paint-over and new railing for its stairs. The woman in the house, who I hoped would be the landlord, says the landlord lives in Mississippi. She gives us the name and address of the landlord as she tells us she's never seen Monique, who must keep odd hours.

We use Monique's house key to get in and find a very neat apartment smelling of flowers and incense. Scented candles in small glass jars line the window sills. A search of her closet, chifforobe, and dresser drawers reveals she lived alone. No address book, however, and no computer; but plenty of books, a CD player, videotape deck, and a TV. No cable. Lots of CDs, rock mostly, and movie

tapes, a variety from musicals like *An American in Paris* to the crime film *Scarface*, the Pacino version.

"There were only four Beatles," Borgo says as he points to the five posters on the bedroom wall. "So who's this guy?"

It's a young, bearded man with soft eyes sandwiched between posters of Paul McCartney and George Harrison. I tell him, "Cat Stevens."

"Yeah? The guy who went Muslim, right? Gave up the music."

I always wonder if the previous owner of my houseboat named her *Sad Lisa* from the Cat Stevens song. Or maybe they knew a Lisa who was sad. No way to know, since I bought it at an estate auction. Couple died together in a car wreck. I thought of changing the name, but somebody wanted that name, and it seems to fit the boat. Unlike the white-eyes, we Sioux don't readily change the names of things.

There's no granola in the kitchen, just corn flakes and Cheerios. Borgo finds an expired driver's license from Vancouver, Canada. Monique looks like a teenager in the picture. There's no phone in Monique's apartment, so I call the information in on the radio to have it forwarded to the coroner's office. We canvass the neighborhood but come up with nothing useful.

"You too tired to go on?" I ask Borgo when he yawns.

"Naw. First twenty-four hours are the most important, ain't they?"

So we split up. He'll search for Cedrick Smith, while I go interview Lieutenant Bruce Addams, United States Coast Guard.

About a mile and a half from West End Park stands a Coast Guard substation, a two-story, white Victorian-style building with a round portico atop, a lighthouse actually, galleries around both stories, and a red tin roof. It rests on a point of land jutting into Lake Pontchartrain just as Lakeshore Drive makes a dogleg turn from north to east. I park in an "official business only" parking spot next to a gray government sedan.

The lake is dotted with sailboats on this breezy morning. Inshore, a pair of braver guys glide by on parasails, standing on surfboards. The air is rich with the scent of cooking from the restaurants adjacent to the USCG substation.

Lieutenant Bruce Addams greets me with a friendly handshake. He's in khakis, short sleeved, with double silver bars on his collar. He's about five ten, one-eighty maybe, with close-cropped reddish hair and brown eyes. Clean shaven, he has no cuts on his face, neck, or arms. According to the information the Levee Boards cops secured from his driver's license when they interviewed him

earlier, he's thirty-six and lives at the Lake Marina Tower across the street from the New Orleans Marina.

"The name's spelled with two *ds*," he tells me. "No relation to Gomez and Morticia." A big smile this time.

"Who?"

"*The Addams Family*. TV show. Movie with Raoul Julia, Angelica Huston?"

I shrug, then remember and say, "Guy dressed up like Frankenstein?"

"No, that's *The Munsters*."

We had a TV when I was a kid, but only three channels. I get that twinge in my gut again, knowing I missed a lot growing up. Guess I'll never get used to it. I sit in a gray metal government-issue chair across from his desk as he sits and goes over his morning activities, his usual jog, gives me a timeline, and maps out his route from Lake Marina Drive over to West End Park, once around the park and up West Roadway to the point and back again. A two-mile jog. He never dipped down into the restaurant area.

"Did you see anyone?"

He saw two fishermen, one with a young boy.

"Any other joggers?"

"No, but Eric jogged the same route this morning."

"Eric?"

"Lieutenant J. G. Eric Gault, my exec. He called in sick after his run. Fell down. Be in later today."

I ask and discover Gault also lives at the Lake Marina Tower in a condo two doors down from Addams.

"Any other joggers here?"

"No, sir."

"What were you wearing on your jog?"

He tells me he wore standard-issue gray USCG sweats, pants, and shirt and white running shoes. Nikes.

I hear my call sign on my radio, pull it out, and respond to Borgo, "Go ahead, 3139."

"Got the subject in my unit. Heading to the office."

"I'll be right there."

I leave my card, asking Lieutenant Addams to call when his exec comes in.

"No problem."

As I stand I ask to see his driver's license, and he tells me he's from Detroit as he hands me his Michigan license. I take down the necessary information, then ask to see his dog tags. He blinks, shrugs, digs into the open collar of his khakis, and pulls his dog tags over his head and tosses them to me. I note his blood type.

Like most people, including me, he's O-positive.

Before I leave, he asks, "What's this all about?"

"Someone was killed at West End Park this morning."

His eyes widen. "Well, if I can help in any way." He extends his hand and we shake again.

Cedrick Smith is graying along his temples. He wears a black T-shirt and blue jeans, black boots. He's sitting in the folding chair next to my desk, and I look at him carefully. There are no scratch marks.

"Crime lab just called," Borgo says, handing me a note.

Preliminary blood typing on the blood from under Monique's fingernails is AB-positive. My heart beats a little faster as Borgo goes for coffee for all three of us. I'll have to look it up on my chart, but as I recall only about four percent of the human population has AB-positive blood.

As I settle in the small interview room with Cedrick Smith and our coffees, I ask Borgo to go check Smith's record again, call his probation officer if he has to, get Smith's blood type.

"It's O-positive," Smith tells me. He produces a blood donor card to confirm this.

I pull out my Miranda warning card to read Smith his rights. He nods and says he'll talk because he's done nothing. Still he looks wary. I ask him why he didn't show up for work this morning. He gives me an elaborate alibi, how he was at his girlfriend Lucy's house, gave me the address, said he was with six other people, gave me their names, said he drank too much and didn't wake up until nine o'clock. He went home and found the detective waiting for him.

"What's this about?"

I watch his eyes carefully as I ask if he knows Monique Lewis.

"Who?"

I describe her.

He nods. "Skinny white girl. Cleans up. Yeah, I seen her. I don't know her."

I tell him she was murdered.

He closes his eyes and leans back, shaking his head. "No wonder you scooped me up. I'm a registered sex offender in Jefferson Parish." His eyes snap open. "Man, I tell you, I ain't raped nobody, ain't done nothin'." He extends his arm. "Take my DNA. Check it."

I turned to Borgo. "Get the crime lab over. Let's get a swab from his mouth before we let him go." Smith has no problem with that, and NOPD will have his DNA on file.

Cedrick Smith squints at me. "You're lettin' me go?"



Lieutenant Addams calls just as I'm getting off the phone with Monique Lewis's mother in Canada. Lieutenant J. G. Gault is at work now. I tell him we'll be right over. On our way, I give Borgo the lowdown on what I learned from Monique's mother. "She sounds old. Her daughter's been gone fifteen years. Last time she heard from Monique she was in New Mexico or Arizona. Never married. Our victim has two sisters and a brother who's coming to pick up the body." Then I tell him how Monique has a daughter being raised by one of her sisters.

Gault is about four inches shorter than me, around five ten, but heavier, two hundred pounds at least, mostly muscle. His light brown hair is boxed into a flattop, looking crisp and hard. He also wears khakis, a single silver bar on his collar. He limps as he moves to shake hands. I was hoping for a bandage or two on his arms or hands, but no luck there.

As he shakes my hand firmly, I nod at the limp, watching his deep-set blue eyes. "What happened?"

"Fell jogging this morning."

"West End, right?" Lieutenant Addams asks from behind his desk.

"That little bridge in West End Park."

I remember a bridge over a man-made pond.

"What time was that?" I ask.

Gault describes the route he took, similar to Addams's route but earlier in the morning. No, he didn't run near the restaurants either. I ask to see his driver's license, which turns out to be from Oklahoma. He's thirty-three but looks much younger.

I let Borgo take over the conversation, as planned, and watch Gault carefully, not that I learn anything from his body language except he's tense. Very tense. But he looks Borgo in the eye with each answer and looks at me, too, as he answers each question with no problem.

"What were you wearing on your jog?" Borgo asks.

He glances at Addams and shrugs as if we're boring him and tells us USCG gray sweats and black running shoes.

"What brand?"

"Reeboks. And if I remember what color socks, I'll call you." He winks as if he's joking, but the bite of his words tells me differently. Addams furrows his brow momentarily. Gault sighs, reaches back to rub the back of his head, and says, "Sorry to snap. My leg's hurting."

"Have you seen a doctor about it?" I ask.

"Naw," he smiles. "It's just a sprain. Ace bandage."

As we stand to leave, I ask to see his dog tags. He hesitates a

moment and Addams says, "I think it's routine."

Gault gives me a hard look, one I'm sure intimidates enlisted men, but has no effect on me, and I let him know with an expressionless stare back at him. He stands and reaches into his shirt and I see he has a V-neck white T-shirt under. He doesn't take the tags off, making me come to look. I watch his eyes as I reach forward to examine the dog tag. I try not to react to Gault having AB-positive blood.

I ease around him toward the far wall to some sort of nautical instrument, a ship's wheel encased in glass with a long glass tube extending beneath it, looking a little like a thermometer, and ask, "What's this?"

"Barometer," Addams says.

As I turn, I see Gault has backed toward a side wall, so I move that way to a wooden sailing ship atop a small bookcase. The name plate under the man-o-war tells me it's the U.S.S. *Constitution*.

"Old Ironsides," says Addams.

As I move between Gault and the bookcase, he shifts quickly and I look down at his injured left leg. He says, without prodding, "Need to work it out."

"Any reason why you keep facing me?" I step around him and see a patch of white at the back of his neck. "Is that a bandage?"

"Yeah. When I tripped this morning, I fell in those bushes by the little bridge. Thorns stuck me."

I nod as I ease over and shake Addams's hand, then thank Gault and lead Borgo out. As we get into our car, I see Borgo can't hold it in any longer and he asks, "How'd you know about the bandage behind his neck?"

"Well, she didn't scratch his arms, and they were the same height."

I get behind the wheel and Borgo shakes his head. "That's it? That's how you came up with it?"

"You have to be more observant, amigo."

"It's pisano. I'm Italian. So, where to now?"

"Bridge."

It's a rock and concrete bridge over the edge of a man-made pond at the far end of West End Park. As we examine the bushes, Borgo states the obvious. "Azalea bushes and that's a camellia bush. No thorns here." We check each bush carefully, not a branch bent or broken, not a leaf missing, and no human tissue scraped on thornless branches.

"So what now?" Borgo asks.

"Search warrants."

We climb back into the Chevy and he asks, "Warrants? As in two?"

"We'll need a description of his building and the exact location of his condo for the first warrant. You'll search there for the jogging clothes he wore while I take him to Charity with the other warrant." He keeps looking at me, so I explain. "Get his blood for typing and DNA testing and get a doctor to look at that thorn injury."

As soon as we secure the warrants we call for a marked car to meet us at the Lake Marina Tower. Officer S. Panola, whose platoon switched around to the evening shift, meets us. Her regular partner, who also has cornrows, is male, six three, two-fifty, with a nameplate that reads E. HAWKINS, greets us as we park and goes in to find the manager so we don't have to kick down Gault's door.

I ask for another car to meet me at the USCG substation, and my buddy Sidney Tilghman is waiting for me outside the station.

"Well, well, this is fast work."

I give him a quick rundown and ask that he put Gault in the back of his unit, in the cage, and follow me to Charity Hospital.

"Want I should ask him anything, slick like, you know? Maybe he'll slip up and say something."

Yeah. Right. So I tell him, "Sure. See if he'll tell you he killed her."

Tilghman pulls up his uniform pants as I lead the way into the substation. Addams isn't there, but Gault is, and I step into his office, pull out my ID folder, and read him his Miranda rights before telling him, "We have a search warrant for blood and skin samples. You'll have to come along with us."

He takes his time getting up, and I see Tilghman is antsy as he eases around me and says, "Keep your hands where we can see them."

Gault limps around his desk, eyes darting between the sergeant and me, but not meeting my eyes. I show him the warrant. His eyes don't even blink.

"Show him your knife," Tilghman urges me. When I don't, he tells Gault he's a lucky man, I usually slice some hair off when I nab a killer. "You behave now," Tilghman continues, "and I won't cuff you till we get out to the car. Get feisty and I'll slap them on and march you out in front of all your men like that." He pats Gault down.

I'm sure the enlisted men can see outside as Tilghman cuffs Gault behind his back before slipping him into the back of the marked police car.

"This isn't necessary," Gault says in a gravely voice.

"You ride in my car, you get cuffed." Tilghman shuts the door.



The ER at Charity is crowded, as usual, and smells of alcohol wipes, Pine Sol, and body odor. We ease through the waiting room, and an Orleans Parish sheriff's deputy comes around to escort Tilghman and his handcuffed prisoner to an alcove, where Tilghman takes off the cuffs, and I go hunt down the duty police surgeon.

Dr. Sam Martinez is short, young, and energetic and quickly takes two swabs from inside Gault's mouth before securing a blood sample from his left arm. As the warrant instructs, the doctor examines the injury at the back of Gault's neck and nods to me.

"The wound is consistent with fingernail scratches," the doctor says after he dresses the wound in a fresh bandage and steps away. "Can't be positive, but it's consistent."

"Says he fell in some bushes."

"Possible," says the doctor. "But unlikely."

I thank him and Tilghman slips the cuffs back on Gault, and we leave for the Detective Bureau, where we uncuff Gault again before putting him into an interview room to simmer for a half hour.

"Coffee?" I ask Tilghman, who shakes his head.

"Hope you got the right guy, Cochise," he says with a grin on his way out.

"Cochise was Apache," I tell him, and he waves back over his shoulder.

After I turn over the swabs and blood sample to a crime lab tech, I take two coffees into the interview room, where Gault stands behind the small table in the room.

"Sit down," I say. "Have some coffee."

He folds his arms.

Gault won't cop out, won't even talk to me after I read him his rights again and have him put his initials on a waiver-of-rights form. He signs on the line that says he does *not* waive his rights and wants to speak with a lawyer before answering any questions. He folds his arms and leans back in the chair, ogling me for a long moment. Then he smiles.

I lock eyes with him and for long seconds, neither of us moves. I hear the distant beat of war drums echoing in my brain. No, it's my heart thumping as I look into the eyes of this killer. I clench my fists and fight the urge to wring his neck. I'm reminded of the legend of the leering Cheyenne renegade called Wolf Who Hunts Smiling. I reach around for my knife wanting so badly to eviscerate this monster sitting across the table from me, wipe that smile off the earth, just as my ancestors wiped the Cheyenne renegade

from the land of the living. But I let out a deep breath, take another in, and feel the rage in me slowly subside as Gault's smile fades and he tries a hard look now. My face remains expressionless. A plains warrior never shows emotion, especially to the white-eyes. I leave him in the room with his untouched mug of coffee and chicory.

I can tell from the grin on Borgo's wide face, as he crosses the squad room, that it went well at the condo. He's bouncing on his toes as he shows me the ripped and bloody collar from Gault's gray USCG sweatshirt, then shows me a small plastic bag secured with red evidence tape. Inside is a broken purple fingernail.

"Found it in the dirty clothes hamper with the sweat suit." Borgo beams. "Did he cop?"

"No. Wants to talk to his lawyer."

Borgo looks at the closed interview room door and shakes his head. "Like to know why, man. What brought it on. Did she rebuff him? Did he just pounce on her?" He looks back at me now. "Maybe he hates women with tattoos, nose piercings."

I shrug. "So long as we get the *who* right, it's all that matters."

He bounces again. "Man what a thrill, finding that nail."

I nod again and have to say it. "Yep. The nail in the coffin."

"Man, that was fast work. Getting it in the first twenty-four hours, right?"

"Good thing," I tell him. "I start on vacation tomorrow."

He laughs. "Where ya' goin'? Disney World. Get away from all this . . . funk?"

"No." I stretch out my back again, fighting off a yawn. "Putting *Sad Lisa* into dry dock for maintenance. Heading for home."

"The Dakotas?"

"Vermilion Bay." I narrow my eyes at him. "That where you go on vacation, Disney World?"

"Naw. I'm a hurricane watcher. Take my vacation days piecemeal. Go where the big storms hit. Went to Florida three times last year."

The tiredness doesn't hit me until we walk Gault over to Central Lockup, alongside Police Headquarters on the stretch of cement we call "Hollywood Walk," where three TV cameras follow us, Borgo leading the way.

Borgo's telling me about a new tropical depression that'll probably end up in the Gulf of Mexico. "It'll have a name starting with K," he tells me, but I'm not listening.

I haven't slept for over twenty-four hours, and I smile wearily for the cameras, like my daddy used to smile after a good hunt in the swamp. Of course Borgo was right, the first twenty-four

hours of a murder case are the most important.

THURSDAY, 22 SEPTEMBER 2005

A month to the day after the murder, I stand beneath the live oak where Monique Lewis lost her life. There's nothing to indicate anything happened here, but everything else is different now. This is the only tree left standing in West End Park. Maxim's Crab Claw Restaurant, where Monique worked, and all the other restaurants are gone, the boatyards mere shells of buildings, all destroyed by that K storm Borgo first alerted me to. Hurricane Katrina.

Monique's tree is the only living thing here, even the bushes are dead. A thick coat of gray brown dirt covers the entire area, more like a moonscape than a park. A lingering odor of petroleum permeates the air, mixed with the stench of mildew and death—dead fish, dead cats, dead dogs, probably several humans we haven't found yet in the wreckage.

The park where Gault claimed he'd tripped is littered with abandoned cars and pickups, along with dozens of sailboats and other pleasure craft flung here, most of the boats in pieces. The sun looks the same as it sets over Lake Pontchartrain. But there are no pelicans gliding above the open water, no gulls dancing over the water beyond the restaurant pilings, no stray cats anywhere to be seen.

I suck in a deep breath of sun-baked air and tell the tree, "We got the results of the DNA test today, and it's an exact match." Thankfully, the FBI lab is functioning better than NOPD. I look at the ground where Monique had lain in death. "Just wanted you to know." I take in another deep breath before going on. "Wish I could tell you why, what brought on his rage. Maybe you already know that, maybe you don't. But you're the one who caught him, you know, digging your nails fighting back, drawing blood and skin." I keep looking at the spot where Monique died and wish there is more to say, but there never is.

A scraping noise turns me around and it's Borgo walking up behind me. I hadn't seen him since the storm. We've been scattered around, trying to keep the city from dying from the inside after being blown apart from the outside. Borgo nods toward the tree, then tells me the Coast Guard Station's gone. Blown down.

"I saw it."

"That other hurricane's gonna hit us," he says.

"Rita? I thought she was headed for Houston."

"She's a Category Five now, got the third lowest barometric pressure ever recorded in the Atlantic basin, and she's huge, like

Katrina, covers most of the state. We're on the east side, the bad side. We'll get the tidal surge again.

Jesus, the words *tidal surge* ring like a funeral bell in my ears.

"The levees won't hold," he adds, and I turn away, wondering how the hell we'll be able to weather the next blow. ✍

CONVERSATION WITH

O'NEIL DE NOUX

The stories of O'Neil De Noux are suffused with the atmosphere and history of New Orleans. Whether he is writing of the 19th century detective Jacques Dugas, the 1940's P.I. Lucien Caye, or (as here) the contemporary homicide detective John Raven Beau, Mr. De Noux all but turns the Crescent City into a character in its own right. Mr. De Noux has published five novels, a true crime book, and three story collections, including New Orleans Confidential, a book of Lucien Caye tales.

AHMM: John Raven Beau, the New Orleans police detective featured in this story, is a different sort of character. He's part Cajun, part Sioux, a native of the area and yet an outsider, it seems, among his peers. Can you tell us how you came to develop this character?

OD: After reading the *Cheyenne* series by John Edward Ames (writing as Judd Cole), I was inspired by the grit and courage of the Cheyenne and their cousins the Sioux. I felt the stoic determination of the plains warrior matched well with the often grim determination I felt as a homicide detective. Since I'm half Cajun, I wondered what it

would be like to combine a Cajun's spirit of living life to its fullest with the tenacious nature of a Sioux warrior into one being.

AHMM: Where do you see Beau going into the future?

OD: Like New Orleans, Beau is on the cusp of a new existence. The catastrophe of Katrina has scarred the city permanently, and it will scar Beau as well. It's survival of the fittest now in the city, not just the strongest, but the people and neighborhoods smart enough to adapt. As criminals return to take advantage of a depleted police department, Beau and his compatriots will need every bit of courage and intelligence to cope. Ever the loner, I see Beau withdrawing into himself and evolving into a more ferocious character, hopefully softened by his Cajun side and the honor code of the plains warrior.

AHMM: You were living in the New Orleans area when Katrina hit and the levees broke. How did you survive the storm, and what have things been like for you in the year and a half after the storm?

OD: With the help of family and friends, and the generosity of strangers, we survived a hard year. A doctor and his wife in Lake Charles made sure of that by providing housing for my family (and

three other families) for eleven months. They are the most generous people I've known. Thanks to FEMA and the SBA (there are some very helpful people in our government; it isn't all bad), and a very good realtor, we were able to sell our storm-damaged home and buy a new one above the flood plain just across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans.

AHMM: How has the hurricane affected your writing?

OD: The first few months (when I had no computer) I couldn't write. But later my writing actually thrived. We were only able to find part-time work, which left more time to write, and I wrote two novels and a dozen short stories in the year A.K. (after Katrina). Haven't sold the novels or all the stories, but I'm still going strong.

AHMM: You have also been a homicide detective and a private detective in New Orleans. How much do you draw on your own experiences for your stories?

OD: Very much. My father was a cop, so was my brother, and I've lived with it all my life. I act and think like a cop naturally (drives my family and friends a little crazy at times because I'm always *on*). I know what's inside a cop and how we would react to situations, psychologically as well as physically. I've put a lot of my adventures in my stories and novels, fictionalizing them as I go along, even my P.I. adventures.

AHMM: You are now working as a police investigator at Southeastern

Louisiana University. How is this job different from being a detective in New Orleans?

OD: The biggest difference is a lack of violent crime, which is due to several factors—a good student body, good faculty and staff, and a full-time police force focused on the safety of all. Most of our problems come from people off campus.

AHMM: Have you been inspired by the different setting to start a new series of stories?

OD: I have been inspired and plan to set some stories on a college campus in the future. Haven't found a hook yet.

AHMM: Who have been your literary influences as you developed your career as a mystery writer?

OD: Joseph Wambaugh led the way for us cops-turned-writers. I've read everything he's written. Elmore Leonard and Harlan Ellison have been a big influence by example and, in Harlan's case, by personal input. The late and great George Alec Effinger taught me how to write a short story. I sure miss him.

AHMM: What, in your eyes, makes New Orleans so conducive to the literary imagination?

OD: George and I discussed this often. It's the dissonance, the inharmonious clash of a people dedicated to having a good time and violent crime from people who want what they don't have and figure taking it is easier than earning it. It's an unrelieved tension that rises until relieved.

MY LIFE IN CRIME

JANICE LAW

It started the day Billy J showed up at school in a real leather jacket and a pair of Nike Zoom LeBron IIs. The leather was class, man, but LeBron IIs! The coolest shoes on the planet. I'm not the biggest kid on court, but I got a killer outside shot, and I'd sure fly with shoes like those. As I kept telling Mama, all I needed to take my game to the next level was better equipment. But Mama, who wasn't my mom at all but my grandmother, had old-fashioned ideas and was all the time telling me that Payless sneakers were good enough if they "kept the wet off my feet."

So there I'm dreaming of LeBron IIs with the special support straps that would lift my game, when in comes Billy J, fresh from a trip to Sportslocker and the top leather shop in the mall. He's wearing a four hundred-dollar bomber jacket and my LeBron II shoes. *Mine*. Are me and the guys interested? Do we want to know how this could have happened when Billy J's so dumb the corner dealers won't touch him for a runner? Sure we do. Fortunately, Mitch, who lacks the cool and self-restraint that gives me a bigger game than you'd expect from my size, comes right out and asks him.

Billy J, moving and styling like some newborn rap star, says, "It's the settlement."

And being that dumb, he tells us the rest, starting with how his cousin knows a guy who knew another guy, plus confusing legal and medical stuff with relatives' contacts we don't need to bother with here. Some of my guys are losing interest before Billy J gets to the point, but I still got one eye on the LeBron IIs, and I keep my ears open. The deal was pretty simple once Billy J finally spits it out. The night of the accident, his brother Wesley drives the family car along South Main at eight P.M. "Eight exactly," says Billy J. "No later, no earlier. Super important." He goes on about this till we get the picture.

Anyway, Wesley's on his way to his night shift at McDonald's, and he has his sister Meghan with him, giving her a lift to a friend's house. They're rolling along Main, right at the speed limit,

which impressed Billy J, "'Cause my brother's a speed king," when "Boom! Bang! Crash!"

Billy J's got minimum verbal, as you can soon tell from talking with him. What's happened is that the guy who knew the other guy who's some far-off Billy J relative has come out of a side street and lost his brakes and piled into the back quarter panel of the Billy J family car.

"The bullet car was done professional," says Billy J, like this is some sort of job, a career path like Mr. Dawkins is always going on about, how we need a "career path" to take us from where we are to someplace none of us can imagine. Perhaps I can put down "bullet car driver" next time.

"They hurt?" I ask.

Billy J gives me a look. It's a scary thing, I tell you, to see a loser like Billy J in fancy gear with a scornful look. "I told you, done professional. Not a mark on them."

"How you get money for that?" asks Kev.

"Whiplash," says Billy J and nods his head. "The doctor said Wes was one bad case, and Meghan was almost worse. They had to have therapy and everything."

"You got to pay for that," says Mitch. "How they get health insurance?"

"Ain't nothing *wrong* with them," says Billy J. "And the auto insurance pays for everything."

"Sure, you say," says Kev. "I don't think there was an accident. I think you lifted that jacket and run out of the mall."

"No way. You ask my Aunt Bessie. She 'bout hit the roof we didn't add her daughter as a jump-in."

"I wouldn't want to jump her daughter," says Kev and everyone laughs.

"A *jump-in* ain't even *in* the car. Just on the accident report. I'm telling you them insurance companies got the money."

Kev and Mitch weren't impressed, but I could sort of see how it worked. 'Course you had to have a doctor, and a lawyer was good, too, 'cause nobody in their right mind would take Wesley Durfen's word for anything with cash involved. Major connections required, and even with the LeBron shoes, I'd probably have forgotten the whole thing, if other guys around hadn't started sporting fancy gear. Then the Ramondis got a hot tub, and Hector's dad got his teeth done. Tanya Morris managed a new car, and her brother-in-law got a set of tools and started doing cut-rate roofing jobs.

Pretty soon everyone at school and around the basketball court is talking settlements and the finer points of rear-end crashes. I

learn a whole lot about whiplash injuries and back pain and rear-quarter panel damage—human and automotive. One night when Mama is complaining about the electric bill and telling me for the millionth time I can't get a cell phone, I come right out and say, "What we need is a settlement."

"We're already next to a housing project," says Mama. "A settlement's more than I need."

The thing with Mama is you're not always sure if she's onto you and making a joke, or if like most folk her age, everything new and big's passed her by.

"I'm talking about an *insurance* settlement. Like everybody's been getting."

"You're talking about a bunch of no-good gangbangers," says Mama.

"Mr. Ventilla's no gangbanger. He got his teeth fixed 'cause he was in a car accident."

"He gets hurt in an accident, he deserves to get his teeth fixed," says Mama, refusing to see what's right in front of her.

"It wasn't an accident. Hector was in on it, too, and I saw him last month with one of those cool little Kawasakis."

"He'll have a real accident with that," says Mama, which I thought was likely but wouldn't admit. "Then where will he be? Wishing he'd left the damn thing alone."

This is off topic, for sure, but that's how Mama talks till you find yourself blocks away from cell phones or a way to tap into insurance. I spell out the details for her about Billy J and the lawyer and New Life Chiropractic, Inc., a little storefront down on River Street that's all of a sudden doing business like Wal-Mart. I'm getting into whiplash and why it's the best injury of all, when Mama cuts me off.

"I don't want to hear another word more now or ever," she says. "We don't have much, but we're going to live honest."

She stuck to that, although when she had to cut back her hours cleaning at the motel, we had lots of bean and rice dinners, and I had to put my can money and circular delivery cash into groceries instead of a cell phone or LeBron IIs.

"Be up to LeBron IIIs," says Mama when I complain. "You get yourself a better pair by waiting."

I grouse to Kev and Mitch, but they aren't much better off. Kev's dad's been gone even longer than mine, and Mitch's working the Wal-Mart loading dock. "We gotta get ourselves a settlement," says Mitch.

"Mama'd about kill me. She'd tattoo my ass," I says, and 'cause neither Kev nor Mitch has initiative, the settlement stays just so

much bull around the court and in the hallways. Then one day Mama's home from the Hampton Inn before I get back from school. I open the door and I can tell right then that something's wrong. The apartment feels different, like the air has gone out of it, and it's quiet in a different way too. Not the quiet of the TV or my boom box waiting to be turned on or the fridge opened and a soda cracked. Something else was waiting.

"Who's there?" I call. I'm maybe even a little nervous. You don't always know what you come home to in our neighborhood.

"That you, Davis?" Mama's voice sounds different, like when she took pneumonia three winters ago.

She's lying on the bed in her room looking very white and very old. I never think of Mama as being any particular age except when she's sick. "What happened? You get the flu that's going around?" I'm worried, but I'm also thinking now I can't crank up the boom box and have Mitch and Kev over.

"Maybe. Probably that's it," Mama said. But she doesn't sound convinced. "I've got this pain."

I forget my afternoon plans and start to get worried. When Mama says she hurts, it's something serious.

"Should we go to the ER?" I ask.

She doesn't know. She says *yes* and then *no*, and I have a bad feeling about deciding either way. Finally, so I don't have to be the one, I says I'll ask Mrs. Perez. She's our next-door neighbor, a little short woman with neat black hair, who has a night shift job in the hospital laundry. By default, she's the medical resource for our block. Mrs. Perez comes in, takes one look at Mama, puts her hand on her forehead, which I hadn't thought to do, and says, "I drive you to the ER."

"I don't want to bother you," says Mama.

"I drive you and Davis stays with you. I gotta be here for Luisa getting home." Luisa's in the elementary and gets home later 'cause of the bus routes.

So we get into Mrs. Perez's ancient Subaru. Mama looks green and winces every time we hit a pothole. In the ER, we meet Dr. Patel, an intern, who has a round brown face that gets serious when he talks to Mama, and we get a referral to an oncologist, which sounds like a funny specialty but which turns out to be as bad as you can get. It's like Mama says, you think you have worries, then you get real trouble and you realize things weren't so bad before.

Now I got to come home every day after school, pronto, to shop and do the dinner; no hanging around the basketball court, working on my outside shot and my quick moves to the hoop. I gotta

consult with Mama on the shopping, of course, because I'm too young to get a regular job and she's had to quit at the motel. "Just for a few months," she says. "Till I get over the surgery."

I don't know about that, but in the meantime, we're living on welfare. Mama scours the coupons and flyers and gets on me to take the bus out to the big supermarket instead of shopping the Jiffy Mart or the Vietnamese market. A trip like that takes up the afternoon, and I usually make it on check day.

Mama has regular visits to the hospital for her chemo too. I go with her unless it's during school time 'cause Mama's dead set on my staying in school. I have feelings both ways; I feel I should go and make sure she gets there in the old car and has somebody to be with her when there's needles and doctors. On the other hand, I hate the smells of the hospital and the tight feeling in the air, like everybody's facing some bad scary thing, which they are, for sure. Things I don't even want to think about too much.

Anyway, Mama gets through the chemo and starts with the radiation. "Do me up like that new meat, doesn't ever go bad," she says, sounding like herself. But in the meantime she can't go back to the Hampton Inn and making beds and cleaning, and she keeps mentioning my Aunt Rita, who lives outside of Jacksonville. Mama keeps saying things like how nice Aunt Rita is and how kind and how she has a boy, Brian, just about my age.

Last thing in the world I want is to go to Jacksonville, Florida, and live with Aunt Rita, who I don't know, or her kid, Brian, either. What we need is a settlement, and we need one now. We got an old junker of a Ford that Mama used to drive to her work and now takes to the hospital. It's ideal for the purpose, but Mama won't consider it, and I'm not old enough for my license.

"She'll never do it," I say to Billy J. I'm so desperate, I've talked to him about the lawyer and the chiropractor and getting the job done professional.

"Up-front money for that," says Billy J.

"If I had money I wouldn't need a settlement," I says.

He says he'll think about it, like this is some big favor. I'd about given up hearing anything, when one day Mama is feeling okay, and there's no radiation on the schedule, and the shopping is done, I'm down at the court, missing everything because I'm so out of practice, and this guy comes over. He's skinny with a yellowish face and a thin mustache, and he's smoking a green cigar. His waist is so little his pants are all bunched around his belt, and he doesn't look like much except for his arms, which are ropey with muscle like he's lifted serious weight.

He watches me for a while, then raises his chin and gestures to show he wants to talk to me. Privately.

I'm not enthusiastic. He's no bigger than I am, but he gives off a kind of warning vibe, like a video game villain with a pulsing bad aura. I come over to the fence.

"You Davis? Friend of Billy J's?"

I says *yeah* and there he is: Victor, the guy who makes accidents happen, who has arrangements with lawyers and chiropractors, who can do serious rear-quarter panel and axle damage without creating fatalities. He's some kind of foreign, Viet or Thai or maybe some weird Indian-Hispanic. I don't know what I expected a bullet car driver to be like. But this is it: thin, smelling of cigar smoke, with narrow eyes and a cold stare.

We sit on a bench in the park. He doesn't like it that I can't drive. He doesn't like it that Mama won't cooperate. He's ready to blow off the whole idea, when I mention we just gotta have a settlement 'cause Mama's a cancer patient, fifth floor, Central Oncology unit. I don't know why I added all that—guess it just made it sound more official, as if there's anything more official than cancer.

He gets interested at that. "Sympathetic victim," he says. Then he asks a lot of questions about what kind of car and when she goes out.

I said for a regular schedule of radiation. And Mama was always, always on time.

"Better if you was driving."

"I'm not old enough."

"Not even for a learner's permit?"

I shook my head.

"I'll think about it," he says. "But we do this, I want twenty-five percent—of everything." He reaches out and takes hold of my shirt in a way I don't like, but I know we have no choice. This is our one chance, and we have to take it.

Well, I start seeing him around our street and get so I recognize his car—a big, heavy Chevy Caprice, practically vintage. More than once I see him parked on a side street near the hospital. Then one day, just before Mama finishes with a round of radiation, the Caprice is idling at the curb as I walk home from school. The passenger side door opens. "Get in," he says. "We gotta set this up." Just like that.

I get in. It's dead simple. Mama's radiation appointments are set at three P.M. She's always on West Walnut heading for the hospital lot by two forty-five; Mama hates to be late. Victor's in the Caprice on Chapel Street, and the accident goes down at that

intersection. "Very tricky," he says. "Thirty percent."

"You said twenty-five," I says, but I already sense there isn't much point in arguing.

"Midday," he says. "Traffic. Cops. Very tricky."

I can see that. "But nothing'll go wrong," I says, half wishing I was home and had never met him.

"Thirty percent and nothing goes wrong." He smiles, and I swear he had pointed teeth.

"When?" I ask.

"Today."

I hustle home and get ready to go with Mama. I'm all the time watching the clock, nervous she's going to be late—or worse, early. It's not one of her good days; she sits in the car for a minute, kinda collecting herself. She says radiation softens your brain and she is sometimes forgetful. She looks awful, too, pale in that soft doughy way old people get, which scares me when I let myself think about it. But this is why we need a settlement, so Mama isn't all the time worried about bills and paying the pharmacy, and so I don't have to live with Aunt Rita and her son Brian.

"We gotta go," I says. "You want me to drive?" I don't know if she knows I can, thanks to Kev's older brother who lets us practice with a junker down on the river road.

Mama shakes her head and puts the key in the ignition. "You worried about something?" she says. "You got them big tests coming up at school?"

I wish. "No, nothing's wrong. I just wish your radiation was over and you were all better."

She puts her hand on my knee for a minute, just a minute, but it tells me everything I don't want to know and a few things I need to remember. Then the car pulls away. I look out the window, counting down the streets. I wish this was over. Washington, South Adams, Jefferson. Chapel's next. I gotta be alert 'cause Victor's gonna pull out in front of us and swerve and clip the rear on my side. I repeat that to myself a couple of times. I'm thinking how very cool it will be, the crash and all, when suddenly Mama hits the brakes and jerks the wheel so she misses the gray green Caprice that's suddenly filling my window.

Our Fairlane swings into the oncoming traffic; Mama's struggling with the wheel, trying to get us back in the right-hand lane. I shout 'cause there's this oncoming delivery truck, and Mama, who's about got no muscle left between the chemo and the radiation, pulls the wheel but can't get it round before the impact. Squealing tires and brakes, shattering glass, twisting metal. Not the crash I'd imagined, not a video game crash, but a shock that

unhooks all your bones and wets your jeans and brings blood into your mouth where it sloshes around with your heart.

I realize I'm yelling and moving, but Mama's not. She's leaning over the steering wheel and her car door is caved in. I start struggling to get my seat belt off and unhook hers and I'm starting to pull at her to get her out when someone yells, "Leave her, leave her. You'll hurt her worse."

I don't know what to do, but I keep talking to her, telling her she'll be all right. There are sirens and a cop comes, and I'm telling him she'll be late for her radiation, Memorial Hospital, Fifth Floor, Oncology Unit. The cop gets on his phone and calls for an ambulance, though we're only two blocks away, and I'm thinking I can walk, we can walk, when the cop comes and puts a blanket around me, though I hadn't realized I was cold, and has me sit down on the sidewalk. That's what a real crash does to you; I guess why they call it a *bullet* car.

They keep me in the hospital overnight. I keep saying I need to see Mama, but it's the next morning before they take me down to her room, which isn't a real room at all but a glassed-in place like a big fish tank full of monitors and machines. This is worse, ten times worse than the oncology waiting room. A doctor's there, not the intern we know, Dr. Patel, nor the gray-haired oncologist, but another doctor, a short African with an accent. He says I can talk to her for a minute. Only a minute.

"Mama," I says, taking her hand, "Mama, I'm so sorry."

She opens her eyes and though she squeezes my hand, I can see she's already gone a long way off. I want to tell her about the accident, about the settlement, about the biggest mistake I ever made, but she shakes her head slightly. She has something important to tell me; she opens her mouth, struggles, and finally whispers, "Hall closet, your birthday." Then she presses my hand again and closes her eyes.

The doctor puts his hand on my shoulder. Only a minute.

I see Mama several times after that, but she doesn't speak again, and I don't feel right telling her anything that would upset her. The day she died, the doctor sat me down and said she could not have survived anyway. Her cancer had metastasized. I knew what that meant from reading the little pamphlets in the oncology waiting room. All the radiation and all the chemo in the world would not have saved her.

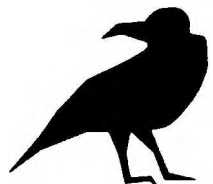
A week later, I'm packing to go south when I remember the hall closet and what was so important that Mama told me that last, instead of anything else. I open the door. There's a rolled-up quilt on the floor and underneath it, a shoe box. I know what's inside

before I lift the lid, and it makes me feel sick and glad and sad all at once: a pair of Nike Zoom LeBron IIs. My size.

I keep them under my bed now, and the only time I've ever hit Aunt Rita's boy Brian was when I found him with his feet in them. I feel funny about those shoes. I can't bear the thought of putting them on and playing in them, and at the same time, I can't bear the thought of her saving up for them and giving them to me, and me not using them. So they're in the box and 'bout every night, I lift the lid and push aside the tissue paper and take a look at them. Sometimes that's all I do; sometimes I put them on and even lace them up. Whenever I do, my old life with Mama and Kev and Mitch and Billy J and settlements comes back to me, along with my short life in crime. 🐦

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REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

You've had the opening day circled on your calendar ever since it was announced last year. You've already told your boss you want the week off so you can camp outside the box office and be the first to buy a ticket. You've been watching old episodes to bone up for trivia face-offs with fellow fans. You've even been practicing your Optimus Prime imitation, and it *rocks*.

Yes, true believer . . . the *Transformers* movie is almost here!

Bring it on, Megatron!

Or not. Maybe giant robots aren't your bag. Perhaps you prefer movies with human characters and witty dialogue and, you know, a plot. Fancy stuff like that.

If so, fear not. The summer blockbuster season may be upon us again, but the battling 'bots (and pirates and wizards and superheroes) won't hog every cineplex screen for themselves. Despite Hollywood's best efforts, a few films for grown-ups will actually sneak into theaters.

Okay, so the twelve films below aren't necessarily all for "grown-ups." And we're not vouching for the characters and dialogue and plot. But we can tell you this much: If you like mysteries and thrillers, these are your best movie bets this summer.

Oh, and we can tell you this about them too: No robots.

The Flock

A remake of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*? A sequel to *The Birds*? A biopic about early '80s one-hit wonders A Flock of Seagulls? None of the above, as it turns out. The English-language debut of Chinese director Wai Keung Lau, *The Flock* stars Richard Gere as a federal agent obsessed with a paroled sex offender who may or may not be connected to a horrific new crime. Lau's won critical raves by combining crime thriller chills with perverse psychology, most notably in his intense *Infernal Affairs* trilogy. The first film in the cops-and-robbers (and cops as robbers) series was recently remade in America . . . as Oscar-winner *The Departed*. May 11

Fay Grim

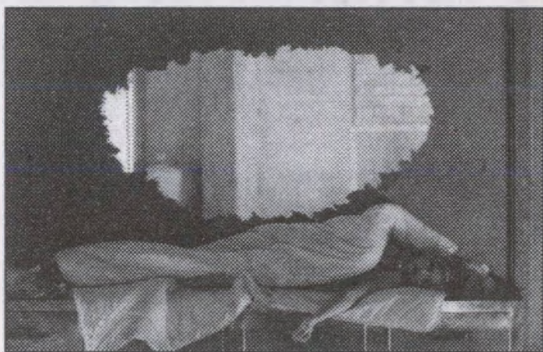
As always, the summer schedule's jam-packed with sequels: *Spider-Man 3*, *Shrek the Third*, the final *Pirates of the Caribbean* adventure, et cetera. But at least one of them (*Fay Grim*) is hardly recognizable as a sequel at all. It's a follow-up to Hal Hartley's quirky, little seen 1997 dramedy *Henry Fool*. While the original explored the twisted relationship between a wannabe poet and a sad-sack garbage-man, the sequel's a thriller. This time, the focus is on the garbage-man's sister, Fay (Parker Posey), who's dragged into international intrigue by a CIA agent (Jeff Goldblum) convinced that her ex-husband's a terrorist. *May 18 (limited release—which means if you don't live in New York, Chicago, or L.A., you'll probably have to wait for the flick to come out on DVD.)*



Jeff Goldblum and Parker Posey in Fay Grim
Photo © Possible Films

Captivity

Imagine the sadistic horror hit *Saw* if it had been directed by an A-list Academy Award-nominated director. Oh, wait . . . you don't have to imagine it. Here it is. *The Killing Fields* and *The Mission*-helmer Roland Joffé tries his hand at suspense with this tale of a model (Elisha Cuthbert) who—à la the *Saw* films—is held prisoner by a voyeuristic killer with a fondness for twisted mind games. We're guessing Joffé won't get another shot at Oscar for this one. *May 18 (also in limited release)*



Elisha Cuthbert in Captivity



Bug

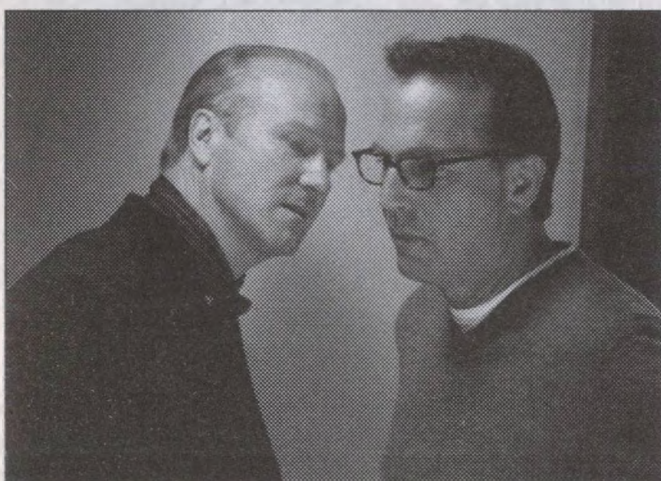
A week after *Captivity* opens, another A-list director puts the screws to a beautiful actress. This time out, it'll be William Friedkin (of *The Exorcist* and *French Connection* fame), with Ashley Judd as his star/victim. Judd plays a woman trapped in a seedy motel with a crazed veteran (Michael Shannon) . . . or is *she* the one who's going nuts? While most summer movie adaptations take comic books or TV shows as their inspiration, this one's based on an off-Broadway play. *May 25*



Ashley Judd in *Bug* © Lions Gate Films

Mr. Brooks

Here's a pitch you've probably never heard before: It's *Harvey* meets *Silence of the Lambs*! Whereas Jimmy Stewart's furry rabbit



William Hurt puts bad ideas in Kevin Costner's head. © MGM Studios

buddy encouraged him to live life as a free spirit, in *Mr. Brooks* Kevin Costner's imaginary friend (William Hurt) encourages him to kill, Kill, *KILL!* Demi Moore plays a detective who suspects that Costner's got bats (or William Hurt, anyway) in his belfry, while CSI veteran Marg Helgenberger plays the

clueless *Mrs. Brooks*. Costner's already talking sequel. But whether anyone joins the conversation remains to be seen. *June 1*

Ocean's Thirteen

Julia Roberts and Catherine Zeta-Jones are out, Ellen Barkin and Al Pacino are in, and everything else should be pretty much the same in the newest (and most likely last) adventure for thief Danny Ocean (George Clooney) and his criminal crew (Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, Bernie Mac, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera). *June 8*



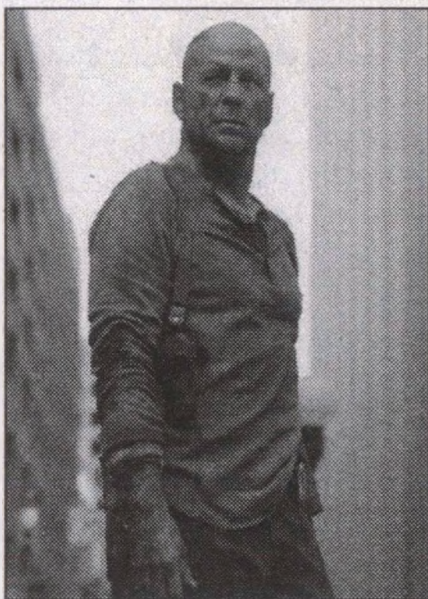
Nancy Drew

Thank you, Veronica Mars! You showed Hollywood there's still an audience for spunky female sleuths, and now *voilà*: The *original* girl detective is getting a twenty-first century makeover. Emma (daughter of Eric, niece of Julia) Roberts plays the inquisitive teen who, on a trip to Hollywood with her dad (Tate Donovan), gets mixed up in a movie star's murder. *June 15*

Live Free or Die Hard

Talk about dying hard—here's one franchise that refuses to stay in the grave. Twelve years after his last outing, tough-guy cop John McClane (Bruce Willis) is knee-deep in terrorists yet again. This time, the series gets a modern reboot thanks to a cyber-crime plotline. When a gang of evil computer geniuses (led by *Deadwood*'s Timothy Olyphant) launches an attack on America's computers, McClane has to team up with a wacky hacker (Justin Long) to save the country from chaos.

June 29



Live Free or Die Hard © 20th Century Fox

The Strangers

It's Sam Peckinpah's brutal 1971 thriller *Straw Dogs* that gets an updating here . . . although *The Strangers* isn't billed as a remake. As in Peckinpah's controversial film, a mild-mannered couple (Dustin Hoffman and Susan George in '71, Scott Speedman and Liv Tyler now) is forced to confront—and perhaps draw strength from—the violent tendencies buried inside themselves when they're terrorized by thugs in an isolated home. Very twenty-first century spin: Instead of being a bunch of brutish yokels, the bad guys this time include Australian supermodel Gemma Ward. *July 13*

1408

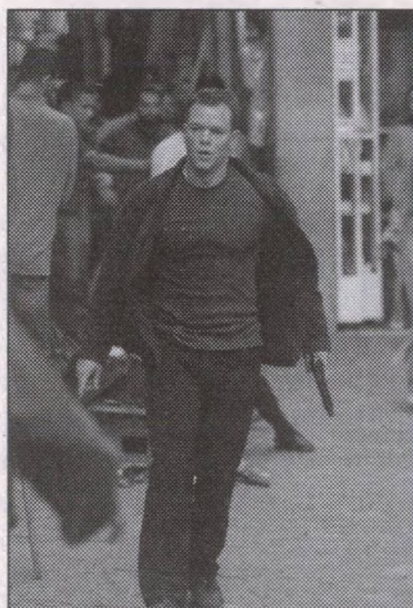
Stephen King sure likes seeing his fellow scribes suffer. Not by depriving them of sales by producing an endless



string of bestsellers . . . though he's still doing that. But he torments them on the page too. *The Shining*, *Misery*, *Secret Window*, and now *1408*—all dragged writers away from their word processors and dropped them into dark pits of despair and madness. The newest film (based on a King short story) stars John Cusack as a paranormal investigator working on a book about famous hauntings. A cynic who no longer believes in the afterlife, he finds his faith again—with a vengeance—after an eventful night in a creepy hotel room. Unfortunately, up against *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, which opens the same day, this film probably doesn't have the ghost of a chance . . .
July 13

The Bourne Ultimatum

In the third entry in *The Bourne* [fill in the blank] series, our amnesiac hero (Matt Damon) once again bounces around the globe in search of his identity while nefarious no-goodniks search for *him*. The twist this time: The no-goodniks include a super-assassin (Edgar Ramirez) every bit as skilled as the deadly Bourne himself. Could this be the end of Jason Bourne? Only if the film tanks—which doesn't seem likely with Damon, Joan Allen, Julia Stiles, and *Bourne Supremacy* helmer Paul Greengrass (*United 93*) all back in action. *August 3*

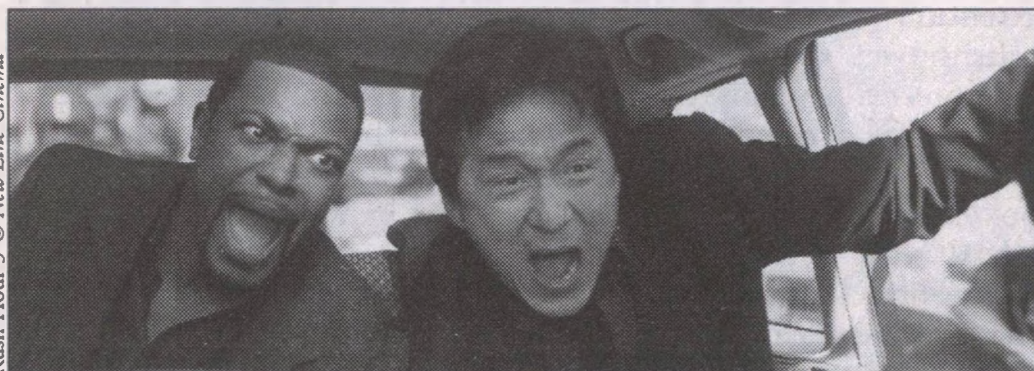


The Bourne Ultimatum © Universal

Rush Hour 3

Jackie Chan. Chris Tucker. Paris. Really, do we need to say more? You'll either go to see it based on that alone . . . or not, for that same reason. *August 10*

Rush Hour 3 © New Line Cinema



PANDORA'S JOURNEY

GILBERT M. STACK

“Anyone interested in a friendly game of cards?”

Corey sighed. He'd heard that offer far too many times to have any doubts as to its disastrous implications for his finances. As he'd feared, Patrick's head perked right up beside him from its light snoring and looked around the railcar. “I could always sit for a friendly game,” he announced, before digging his elbow lightly into Corey's ribs. “How much money do I have left, Corey, me lad?”

Corey winced. His chest, face, and arms were covered with bruises where he'd been beaten by a lynch mob four nights before, and the flesh covering those ribs was ugly and tender. But that didn't stop him from reaching for his wallet and their diminishing cache of prize money. “You ran out of cash a week ago,” he reminded Patrick. “How much will you need?”

“That's the spirit,” the original voice repeated. “Now who else wants to play?”

Looking around, Corey spotted the speaker sitting about midway down the length of the railcar. They were both passengers on the train leaving Cheyenne for points farther west. There were fifteen or twenty other passengers sharing the car, all of them looking at either Patrick or the speaker.

A military officer half stood from his seat to get the gentleman's attention. “Just how friendly a game do you have in mind, sir?”

In the seat beside Corey on the other side from Patrick, Miss Pandora Parson shifted her attention to examine the officer. She was a well-dressed young woman with brilliant red hair and a sprinkle of freckles on her nose. She'd been traveling with the boxer and Patrick, his trainer, since they had left Denver together a few weeks before.

The original gambler, a tall broad mountain of a man with a string tie, responded to the officer. “A *very* friendly game, Captain. Just a few hands of cards to help while away the miles and enough money at stake to keep the game interesting.”

"Lieutenant," the officer corrected him. "I haven't been a captain since the War Between the States. Lieutenant Thomas Ridgewood is my name."

"Gambling is the scourge of the God-fearing man," an elderly woman observed in a loud voice. "Mark my words, gentlemen. It's Satan's work you're contemplating."

"That's three," the initial speaker announced, ignoring the old woman's warning. "Is anyone else interested?"

Corey looked to Miss Parson to see if she wanted to join the game. Unlike Patrick, she was a skilled enough player to have a realistic chance of leaving richer than she started. Noticing his attention, Miss Parson gave a small, almost imperceptible shake of her head. Corey accepted her refusal without further comment. He had no interest in card games himself. If Miss Parson wanted to give this one a pass, then that was fine with him.

"Satan's work!" the old woman repeated. She stood at her seat, clutching her Bible tightly in her right hand. A young man sitting next to her tried to get her to sit down again, but she would not listen to him. The force of her righteous anger smothered any small levity that had hitherto survived the Wyoming August heat, and it appeared that Patrick's card game would suffer a stillborn death. Corey began to breathe easier. Perhaps his old friend would not have the opportunity to lose the rest of their small savings until after they left the train. The old man never saw the cards as anything but an opportunity to add to their meager wealth, but in Corey's recollection, the final result usually increased the urgency of scheduling Corey's next fight. After the beating Corey had taken in Cheyenne protecting Patrick from a misdirected hanging, the bare-knuckle fighter knew it could be weeks before he was fit to fight again. So anything that delayed the card game would ultimately help Corey and Patrick keep eating.

Satisfied that she had made her point, the old woman nodded once and sat down. Private conversations began to resume only to be interrupted again. "I suppose I could be your fourth man, lads, but the Lord alone knows where we'll find our fifth."

The old woman shot back up in her seat. "Who said that?" she demanded.

In response, a grayhaired figure in black cassock and white collar rose to his feet.

"The woman gasped in horror. "A minister?"

"Priest, madam," the old man corrected her. "I really don't feel like playing," he continued, "but I hate to see a Protestant squelching the only bit of fun there is likely to be on this train today."

"You heathen!" the woman screamed. Her jaw kept working

after the words stopped, as if she were struggling to find stronger things to say.

"Catholic, madam," the priest said apologetically. "It's you poor Protestants who are the heathens." He turned to the rest of the railcar and rubbed his hands with glee. "So what are we waiting for, I ask you? Let's get the conductors to set up a table for us. While you," he indicated the man with the string tie, "dash into the next car and see if you can find us another player."

"No need to do that!" Patrick announced. "Miss Parson here is a right fine player."

Miss Parson turned to stare at Patrick, a less than friendly expression on her face. "Mr. O'Sullivan, I quite think I can make up my own mind as to whether or not—"

"Jezebel!" the old woman shrieked. "Harlot! Dragging these fine men into sin!"

Miss Parson whirled away from Patrick to glare at the old woman. Her body trembled with anger, and she twisted her mother's silver wedding band around on her finger. She had known this was likely to happen, Corey realized. In fact, she had probably encountered this reaction many times before. It was probably why she played principally in saloons and avoided mixed company.

"Why thank you, Mr. O'Sullivan," Miss Parson said. "I believe a game of cards would be quite refreshing."

"If she can play, may I?" a small, feminine, honeysuckle voice asked. "I've always wanted to learn how to play cards."

"Well if this don't beat all," the man with the string tie said. "I don't think I've ever played cards with a priest and two ladies."

The conductors required a small cash incentive before agreeing to set up a table near the heating stove at the front end of the passenger car. The man with the string tie paid them happily enough, then took a seat at the table next to the cold stove, clearly eager to begin play.

Corey moved himself to the first row of seats behind the table where he could easily keep an eye on Patrick and Miss Parson. In doing so, he somewhat rudely beat out the Bible-thumping old woman and her family. Why she would want to be close to the action he did not know, but Corey felt certain that the players would be more comfortable if she sat back a few rows.

The old woman stood before Corey clearly waiting for him to volunteer to move. Corey squirmed but held his ground. Rudeness to a white woman was unnatural in the West, but his common sense told him that this was an acceptable exception. The old woman looked Corey up and down, taking in the fading purple bruises on

his face and the still evident swelling on his hands. Then she sniffed with disdain and led her family several rows farther back.

"Now that that unpleasantness is finished," the priest said. "Why don't we all get better acquainted. I am Father Murphy." He reached into the carpetbag at his feet and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. "And this is my good friend, Jack. Any of you players who would like to become better acquainted with Jack, just let me know and I'll pass him around the table."

"Alcohol!" the old woman moaned. "Is there no end to this deviltry?"

Father Murphy took a long swig from the bottle and smacked his lips with satisfaction, seeming to delight in the woman's distress. "Now then, we all know who I am, but as to the rest of you?" He turned toward Patrick, who was sitting on his left.

"Patrick O'Sullivan," the old man answered. "I train boxers. That there," he indicated Corey with a nod, "is my pride and joy, Rock Quarry Callaghan."

All eyes turned to study Corey's bruised face. "Forgive my asking," the young woman next to Patrick said, "but are you a good fighter, Mr. Callaghan?"

Corey smiled. The young woman was a pretty little thing with long blond hair and thick eyelashes. "I didn't get these bruises in the ring, miss. I got them pulling him," he indicated Patrick, "out of trouble."

"I see," she answered, then giggled slightly when she realized all eyes at the table were upon her. All the men smiled patiently. Miss Parson frowned.

"Oh, my name is Jenny Lynn Davis, and I'm frightfully glad to have this opportunity to join your little game. I used to watch the menfolk play back at our home in Georgia. It's so wonderfully interesting."

"I'm sure we are all quite glad to have you with us," Lieutenant Ridgewood assured her. He twisted in his seat to look at Miss Parson. "I hope that the presence of you two ladies will help to keep this game *friendly*."

"Indeed, Lieutenant," Miss Parson agreed. She turned away from his smile to face the final man at the table. He had rare height and a breadth of shoulders that actually exceeded Corey's. "Mr. O'Sullivan has already given you my name, and the lieutenant has introduced himself, but I don't believe you've offered your own name yet."

The man with the string tie smiled, showing teeth stained brown with tobacco juice. "Well now, little lady, my name is Theodore Perkins, but all of you gamblers can simply call me Ted."

"We're pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Perkins," Miss Parson told him. "Did you bring a deck of cards for the game?"

Perkins smile broadened. "Indeed I did, little lady." He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a deck. His massive hand dwarfed the cards within it as he placed the deck in front of Miss Parson.

The lady gambler opened the deck and expertly rifled through the cards. They apparently satisfied her, and she returned the cards to Perkins with a slight smile.

Perkins took the deck. "Why don't we start with a simple game of five-card draw?"

Luck is a strange and fickle lady. It was impossible to guess who she would favor with her charms. For as long as Corey had known Patrick, Luck had turned her back on the old man whenever he sat down to play cards. That afternoon on the train out of Cheyenne, Lady Luck not only smiled on Patrick, she sat down on his lap and kissed him on the cheek.

Patrick, it seemed, could do no wrong. Whether he held his hand pat or traded his cards, he always seemed to draw a winning hand. If he did lose, it was because he folded, or the pot would prove so trifling that the loss scarcely mattered. And with each successive win,

For as long as Corey had known Patrick, Luck had turned her back on the old man.

the old man's enthusiasm would grow while the pleasure of his companions diminished. By the time the train approached Laramie, Patrick had accumulated four times his starting stake, with the losses coming most heavily from Perkins and Miss Parson.

"If General Grant had folded during the war like I have today," Lieutenant Ridgewood observed, "the South would still own its slaves."

Miss Davis bristled at the lieutenant's words, which caused Miss Parson to smile and address him. "You are so clever, Lieutenant," she told him. "I'm glad that someone at this table can keep his spirits up while Mr. O'Sullivan corners all the luck. Not that you are doing as poorly as I am."

It was true. The lieutenant, thanks to a couple of decent hands, was mostly breaking even.

"I can keep my spirits up too," Father Murphy observed. He hefted his bottle of whiskey and took a swig.

Patrick laughed in delight. "Look at all this, Corey me lad. If I had any sense, I'd quit now and we'd live off my winnings while you heal."

"That would hardly be sporting," Perkins protested. "You have to give us a chance to win back our money."

"Don't worry, Mr. Perkins," Corey assured him. "Patrick never has had any sense."

"Twelve minutes," called the conductor. "The train departs in twelve minutes whether or not all of you passengers are back on board."

Steel wheels locked and screeched against the rails as the conductor spoke, grinding to a halt in Laramie Station.

Lieutenant Ridgewood got to his feet. "If we could take a short break, ladies, gentlemen, despite our conductor's warning I feel I should check on my men."

"So you're not traveling alone then, Lieutenant?" Father Murphy asked.

"No, sir," the lieutenant answered. "I'm taking six men to join the garrison at Fort Bridger. Now I don't mean to be rude, but I want to be back before the train starts rolling. While I could step between the moving cars, I much prefer to walk beside them when the ground is still."

The lieutenant collected his stake and left the table, moving toward the front of the car. Father Murphy stood as he departed. "I think the lieutenant has the right of it. We should all take advantage of this stop to stretch our legs. Shall we adjourn until the train is moving again?"

The priest scooped his stake and whiskey into his carpetbag. The other players pushed their chairs back from the table. Corey stood with them, carefully stretching the bruised muscles of his ribs, shoulders, and neck.

"Can't say as I'd mind a chance to walk about," Perkins admitted. He followed Father Murphy toward the exit in the front of the car.

Corey took a step toward Miss Parson.

"Oh, Mr. Callaghan," Miss Davis asked. "Would you help me with this bag? I just don't know what to do with it if I'm to get off this train and get some air." She came around the table past Miss Parson and touched Corey's arm.

"Well I . . ." Corey wasn't sure how to respond to this request but quickly realized that whatever he should have done, he had chosen wrong when Miss Parson whirled about and stalked from the car.

Patrick chuckled with delight. "That's the way, Corey me lad. Just keep up the smooth patter, and I'll have you ready to train again in no time."

Miss Davis looked from Corey to Patrick and back again as if she couldn't quite understand what the old man was saying.

"Don't let him worry you," Corey reassured her. "The old fool's just down and determined to make certain I regret my efforts to pull him out of trouble in Cheyenne."

Patrick continued to laugh.

When Corey got back on the train, following Miss Davis with her bag, he found most of the players had preceded them. Patrick, Miss Parson, Lieutenant Ridgewood, and Father Murphy were already in their seats. Miss Parson would not meet Corey's eyes as he dutifully helped Miss Davis into her chair. Annoyed, he ignored her in return and began to round the table to recover his seat.

He stopped.

The noisy old woman with the Bible had relocated herself during the station stop and now occupied Corey's place. Her mousy-looking son and daughter filled the rest of the bench beside her.

Corey took a moment to consider the situation. It was awkward, to say the least. He had no doubt that nothing shy of physical force would move the woman now that she was sitting where she wanted to be. The smug expression on her hard face was proof of that. And whatever the perceived provocation, Corey could never lay hands on her to claim his place. Her mousy son, however, was another matter entirely. He was a few years older than Corey but seemed to shrink in on himself as he suffered the boxer's gaze. *He* could be moved without a problem.

"Aye," Father Murphy observed. The three intruders were sitting directly behind him, which couldn't be making him happy. "I'm sure that you could force him up if you wanted to, lad. You could probably throw him off the train and no one would care a whit. But before you do, you might ask yourself if you really want to earn a place sitting beside the Devil's handmaid."

It took a moment for the insult to penetrate the woman's aura of smug victory, but when it did, her expression of triumph froze unnaturally upon her face. Then the grin cracked and transformed into an angry, disbelieving scowl. "Devil's handmaid?" Her voice at first lacked force, as if she couldn't quite believe what the priest had called her. But then she recovered herself, and her growing fury added volume to her words. "Devil's handmaid? You despicable, drunken heathen—"

Father Murphy appeared not to recognize that he had crossed a line of propriety with his comment. Undeterred by the woman's anger, he offered another observation. "Sure enough, how else do

you explain your crushing need to sit closer to me? And me being a man of the cloth?"

The woman stood and pointed a shaking finger at the priest and the table behind him. "A pox on all of you sinners!" she cursed. Then, white faced with fury, she gathered up her skirts and stormed off down the aisle to sit farther back in the railcar. The train gave a lurch as she found her seat, and began to roll forward. The woman's son and daughter looked at each other as if silently asking what they should do. Then they rose in unison and, heads bowed, hurried to rejoin their mother.

Father Murphy sighed. "Now then, Mr. Callaghan, why don't you take your seat so I won't have that harpy breathing down my neck again." He appeared to notice for the first time the shocked expressions of the other players. "I'm sorry gentlemen, ladies, that was unpardonably rude of me, but I can only think of two reasons a woman like that would want to sit behind me in a poker game, and that is either to mess with my spirits," he lifted Jack to his lips and drank, "or to spoil my game. I just couldn't play with her sitting behind me."

"I think that you can add a third reason in the future," Perkins said. He had evidently arrived to stand behind Corey during the altercation between the priest and the lady. Now he took his seat at the table.

"And that would be?" Father Murphy asked.

"To push a knife into your back," Perkins laughed.

The twinkle returned to Father Murphy's eyes. "And deserving it I would be," he agreed.

A sergeant in blue cavalry uniform approached Lieutenant Ridgewood a few minutes later and bent to whisper in his ear. Corey could not make out the man's words, but the lieutenant's face immediately grew grave with concern. When the sergeant finished speaking, the lieutenant got to his feet. "If you'll excuse me for a few minutes, I have to attend to this." Without waiting for their response, he departed the table toward the front of the train.

A brief silence followed his departure, which was only broken when Perkins began shuffling the deck. "I guess we can play a few hands without the military," he suggested.

"Just where did he run off to?" Patrick asked. "I couldn't hear what the soldier boy had to say. Could you hear, Miss Parson?"

Miss Parson frowned at Patrick's suggestion. Clearly if she had eavesdropped she was not about to admit to it in public.

Miss Davis had no such inhibitions. "Why, he said that two of

the lieutenant's men didn't get back on the train at the stop in Laramie. Don't they call that desertion?"

"I would be doubting it's desertion, lass," Father Murphy corrected her. "It's far more likely that for some reason they just couldn't get back on the train. They're probably back in Laramie right now worrying about how they will explain this to the lieutenant when they catch up to him."

"Father Murphy is right," Perkins agreed. "When we arrive in Rawlins there will be a telegram waiting for the lieutenant telling him his men will be on the next train."

"Wonder why the soldiers aren't in this car with the lieutenant," Patrick asked.

"I expect that they are guarding something," Father Murphy answered. "If the lieutenant had gone toward the back of the train, I'd say they were with the horses. But he went toward the front so it's my guess they're in the baggage car."

"I didn't know people could ride in the baggage car," Miss Davis said.

"They can when they're soldiers with something to guard," Father Murphy replied.

"Patrick rubbed his hands together with glee. "Must be something valuable. Maybe an army payroll. There could be a fortune in that car up ahead of us."

"It can't be much more than you've already won, Mr. O'Sullivan," Miss Parson exaggerated. "Mr. Perkins, why don't you deal the cards and give us a chance to win some of our money back?"

When Lieutenant Ridgewood returned, Miss Parson had just won her first hand of the day. It was a modest change in a week-long run of abysmal luck, so she was pleased but not excited by her play.

Patrick, who had not won a hand since the lieutenant left, brightened noticeably when the soldier reappeared in front of the table. "Good to see you, Lieutenant. Hope you got that payroll locked up again. I didn't like you leaving. You took all my luck with you."

Lieutenant Ridgewood stood frozen halfway down to his seat. "What did you say?"

His voice was sharp, commanding, almost angry, and Patrick stopped smiling. A look halfway between surprise and concern covered his face. "I said I'm luckier when you're sitting here playing."

"No, I mean before that! What did you say?"

"I think," Father Murphy suggested, "that O'Sullivan here is guilty of listening to table gossip. We've been speculating that your men are guarding an army payroll. I guess from your reaction we are right?"

The lieutenant let himself sink the rest of the way into his seat. "I see." He fumbled with the coins that compiled his stake, arranging them in neat orderly piles, which would not long survive the train's vibrations as it raced along the rails. "I would thank you gentlemen, ladies, not to interest yourselves in military matters."

Miss Davis leaned close to the lieutenant and placed her hand upon his arm. "Surely it cannot hurt for us to know what you are escorting."

The lieutenant visibly controlled his anger at this contradiction of his wishes. He forced himself to smile and laid his hand atop Miss Davis's. "Of course it wouldn't. Anyone who saw my men carrying the pay chest on board knows what we are escorting. I simply prefer not to discuss the matter in public."

"Quite sensible," Perkins agreed as he gathered the cards together and began to shuffle. "I'm just glad you're still able to play with us. How many men got left behind in Rawlings?"

The pretense of calm good humor fled the lieutenant's face as his eyes snapped away from Miss Davis to lock upon Perkins. The anger evident in that stare did not disconcert Perkins at all. He began to deal the cards, and Corey, with a fighter's instincts and peripheral vision, found his attention suddenly pulled away from the lieutenant and Perkins to the rest of the table.

Father Murphy's back was mostly to him, but from the positioning of his head Corey believed he was looking directly at the lieutenant. Patrick was mostly doing the same, shifting his attention between the lieutenant and Perkins. Miss Davis was also staring at the lieutenant, and with an expression much harder than her fawning words would seem to indicate. But Miss Parson was looking at neither man. Her gaze was directed back into the train behind Corey, and she had a most thoughtful expression etched upon her face.

It was over in an instant. Miss Parson masked her features and pushed her attention down to the cards she was gathering automatically in her hands. It was over in an instant, but Corey could not shake the feeling of urgency her expression invoked in him. Thoughtful described it, but not fully. Her face had also expressed a significant twinge of concern.

Twisting in his seat so that he could lean back against the wall of the railcar, Corey looked back over his shoulder toward the back of the car. He could feel the wall vibrating rhythmically

against his shoulder blades. The lieutenant was reluctantly answering Perkins as Corey examined the faces behind him.

"I lost two men. Somehow they didn't make it back on the train at the stop in Laramie."

There was the old woman and her family, of course, and a handful of men in suits, each evidently traveling alone. There was also a younger family with three small children and more than a half dozen rugged-looking trailhands scattered across the length of the car. No single passenger attracted his attention. No single passenger seemed to justify Miss Parson's concern. Perhaps Corey had misread her expression and she was merely annoyed with Perkins for aggravating the lieutenant. She seemed to like the officer, but somehow that didn't seem explanation enough for the boxer.

"I suspect you'll find a telegram waiting for you in Rawlings or Green River," Perkins was saying. "They'll be on the next train desperate to catch up with you before you reach your new posting. Where did you say you were headed again?"

"Fort Bridger," the lieutenant answered, forcing the words through gritted teeth.

Perkins continued talking as if he was unaware of the lieutenant's growing anger, but Corey's instincts told him he was baiting the man. "Bridger? Isn't that in Utah among the Saints?"

"Near enough," the lieutenant answered. He took a deep breath, put the palms of both hands flat upon the table, and began to push himself to his feet. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Now look what you've done, Mr. Perkins," Miss Davis complained. "The lieutenant made a simple request of us, and yet you insist on continuing to stick your nose into his business. Lieutenant Ridgewood, please stay and keep playing. We will all promise not to ask you anything else about forts or payrolls or missing soldiers for the rest of the journey. Please stay."

The plea was the most sincere appeal Corey had heard in a long time, and it wasn't hurt by the way Miss Davis was staring up into the lieutenant's face and batting her eyes. He didn't see how the man could refuse her request. The lieutenant clearly agreed with Corey's silent assessment. He sat down again and faced the men at the table. "I would greatly appreciate it, gentlemen, if we could find another topic for our conversation."

"Fair enough," Perkins agreed.

"Anything to keep you here," Patrick announced. "You see, you're lucky for me. And that's a quality I quite admire in a card player."

Corey rolled his eyes. The worst part was that Patrick probably thought he was pleasantly changing the topic of conversation.

"So tell me, Lieutenant Ridgewood," Father Murphy lifted his voice to be sure it carried beyond the table to the rest of the car where many of the passengers had been listening to the exchange. "I wouldn't be wanting to pry further into your business, but I must confess that I'm bursting with curiosity about something. And unless I miss my guess, I'm not the only one to wonder." He indulged in a dramatic pause as his fellow players wondered if he was about to drive the lieutenant away from the game after all. "So tell me, Lieutenant Ridgewood, on your honor as an officer and a gentleman speaking to a man of the cloth—" The priest gave a meaningful nod toward Miss Davis. "—are you married?"

Even Miss Parson smiled.

Conversation naturally dwindled as the poker game heated up again. Lady Luck had definitely deserted Patrick, but she hadn't settled fully on a new favorite. Lieutenant Ridgewood won the first hand, followed by Miss Parson, who beat Perkins out of a hard fought, high stakes pot with three jacks to his three nines. Then it was Father Murphy's turn, followed by the lieutenant again. And so it went with every player sharing in the winnings, and only the lieutenant clearly stretching ahead.

At Rawlings, as he had in Laramie, the lieutenant excused himself to check on his men and presumably to inquire about a telegram. As he left the table, Miss Davis caught at the lieutenant's hand. "Would it be possible, Lieutenant Ridgewood, for me to accompany you while you review your men?"

The lieutenant frowned while he considered the request. Corey thought he would refuse the young woman, but clearly Miss Davis's charms overpowered the officer's initial instincts. Lieutenant Ridgewood bowed formally. "It would be my pleasure." Offering Miss Davis his arm, he escorted her from the car.

Corey stood as well. "Hungry, Miss Parson? Patrick?"

"Oh, so you notice me again, do you, Mr. Callaghan?"

Corey eyed Miss Parson cautiously, recognizing a dangerous mood but not actually feeling responsible for her temper. "Always," he offered tentatively before trying to change the subject. "It should be possible to get some food here if you'd like me to."

"I, for one, would be grateful of it, lad," Father Murphy announced. "I know you didn't offer, but I'd appreciate it if you'd help me out."

"Of course, Father," Corey agreed.

The priest stood up. "It's not that I don't plan to get off the train," he explained. "It's just that Jack here," he indicated his bot-

tle of whiskey, "is starting to look thirsty, and I need to see about filling him back up."

The priest stepped past Perkins and stopped next to Miss Parson. "Now don't be too hard on him, lass. That little Miss Davis is after playing games just like that old harpy."

Miss Parson started to reply, but her eye caught sight of something in the back of the car and she noticeably hesitated. Recovering herself, she forced a smile as she turned toward the priest. "Perhaps you're right, Father," she agreed. "But let's get off the train while we talk about it." She intertwined her arm with Father Murphy's and escorted him toward the front of the car.

Looking over her shoulder, Miss Parson called back to Patrick. "Would you remain here with our things, Mr. O'Sullivan?" Without waiting for an answer she called out to Corey. "Coming, Mr. Callaghan?" Then she and the priest were through the door.

"If that don't beat all," Patrick said. "You invite a woman to travel with you, and the next thing you know she's giving you orders."

Corey caught up with Miss Parson and Father Murphy on the platform of Rawlings Station just as they were pushing through the small crowd toward the main building.

"I surely hope I can find a refill for my friend Jack," Father Murphy was saying.

"You will," Miss Parson answered. "Just about everything can be found near the railroad."

"I surely hope you're right, lass," the priest replied, as he led the three into the large main room of the station house. A ticket window dominated the wall closest to the rails. One window looked out of the building onto the station platform, while a second looked into the station house. Between the windows was a narrow room that doubled as ticket office and telegraph station. Lieutenant Ridgewood and Miss Davis were already at the front of that window, with the lieutenant shouting angrily at the clerk.

"What do you mean the line east is down?"

Miss Davis clutched at the lieutenant's sleeve trying to calm the officer. He took no notice of her. Reaching through the window with his right hand he caught the clerk by his collar. "I lost two men in Laramie. What do you mean the line is down?"

"It's down," the clerk insisted.

"Well when will it be back up again?" the lieutenant shouted.

"There's no way to tell, sir," the clerk explained. "It all depends on where the break is. A repair team will ride toward the break in

both directions and fix it when they find it. Service could be restored in as little as an hour or as much as two or more days."

"An hour?" the lieutenant shouted. "Two days? Oh, this is useless!" He released the clerk and whirled about in disgust. He froze when he saw Corey, Miss Parson, and Father Murphy staring at him, then stormed past them toward the train, trailing Miss Davis behind him.

"That man is having an uncommonly bad run of luck," Father Murphy observed as they watched the two figures depart. They did not return to the car in which they had been playing poker but went instead to check on the lieutenant's detachment. There were ten cars on the track behind the engine: a coal car, a freight car, two passenger cars, a baggage car, a third passenger car, three stock cars, and a caboose. Corey and the poker players were riding in the third passenger car. The lieutenant and Miss Davis entered the baggage car ahead of them.

"Well, I'd best be off to find more Jack," Father Murphy announced. "It doesn't do for a man to travel without his friend."

Corey clapped the priest on the shoulder. "We'll find you a meal, Father."

As the priest walked away Corey noticed that Miss Parson was still staring through the open doorway at the train. People walked in and out past her, but she ignored them. Corey tried to see what she was looking at. Perkins had gotten off the train and was crossing the platform toward them. Two of the more rugged hands were descending to the platform as they watched. People milled everywhere, but he could see nothing special about anyone.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" he asked Miss Parson.

"I've seen that man before," she answered. Her voice was very low, so that Corey had to strain to hear over the noise of the other people in the station. "I think it was in Tucson. We—"

She broke off talking as Perkins's large frame filled the doorway. "Evening, Miss Parson, Callaghan," he greeted them. "If you don't stop daydreaming you'll miss your chance to get a meal before the train leaves."

Miss Parson shook her head back and forth as if suddenly startled from her sleep. "Why hello, Mr. Perkins," she responded, her voice suddenly warm and cheery. "I guess we were woolgathering. It's just that Lieutenant Ridgewood seemed so angry when he learned the telegraph lines were down. I think we may lose him from our game."

"Is that so?" Perkins asked, his expression jovial, except in his tight, narrow eyes. "That would be a shame. It might cost us Miss Davis, too, the way she's been batting those pretty eyes at him."

What do you say, Callaghan? If we lose both players can we count on you to sit in so we can keep playing?" As he spoke he clasped Corey hard on the left shoulder, squeezing the bruises there with his strong right hand. To all outward appearances, it was a gesture of good comradeship, but Corey knew that he was being tested. It was a common enough event in the world of bare-knuckle boxers, and he did not permit himself to wince. Neither would he allow himself to be bullied or intimidated.

Sully's broken nose and battered cheeks told a story. He might even have spent time in the ring.

"I'm not much for cards," Corey told Perkins, "but I'll think on it."

"Good!" Perkins released Corey's shoulder and moved deeper into the station.

Corey waited for Perkins to get a few steps away before continuing his conversation with Miss Parson. "You knew Perkins in Tucson?"

"Not Mr. Perkins, Mr. Callaghan." A hint of exasperation could be heard in Miss Parson's voice. "Sully, Jim Sully, the rugged-looking man with the crooked nose, sitting toward the rear of our car."

Corey didn't point out that there were a number of rugged-looking men on the train. Instead he searched his memory until he believed he had identified the one Miss Parson was mentioning. Sully, if Corey was correct in his identification, was a hard-looking man who had clearly been in a lot of fights. His broken nose and battered cheeks told the story. He might even have spent some time in the ring.

"So what is Sully's story," Corey asked.

"The usual," Miss Parson answered, the hint of a smile on her face. "Cardsharp, liar, thief, bank robber . . ."

"Oh," Corey answered, recognizing for the first time in weeks just how much he did not know about Miss Parson.

"Why are you worried about him now? You know I'll protect you if he tries to bother you."

Pandora Parson's face softened for the first time in hours. She entwined her arm in Corey's and began to guide him deeper into the station. "Mr. Callaghan, you are such a gentleman. I'm not worried about myself—at least not directly. It's just that when a known gambler doesn't join a card game on a long, boring train ride, I can't help but wonder why."

"Perhaps he was worried you know he's a cheat."

Miss Parson laughed—not a cruel chuckle, but an honestly delighted peal of merriness. "Why Mr. Callaghan, for a boxer you

are remarkably naïve. Mr. Sully doesn't care if I notice him cheating. The worst I would do is leave the game."

"You wouldn't accuse him?"

"Of course not, a woman plays cards on men's sufferance. If one man accuses another of cheating, there are a whole range of options available to the accused, including drawing a gun and shooting his accuser. Women complicate matters. If I accuse a man of cheating, I would expect to be dismissed from the game. You see, men have no acceptable method to challenge my accusation other than to get rid of me. No, Mr. Sully is not worried about me."

"I see," Corey said. "Or maybe I don't see. Why do you think Sully isn't playing?"

"I don't know," Miss Parson admitted, "but when I add this to Lieutenant Ridgewood's problems, it makes me wonder about Mr. Sully's other professions."

"I see," Corey said again, this time really understanding her concern. "Should we warn the lieutenant?"

"Warn him of what?" Miss Parson said. "A man I think *might* be a thief, *might* be responsible for his men missing the train at Laramie, and *might* be planning to steal the payroll under his protection. Why would Lieutenant Ridgewood believe us?"

"It still seems like we should try," Corey answered.

Miss Parson sighed. "I know it does, Mr. Callaghan. I keep reminding myself that it's really none of my business, but I'm not wholly comfortable with the decision."

She looked about and spotted a matronly woman selling cold dinners. "Now shall we attend to our immediate concerns before we find ourselves left behind like the lieutenant's soldiers?"

Corey and Miss Parson reboarded the train with two minutes to spare, their arms full of Rawlings Station's notion of an evening meal. There were hunks of bread, cold potatoes, and a few pieces of chicken to be shared with Patrick and the priest.

"Cold again," Patrick noted with a grimace. "You would think that since the station has the train's schedule, it could try to cook food to be hot when the train arrives."

His complaints did not appear to diminish his appetite.

A soldier appeared carrying food for Lieutenant Ridgewood and Miss Davis. The lieutenant appeared calmer than he had in the station, suggesting that nothing new had been amiss in the baggage car.

Thinking of the lieutenant's problems reminded Corey of Jim Sully, and he twisted in his seat to look about the car but saw no sign of the man. He turned back toward Miss Parson, lifting his

eyebrow in query when he caught her eye. She shook her head but said nothing.

With the hissing release of steam, the train began to roll forward. Perkins appeared in the door behind Miss Parson, almost having missed the train. Sully did not appear behind him. Perhaps Miss Parson's suspicions had been wrong.

Perkins found his seat. He held a half-eaten leg of chicken in his right hand, and his mouth was full of unchewed meat. "Give me a moment," he suggested, forcing the words out through the food in his mouth. "I'll be ready to play again in a minute."

"No hurry on our account," Miss Parson assured him, then took a far more delicate bite from a chicken breast.

Perkins ignored her, stuffing more meat into his mouth before tossing the stripped leg onto the floor beside him. He wiped his hands on his vest and then reached for the cards.

"I've only got a couple more stops to win my money back," he told them. "Let's play some cards."

Perkins, it appeared, should not have been in such a hurry, for when play resumed all luck seemed to flow the lieutenant's way. It began with the first hand Perkins dealt, dropping a natural full house in front of the lieutenant. Two middling hands followed that didn't amount to much as Father Murphy and Patrick took their turns dealing the cards, then Miss Davis carefully shuffled the deck and dealt out another hand. The lieutenant bid high for him—two full dollars. Miss Parson folded almost without considering her cards. Perkins stayed in the game, but Father Murphy quickly followed Miss Parson. Patrick licked his lips and matched the bet, while Miss Davis reluctantly folded.

The lieutenant claimed two cards. Perkins tossed in his hand, and Patrick, confident in his coming victory, took two as well.

The lieutenant looked suddenly very seriously at his hand, eyes growing wide with surprise. He looked down at his cards and bid three more dollars. Patrick foolishly matched the bet and called.

Lieutenant Ridgewood placed four sixes on the table. Patrick threw his three eights onto the deck in a gesture of disgust.

And that was the way it went for the next thirty minutes, with the lieutenant handily winning a third of the hands and Patrick's once large pot slowly deserting him. He was just starting to get angry when a sharp lurch shook the car and the whole motion of the train altered.

"Did you feel that, Corey me lad?" Patrick asked.

Corey was looking about him, the same as most of the other

passengers. Something was amiss with the way they were moving forward, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what was wrong.

Perkins began to scoop up his money, stuffing the coins into his pocket. Everyone else was listening to the sound the train made as it raced along the tracks. "Are we slowing down?" Lieutenant Ridgewood asked, rising from his chair.

Shots rang out from somewhere up ahead of them—four or five bullets fired all in a rush.

The lieutenant turned toward the front of the train in astonishment, clearly realizing at least part of what was happening. "My men!" he shouted and began to step toward them.

Perkins, sitting across from the lieutenant, shoved the table hard into his retreating form. It wouldn't have been possible in a luxury car where the tables were bolted to the floor, but in this makeshift arrangement the edge of the table struck hard against the lieutenant's hip and knocked over Miss Parson as well, for good measure.

Corey sprang to his feet, but somehow Perkins had gotten a small pistol into his hands, and he spun and whipped it against Corey's face. The boxer went down hard, momentarily blinded by the blow.

A final shot sounded ahead of them, followed by an ominous silence.

"We are slowing down," Father Murphy announced. His voice sounded small and overwhelmed by the events exploding around him. "The sound of the engine is growing fainter and we're slowing down."

On his hands and knees, struggling to clear his head, Corey could not tell if the priest was right or wrong. He blinked his eyes ferociously until the spots in them faded sufficiently to let him look for Perkins's boots.

"Why did you hit my Corey?" Patrick was shouting.

Perkins evidently ignored him, flipping the poker table over onto Miss Parson and moving toward the lieutenant.

As Corey's vision finally cleared, the large man was striking the lieutenant again and again to make certain he stayed on the floor.

The door at the front of the car opened, admitting Jim Sully. "We've got it!" he told Perkins.

"Good!" Perkins answered him. "Now take a man and go to the horses. I want them out of the stock car and back up here as soon as these cars stop rolling. I'll hold these sheep here."

Sully grunted and disappeared back out the door.

Miss Parson and Patrick appeared to be unharmed. She pulled herself out from under the table into a sitting position. Patrick

stood next to Father Murphy, gaping at Perkins and the chaos he was causing. The lieutenant was not so lucky. He lay on the floor where he had fallen, blood welling from injuries on the back of his scalp. "My men," he groaned.

"They're dead, Lieutenant." Perkins said it flatly, just a simple bit of information. Then his voice turned cruel. "While you were enjoying yourself playing cards and flirting with the lady, my men were planning to murder yours. Should I send you to join them? Would you like to lead them in hell?"

He pointed his pistol at the lieutenant's head but laughed and did not pull the trigger.

He's probably only got six shots, Corey realized, and he has to be worried that some of the men in this car are armed. This wasn't the East, after all. A lot of men in the West carried guns.

Corey slid his feet beneath him and prepared to stand up.

"I wouldn't do that, Callaghan." Perkins waved the gun toward him. "I prefer you on the ground."

The door opened behind him, and Sully and a second man pushed past Perkins. "We're coasting uphill," Sully announced, as if it was news.

Perkins cursed.

"Can't be helped," Sully said. "It's all hills out here. We'll roll back downhill away, but I don't think it's steep enough to make us jump the tracks."

Perkins cursed again and Sully grinned. He started down the length of the car but stopped almost immediately and tipped his hat toward Miss Parson. She glowered at him, making his grin grow broader.

Sully and his man crossed the length of the car and disappeared through the back entrance.

Silence filled the car as its passengers listened to the engineless train grind to a halt as it coasted up the hill.

The silence was broken by Father Murphy's female adversary. In the wake of Sully and his man passing to the rear of the car, the old woman had made her way up to the front until she stood, quivering with anger, in front of Ted Perkins. She pointed a finger at the large man. "You scoundrel!" she spat at him. "I warned you that you were about the devil's work!"

Perkins mockingly doffed his hat. "And you were correct, madam. Now why don't you return to your seat before I add another case of assault to my sins."

The old woman stood her ground, and Corey finished getting to his feet. Perkins immediately pointed the gun directly at him. "I told you, Callaghan, I prefer you on the floor. Now take a dive!"

Patrick lurched forward, sudden fury written plainly across his face. "My lad never takes a dive!"

Perkins started bringing the gun to bear on Patrick, but the old woman shoved hard at his gun arm. The result almost got Corey killed, but the prematurely fired bullet passed somewhere between him and Father Murphy and through a window of the car.

Corey surged forward before Perkins could fire again, but in the small, confined space Patrick's lead was sufficient to let the old man get there ahead of him. In his prime Patrick O'Sullivan must have been a force to be reckoned with. He was shorter than Perkins, smaller of build and easily twenty years older, but the man who had taught Corey how to fight proved that he could still handle himself in a brawl. He slipped in next to the old woman, and his right fist shot out twice into Perkins's chin. The gambler's head was flung up, and he took a heavy step backward.

Patrick turned his attention to Perkins's stomach, hammering blows against it with impressive speed and form. Corey arrived beside him, scrambling to grab hold of Perkins's gun hand and shove the muzzle of the weapon up toward the ceiling while also striving not to knock the old woman down.

Perkins roared with anger. His meaty left hand swung around and knocked Patrick into Corey's bruised ribs. In the narrow confines of the bouncing railcar, Corey lost his balance, and while he did not fall, he lost his grip on Perkins's weapon. The gambler started to bring the weapon to bear on the two boxers, but Lieutenant Ridgewood surged to his feet beside Perkins, forcing him to reassess the odds against him. Evidently, three angry men in close quarters were more than he wanted to face, even with the pistol to balance the odds. Perkins took a quick step back, fumbled with the latch on the railcar door, and was out of the interior and crossing to the baggage car before his opponents could react to his retreat.

Patrick was still quivering with rage. "Imagine that! Thinking you would take a dive!"

"He was pointing a gun at me, Patrick! And we're not in the ring! It's hardly the same thing."

Corey shot out a hand and grabbed hold of the lieutenant's arm as the officer started to follow Perkins into the space between the cars. The lieutenant rounded furiously on Corey, and the boxer held his hands up in surrender. "I guess I don't really care what you do, Lieutenant," he said, "but do you really want to charge after him? He's still armed."

The train ground to a halt on the slope and then slowly began to roll back downhill.

Miss Parson stepped over to join them. "It's quite the mess we find ourselves in, gentlemen."

"Aye, that it is," Father Murphy agreed. "It appears our poker game was nothing more than a distraction for the good lieutenant."

"I told you no good would come of it," the old woman reminded them.

"Aye, that you did," the priest agreed. "And might I add that I am quite embarrassed by my earlier utterances. You have proved yourself a woman of remarkable courage, but with your permission we need to turn our attention away from past sins and toward the solution to the lieutenant's problems."

"I have to secure that payroll and rescue my men," the lieutenant said. He had ceased to try and exit the car but had not taken his attention from the door. His service revolver was out of its holster and in his hand.

"To accomplish that," Miss Parson suggested, "you are going to need help and a plan."

Corey didn't think there was much chance that the lieutenant's men were still alive after all of that gunfire and was about to volunteer that information, when he realized that Miss Parson would have thought of that as well and obviously had decided not to mention it.

Patrick was not so discreet. "It don't look good for your soldiers, Lieutenant. All of those gunshots."

The lieutenant gritted his teeth as if firming his resolve, then began to open the door toward the baggage car.

Corey hauled him back again. "Now that's not going to do no good. You heard Miss Parson. We need a plan."

"I'm sure," Miss Davis observed, "that a trained military officer like Lieutenant Ridgewood does not need the help or the advice of a down-on-his-luck boxer and a professional lady gambler."

Patrick bristled at the comment, but Miss Parson responded before either of the two men could speak. "If you are correct, Miss Davis, then the lieutenant should not listen to you either. Really, pretending this was your first time playing while all the while you and Mr. Perkins were dealing off the bottom of the deck to set up Lieutenant Ridgewood. What else is your role in this? You've already helped to distract the lieutenant from his duties. Are you also supposed to encourage him to get himself killed?"

Silence blanketed the railcar while every passenger strained their ears to hear Miss Davis's response. Her face grown flushed and stern, she waited an unnatural moment too long while she struggled to formulate a reply. "Why, I'm sure I don't know what

you mean, Miss Parson. I've never even heard of—what did you call it? Dealing under the deck?"

"You've heard of it," Father Murphy corrected her. His face was drawn and sad. I didn't notice Perkins doing it, but I surely saw you feed cards to the lieutenant half a dozen times." He shrugged and smiled wanly at Miss Parson. "I didn't see anything sinister in it. I just thought she was trying to keep her sweet in the game."

Miss Davis turned to Lieutenant Ridgewood. "This just isn't true, Thomas. I have no idea what these people are talking about." She turned on Miss Parson, anger flashing in her eyes. "You've made all of this up! If you really thought I was cheating, why didn't you expose me during the game?"

"Lots of reasons," Miss Parson answered, "but primarily because to call attention to your slight of hand would have besmirched the honor of Lieutenant Ridgewood. Even though you were feeding him cards, I didn't think he was aware you were cheating for him."

"I wasn't." The lieutenant's voice was quiet. His face had lost its flush of red fury and replaced it with a milder expression of sadness and confusion.

"Why, Thomas," Miss Davis faced him, batting her eyelashes with concern, "surely you don't believe this preposterous story."

He did not answer her directly. "You said you had lots of reasons, Miss Parson."

Miss Parson picked up her story as if there had been no interruption. "Then there was the problem of Mr. Perkins. I knew he was feeding you cards as well, so I assumed he was working together with Miss Davis. But even after your men disappeared I couldn't be sure of what they were after until I caught sight of Mr. Sully."

"Sully?"

"One of the men helping Mr. Perkins rob your payroll. He has a bad reputation down south of here."

"And you couldn't warn me?"

"When, Lieutenant Ridgewood? When was I supposed to warn you? Miss Davis has been at your side since she finished her little game with Mr. Callaghan. Even that was probably designed to make her appear an empty-headed, flirtatious girl. No, Lieutenant, there was no time to warn you of my suspicions, but now there is plenty of time to warn you that simply charging into the baggage car with your pistol in hand will accomplish nothing other than to make you dead."

The lieutenant looked again toward the baggage car, then down to the pistol in his hand. He holstered the weapon, then turned back to Miss Parson. "What do you suggest?"

"I cannot believe you are going to listen to this woman!" Miss Davis protested.

"Father Murphy," Lieutenant Ridgewood asked, "Missus, er, pardon me, madam," he addressed the old woman, "but I fear I do not know your name."

"Mrs. Black," she responded, holding her chin high and looking the lieutenant straight in the eye.

"Father Murphy, Mrs. Black, could I trouble you to take this young woman over to the seats, hold her there, and *keep her quiet?*"

Father Murphy looked at Mrs. Black and sighed. "Of course you can, Lieutenant, anything we can do to help."

Mrs. Black sniffed at the priest. "Anything to help our brave boys in the military."

Miss Davis protested. "You can't—"

She stopped talking when Mrs. Black's hand clutched her arm. "And you *will* be quiet, missy! I guarantee it!"

Miss Davis looked into Mrs. Black's eyes and shrank back against the priest.

The lieutenant turned back to Miss Parson. "Your plan, miss, and please hurry. We don't know how much time we have."

Miss Parson was ready, obviously aware that while the train was racing down the track now, it wouldn't be too long before it slowed down again. "First we have to act to buy more time and take advantage of the fact that Mr. Perkins and Mr. Sully have divided their forces."

Lieutenant Ridgewood nodded. "Any thoughts on how we can do that?"

"To begin, we can decouple this car from the stock cars behind it."

"They're all rolling downhill," Patrick noted. "That won't do much."

"Not at first," Miss Parson agreed, allowing her attention to be diverted to Patrick. "But with luck the cars will separate enough to keep Mr. Sully and his companion from returning here. Then Lieutenant Ridgewood can cross this car to the baggage car where he can apply the hand brake. If Mr. Perkins tries to interfere, the lieutenant can shoot him."

"Better yet," Patrick suggested, "if Corey here goes with him, he can turn the hand brake while the lieutenant lies in ambush to shoot Perkins if he comes out to stop him."

"Dangerous, Mr. O'Sullivan," Miss Parson objected.

"But it might be our best chance to stop Perkins without having to rush the car," the lieutenant said. "May I count on your help, Mr. Callaghan?"

"Of course you can," Patrick answered for Corey. "My lad here is dying for the chance to get back at Perkins. Imagine him suggesting that Rock Quarry Callaghan would take a dive."

Corey met Miss Parson's eyes, saw the concern there, and shrugged. They both knew he wouldn't let Patrick look like a liar. He'd help the lieutenant.

"What about the rest of you, men?" the lieutenant asked, raising his voice to address the other passengers. "Can I count on any help from the rest of you?"

A murmur followed his request while the other passengers talked it over among themselves. One of the gentlemen rose, apparently speaking for all of them. "If they try to come back in here, we'll fight them, but we ain't rushing any railcars."

The lieutenant looked unhappy with this response so Corey spoke up before the officer could try again. "It's just as well, sir. What we're going to try doesn't take a lot of men, and we do want someone here to protect the women and children."

The lieutenant nodded. "You're quite correct, Callaghan. Let's get on with it."

He secured the flap on his holster, locking the weapon in place, then started down the aisle toward the rear exit from the car.

Corey followed him.

The railcars were rolling quickly down the hill when the two men stepped through the doorway and onto the narrow ledge at the rear of the car. A slender iron rail offered some protection against falling, but nothing else.

The lieutenant swayed unsteadily as he looked at the passing ground.

Corey reached out and steadied him.

"Sorry, Callaghan," the lieutenant apologized. "Don't know what's wrong with me. I'm dizzy all of the sudden, looking down at the moving ground. Hell, I've ridden faster than this on horseback."

"It might be those blows to the head," Corey suggested. "Why don't you stand back here while I see about separating these two cars?"

"Do you know how to unhitch them?"

"Not really, but how hard can it be?"

Corey crouched down at the edge of the small platform and grabbed hold of the railing with his right hand. Then he leaned forward to examine the spot where the two cars were joined. Some sort of lever seemed to lock the two cars together. He grabbed hold of the steel piece with his right hand and pulled it

toward him. Despite being obviously well lubricated, the metal did not budge.

Corey tried again, flexing truly powerful muscles, which he had honed through years in the ring, but pulling was not the same as punching, and he could not free the cars.

"This isn't working," he told the lieutenant, then stood up and reached across the gap between the cars to grab the rail on the other side. He stepped across the gap so that he was standing on the baggage car looking back at Ridgewood. Grabbing hold of the new railing, he kicked at the lever.

"Be careful," the lieutenant warned. "You don't want to get stuck over there."

Corey ignored the officer and kicked the lever again, striking it hard with the heel of his shoe. The lever snapped clear and the two cars immediately came free of each other, a small gap quickly widening between them.

Corey responded instantly. Pulling his foot back up beneath him he leapt back toward the lieutenant and the passenger car. The distance was only a couple of feet and he made it without mishap, latching tightly onto the railing while the lieutenant grabbed him by the shirt and hauled Corey up beside him.

"Careful now, don't go getting killed before we rescue my men."

Corey thought he detected a faint smile on the lieutenant's lips, but he couldn't be sure. Instead of answering, he grasped a rung on the ladder mounted on the end of the car and quickly clambered up to the roof. There was a stiff wind, and the car bounced on the tracks sufficiently to make Corey careful of his footing. Crouching low, Corey quickly made his way to the front of the car, where he waited for the lieutenant to catch up with him.

When the lieutenant arrived, Corey leaned close to him, shouting to make his voice heard above the noise of the wind and train. "We're going to have to do this quickly. If we take too long and Perkins is waiting by this door, he may hear us and one of us will get shot. Same thing could happen if we take too long crossing the top of the baggage car. We don't want him to act until we're ready for him."

The lieutenant was eyeing the gap between the cars. It was less than four feet, but he didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off it. His body swayed noticeably.

"Lieutenant? Are you alright?"

The lieutenant shook his head but answered in the affirmative. "Of course, of course, let's do this."

Without hesitation, Corey leaped across the gap and landed on

the roof of the baggage car. It was harder than he had expected, for there was nothing to grab hold of to keep him from sliding around. Fortunately he had a good sense of balance and recovered himself without trouble. The lieutenant, however, in his current condition, might find the jump more difficult.

The officer was not ready to follow Corey. He was staring at the gap again and swaying slightly from side to side.

"Lieutenant!" Corey called to him, but the man did not look up.

"Ridgewood!" Corey called again without success. He had to find a way to get the man's attention. "Don't make me jump back over there to get you!"

The lieutenant looked up then, meeting Corey's eyes for just a moment, before planting his feet more firmly beneath him. Still he didn't make the jump.

Corey tried another tactic. "It's now or never, Lieutenant, and it's your decision. This is your whole career in front of you. The army will forgive you losing your men, but they'll never forgive cowardice!"

"Cowardice!" Ridgewood's face snapped back up toward Corey again, and he leapt at the boxer without warning. In an instant he was across the gap and looking to get his hands around Corey's neck.

Corey slithered nimbly backward, keeping out of the lieutenant's reach. "Easy there, Lieutenant! Good job! I knew you could do it!"

Lieutenant Ridgewood caught sight of Corey's laughing face and stopped scrambling after him. His own face colored with embarrassment. "Sorry about that, Callaghan. I don't know what came over me back there. I was just so damned dizzy."

Corey turned his back on the lieutenant and hurried toward the end of the car. He had to assume that Perkins had heard them land on the roof, and he didn't know how much time he had. A glance back over his shoulder told him the lieutenant was following him, albeit more cautiously.

Corey reached the ladder at the end of the car. No other cars stretched out on the track ahead of him. Sully must have separated the cars right here. The sense of urgency boiling hot within him, Corey decided not to wait. He swung down onto the tiny platform at the end of the car, grabbed the steel ring that controlled the hand brake in both hands, and gave the mechanism a mighty twist, throwing his whole weight into the effort. The rail-car lurched as the steel brake pressed against the steel wheels of the car. Sparks fanned out behind the train in a broad and brilliant arc.

Corey twisted again. The screech of steel on steel was deafening, but the brake was biting hard into the wheel now, and Corey knew they had to be slowing down.

Shouting profanities, Perkins shoved the car door open and thrust his pistol in Corey's direction. Without conscious thought, Corey's hand flashed forward, grabbed the pistol, and yanked it hard toward him. It fired once before it pulled free of Perkins's hand, but the bullet flew off somewhere into the wilderness without hitting flesh. Corey sent the pistol careening after it, then braced himself to put down Perkins.

He was not in very good shape for a fight. The beating he took from rifle butts and kicking boots in Cheyenne had been severe. But Rock Quarry Callaghan was not a man who backed away from a fight, and his pride would not let him admit that any man alive might beat him with his fists.

Perkins, for his part, was broad in the shoulders and heavily built. While not a boxer, he had the look of a man who got into his share of fights and expected to win them when he did. He edged out of the doorway, a large grin splitting his face. "Callaghan, somehow I just knew I was going to get to beat on you before this day was through."

Corey attacked. His right fist shot out twice in quick jabs directed against Perkins's nose. He didn't break it, although a trickle of blood squirted over Perkins's lips.

The big man just smiled to show Corey he could take it.

Corey struck again with a left to Perkins's broad stomach. The gambler responded with a sweeping blow to Corey's head, which the boxer easily avoided.

Corey drove two fists into Perkins's rib cage with the same apparent lack of success. Perkins rocked a blow to Corey's shoulder that almost turned him on the little platform. The blow hurt far more than it should have, and Corey had difficulty bouncing back as if he were unaffected.

The fight was reminiscent of a very old style of boxing, before the footwork and maneuvering that marked the current sport. In those days, boxing was about brawn and grit. The man who had them stood his ground, endured punishment, and won matches. Fighting in close quarters was similar to that, except that this wasn't a ring and there weren't rules, and Corey, who had first learned how to fight on the docks of Boston, knew how to take advantage of this situation. He brought his right knee up hard into the fork of Perkins's legs.

The big man grunted and hesitated.

That was all the opportunity Corey needed. His hands shot out

to grab Perkins by the collar of his shirt. Then he yanked the man forward, pivoted on his left foot, and heaved the massive gambler off the car and onto the tracks below.

Perkins cried out as he tumbled through the air, but it was too late. One giant hand almost grasped hold of the thin steel railing but couldn't quite find a grip. Then the small mountain of human flesh impacted the much larger mountain of rock and earth and he was tumbling along the track well behind Corey and getting farther by the moment.

"Very nicely done, Callaghan," Lieutenant Ridgewood complimented the boxer. "But am I mistaken or were you supposed to wait for me to get set and get my gun out before you set the brake?"

The lieutenant's gun was out now, and he was leaning over the edge of the roof of the railcar peering down at Corey. He still looked pale enough to cause Corey to worry about him.

The boxer shrugged. "I got anxious."

"Can't argue with success." Maneuvering carefully, the lieutenant took hold of the ladder with his free hand and descended to the platform beside Corey, who stepped back to the other end to make room for the officer.

"Do you think Perkins was alone in there?" the lieutenant asked, indicating the door with his gun.

Three shots rang out in response, puncturing the door to the baggage car and nearly perforating the two men as well. They leapt as far to their respective sides as the narrow confines of the ledge would permit them, and braced themselves for more shots.

"I guess that answers that question," the lieutenant observed. He looked the door over up and down. "I guess we have to do this the hard way after all."

Reaching out with one foot, the lieutenant tapped the door. Two more shots punctured the panel. The lieutenant stepped out behind them and fired five shots through the door into the baggage car.

Corey knew what he had to do. Reaching out with his left hand as the lieutenant stopped firing, he yanked open the door and leapt inside. If Perkins's partner was hiding behind something, or the lieutenant had simply missed, then Corey was likely to be killed or wounded. Speed was his best hope for safety. He had to cover the ground between them while his opponent was still ducking for cover from the lieutenant's shots.

Darting into the baggage car, Corey almost tripped over Perkins's accomplice. The payroll robber was lying on his back with two holes in his chest. He wasn't dead yet, Corey noted as

he kicked the man's pistol farther away from his hand, but he probably would be before too much longer.

The lieutenant entered the baggage car behind Corey and wasted only a moment looking at the dying man before going to check on his own soldiers. Three were dead. The sergeant was unconscious, breathing raggedly. The lieutenant's face had gone white, losing all of the bravado with which he'd faced storming the baggage car a few moments earlier.

"Mr. Callaghan, would you please return to the passenger car and ask if there is a doctor on board, or failing that, if one of the womenfolk knows anything about caring for a wounded man?"

Corey started at once toward the passenger car.

The lieutenant stopped him. "And, Mr. Callaghan, please ask Father Murphy to come back with you. Some of these men were Irish. I think there are certain prayers that Catholics say over the sick and the dead."

Corey went out, stepping nimbly over the gap between the cars to reach his destination. All sense of adventure had left him at the sight of the dead men. He had placed his hand on the door to open it when he suffered a vivid recollection of shots piercing a similar door on the other car. "Miss Parson!" he called out. "It's Corey Callaghan! I'm coming in!"

The door was pushed open from the inside and Miss Parson looked out at him. "Are you quite all right, Mr. Callaghan? We heard shots. Were you or the lieutenant injured?"

Corey stepped into the railcar. "We weren't hurt, but the same can't be said for the lieutenant's men." He raised his voice. "Is there a doctor here? We have wounded men in the next car." He lowered his voice to normal tones. "Father Murphy, I'm afraid we're going to need your services as well."

Father Murphy got to his feet, but no doctor volunteered himself. The priest staggered a bit as he began to walk, but whether from too much whiskey or the motion of the rolling train, Corey couldn't tell.

"I know something about tending wounds as well," the priest announced, then stepped past Corey and out of the car.

Miss Parson leaned close to Corey. "We're going to have to figure out what to do about Mr. Sully and the other man as well. They'll be back with horses just as soon as the train stops rolling—maybe before."

"Patrick!" Corey ordered. "Help Mrs. Black keep watch on Miss Davis. The authorities will want to speak with her. We'll be talking it over with the lieutenant in the next car."



Sully did not prove to be the problem Miss Parson had feared.

The lieutenant browbeat four of the men in the passenger car to join him, Corey, and Patrick on the roof of the train to deter the robbers from returning. He armed the men with the carbines formerly wielded by his own soldiers. It was hot, dry waiting, even after they put down blankets to protect their bodies from the searing heat of the metal roof.

The lieutenant tried to coach the men in military discipline, but Patrick fired his weapon almost as soon as the two riders and their five horses came into view. Most of the other men, Corey included, fired right after him. Between them, Corey and Patrick knew most of what there was to know about boxing, but neither was worth a damn when it came to other weapons.

Jim Sully rode closer to the engineless railcars after the shots, just to make certain of things. He spied the lieutenant and his new troop of men and thought better of the whole payroll venture. He waved his hat in mock salute and led his partner and their horses away.

When the authorities arrived, the lieutenant was the center of most of the attention. It was unclear yet if he was the hero of the piece, but he certainly was not treated as the villain. A military inquiry at Fort Bridger would eventually settle that question.

Miss Davis was taken into custody, although Corey doubted that anything too serious would happen to her. Her connection to events was all too vague, and Corey suspected she would gaze on the jury with her pretty blue eyes and mournful frown and the twelve honest men would acquit her.

As for the rest of them, it appeared that they were off to Fort Bridger—Corey, Patrick, Miss Parson, Father Murphy, and even Mrs. Black and her children. The lieutenant had asked them to come and serve as witnesses to what had happened before a board of inquiry. No one appeared thrilled at the prospect, although Mrs. Black assured them it was “the proper thing to do.”

“Do you really want to go to Fort Bridger, Mr. Callaghan?” Miss Parson asked him.

Corey honestly did not want to go. He felt he’d done enough for the lieutenant. Now he would like to find some nice town with decent prospects where he could restart his training—not a fort in the middle of nowhere on the edge of Mormon and Indian territory. Still, he was pretty certain that the lieutenant had flattered Patrick into agreeing to go, so he put a brave face on the situation. “One place is as good as another, I guess. And with all of those sol-

dier boys about, I'm sure Patrick will have no trouble fixing me up a fight or two."

"Soldiers also gamble," Miss Parson observed, as if she too was trying to convince herself that helping the lieutenant was the right thing to do. "If they can be convinced to let a lady join the game."

"You'll convince them," Corey smiled. "It's what you do best—convincing men to listen to you."

"Why, Mr. Callaghan, I'm not sure whether or not I've been complimented."

"You have," he assured her.

"Do you really want to go to Fort Bridger?" she asked again.

"I don't mind," Corey admitted, "so long as you are going too." 🐦

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

DX BTW PQB, UYDXI WYGGIPMJ, XNTX NI WTB DX:

XNIVI BTW T ETWI TCTDPWX NDL. OTWEDPTXIG,

NI BTXENIG DX CVQBDPC, CVQBDPC, MDSI WQLI

LQPWXVQYW XVQRDETM RMPX.

—TMGQYW NYFMIJ

CIPHER: _____
ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 236

DEATH AT MY DOOR

PERCY SPURLARK PARKER

The green glow of my clock radio told me it was 3:17 A.M. as the doorbell prodded me awake. It wasn't all that unusual an occurrence, Vegas is a twenty-four-hour town, and I carry a P.I. license.

The name's Trevor Oaks. I have living quarters over Miller's Game Room, an arcade I own just north of the Stratosphere on Las Vegas Boulevard. I climbed out of bed as the doorbell rang again, made it out of the bedroom at a fairly steady stride, and aimed myself in the direction of the apartment door. All in all a considerable feat, taking in the fact that my bum knee had been acting up for a week.

I made it to the door, pushed the intercom button. "Yeah, who is it?"

Nothing. Great.

"Okay, you got me up now. What the hell do you want?"

Still nothing, or almost nothing. It was very faint, like a slight cough.

I started to go back to bed, but hell, I was up and already at the door, and whoever was down there could start ringing the doorbell again. I opened the door to my apartment and hobbled down the stairs to the front door. Looking through the peephole the only thing I could make out was a car parked halfway onto the sidewalk, its headlights still on. Maybe some drunk had an accident.

He must have been crumpled at the base of the door because when I opened it he fell into the foyer. Dennis Rimmey. He lay on his back across the door's threshold, a .38 snub nose on the sidewalk inches from his hand. From the blood on his shirt he'd been shot at least twice, once in his chest and once just above his belt line. A trickle of blood smeared the right corner of his mouth, and there wasn't a flicker in his open eyes. The little cough I'd heard had probably been the last thing he'd uttered.

Looking down at him I tried to remember if there had ever been a time I liked the guy, even if it was just to the point of saying, "Rimmey? Yeah, he's okay." I couldn't come up with anything. The

Joel Spector



dislike ran both ways. Neither one of us had much use for the other. It wasn't because he was white and I'm black, at least not on my part. It wasn't because we were both in the P.I. game and therefore competitors of sorts, although our clientele rarely crossed paths. It was just something instinctive and deep, and there from the first time we met. Rimmey was a class A slimeball and his word was as good as the next Grant that hit his palm. Although I'd never wished him dead, I didn't feel any remorse either.

There was one thing that popped into my head: Knowing the dislike we had for each other, what the hell was he doing here?

"You sure he didn't say anything? No whisper? No gesture?"

"He was dead, Joe. I've already told you that."

We were upstairs in my apartment. The guy sitting at my kitchen table with me was Detective Sergeant Joe Grover. We've known each other since our UNLV football days.

"You're being straight with me on this, Tree? No bs?"

Calling me "Tree" was another sign of how long we've known each other. Back in the day I was Trevor "Oak Tree" Oaks, second string offensive end. I was sure to be a starter my senior year, but I messed up my knee the year before, which ended any thought of a football career.

"I've told you the way it happened, Joe. There ain't nothing else to say."

"You and Rimmey weren't working on anything together?" Joe asked, narrowing his gray eyes on me.

"Get real."

"No mutual clients or friends?"

"None that I'm aware of. I mean, I'm sure we knew some of the same people. You can't help that in this town. But that's as far it went."

Joe leaned back in his chair, a slight frown on his square-chinned face. "I'm having a problem here, Tree. As a friend I tend to believe you. As a cop it just doesn't ring true. I consider you one of my closest friends, but if I had a couple of bullets in me, I can't see myself parking on your doorstep, when the nearest hospital is what . . . a hot fifteen, twenty minutes away."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to level with me."

I'd made coffee for both of us, instant and strong in oversized mugs. I took a swallow of mine. It was still hot and burned going down.

"Well?" Joe said, with a hunch of his shoulders, his brows knotting slightly.

"I've said what I've had to say. I don't know why he picked my doorstep to die on. Maybe I should've dragged him next door and gone back to bed."

Joe shook his head, dug a pack of cigarettes out, and lit one. I'd never picked up the habit, and of late he'd said he was trying to quit.

"I'm going to need you to come down to the station for a deposition," he said, blowing smoke from his nostrils. I'm telling you, this 'I know nothing' bit isn't going to set too well with my bosses."

"It is what it is, Joe."

"Sure," he nodded.

I stood at my window looking down at the street below, waiting until I saw Joe drive off in his unmarked car before I went back to my closet where I'd stashed the photograph. Percentagewise, I'd been about ninety-five percent upfront with Joe. I didn't tell him I'd taken a folded photograph from Rimmey's inside jacket pocket. I didn't know what it was at first. I just saw something sticking out of his pocket, and curiosity got the best of me. Once I got a look at it, however, there was no way I could turn it over to Joe.

Mira Navilone was in all her skinny glory. The only thing that adorned her were a pair of dangling diamond earrings, and one strapless spiked heel on her left foot. The two guys with her wore Halloween masks. The black guy had on a George Bush mask, and I guess for political correctness the white guy wore an Al Sharpton mask. Their positions might have been choreographed by Cirque du Soleil.

Rimmey had left the keys in the ignition, the motor running, and the driver's side door opened. I'd taken the keys and did a quick but thorough search of the car to make sure there weren't any other photos around before I called Metro. I gave the keys to the first cop that arrived, telling him I took the keys to prevent a passerby from seizing the opportunity and making off with the car. He gave me a short speech about tampering with evidence, then got busy with crowd control.

Risqué photos, risqué cabaret acts, even risqué slot machines are pretty much commonplace here. Aside from the various decency groups who keep trying to bury Vegas's old tag as Sin City, I doubt too many people would care one way or the other if the photo was hung from every lamppost on the Strip. Mira wouldn't be thought the worst for it. In some circles she might even be praised. But I knew one person who would be spitting fireballs. Belle Navilone, Mira's grandmother.

I'd seen her temper in action a time or two. Her husband had been one of the old Vegas mob bosses. He'd taken his life as the Feds were closing in on him, or so the story goes. Belle was left with enough money, property, and businesses in her own name that the Feds hadn't been able to touch her.

I'd first met Belle when I'd tracked down her nephew for his ex-wife. Before the whole thing was over, both the nephew and the ex-wife were dead. The culprit, Belle's handyman slash chauffeur slash bodyguard, was also moonlighting as Mira's lover. I'd been the one who figured the whole mess out. Since then Belle and I had developed a relationship that I would say was more than an employer-employee type of thing. But I couldn't go as far as declaring it a friendship either.

I didn't get back to sleep, I didn't even try. My head was too full with Rimmey dying at my door and trying to decide what my next move should be. Destroying the photograph and pretending I'd never seen it would be one way of going, although I knew that really wouldn't help. Rimmey dying at my door put me into this thing, whatever it was, and I was going to be in it until I found some sort of solution.

Who killed him? How did he get the photograph? Why did he come to me? Big questions with not an answer in sight. I went through two more mugs of coffee, a couple of different CDs of Motown's Greatest Hits, and a long hot shower before I locked in on what I should do.

Mira ran the day-to-day operation of Belle's check cashing and loan stores. There were nine or ten Helping Hand Money Marts throughout the valley. Legal loan-sharking was about the best description for the places. It wasn't the only business Belle owned or had money invested in. If you asked her, it all belonged to the family, which consisted of her and Mira. However, I doubted if anything was in Mira's name.

Mira worked out of the largest of the stores on Boulder just north of Tropicana. I pulled my Town Car into the parking lot of the strip mall just before eight, wanting to catch her on the way in. It was a twenty-four-hour operation, but if I remembered correctly she usually made it in about eight thirty. I didn't see her Caddy Escalade so, so far so good.

The Helping Hand sat in the middle of the storefronts and took up more space than the others combined. Dark green dollar signs were plastered about the pale green building and on the glass windows and danced on the neon sign on the roof.

It had been raining off and on all week. No great downpour, just

enough to keep my knee bugging me. A few handfuls of drops hit my windshield, then stopped before I could decide if I should bother turning on my wipers.

The Escalade pulled into the lot, parking two spots over from me. I made it out before she did. "Morning, Mira."

"Oh, Trevor. I thought that was you."

The Escalade was Belle's idea, it had to be. Left on her own, Mira probably would be driving around in a VW Beetle. By far, she wasn't the ugliest woman I've ever encountered. And by the same measurement, she wasn't the prettiest either. Skinny, homey, or mousy came to mind. She'd dyed her hair since the last time I saw her. It was black now, cut short and pasted to her head like a curly skullcap. The hair and the heavy eye makeup took away from her overbite. She wore tan tailored slacks and a darker brown satin windbreaker zipped low enough to expose the triple strand of pearls around her neck. Someone had been working overtime on her wardrobe.

"What brings you out this way?"

She was smiling, coyly perhaps; there was even assertiveness in her stance. But that all went away when I pulled the photograph out of my pocket. The pale blue eyes encased in the heavy make-up grew large and piercing.

"Where did you get this?" she snapped, grabbing the photograph out of my hand with such force she lost her balance, taking a step back to right herself.

"I took it off of Dennis Rimmey's body. Somebody put a couple of bullets in him last night. He died on my doorstep."

"I . . . I, uh."

"Maybe we better go in your office and talk."

"Yes . . ." she said, folding the photograph and jamming it in her purse.

She started toward the door to the Helping Hand, stopped, then looked back at me. "I think Lucky's would be better."

Lucky Frank's—booze, food, and gaming—anchored the right corner of the strip mall. It was a dimly lit joint. A stab at trying to appear intimate, I guess. From the smell of the place, the low lighting probably also helped when they served their food.

There were only two people at the bar when we came in, both sitting far enough apart they could do their drinking in solitude. We grabbed a back booth, and I went up to the bar and got us a couple cups of coffee.

Mira dumped a lot of cream in hers, stirring it vigorously without looking up at me.

"We can start whenever you're ready," I said.

She stopped stirring, raised the cup, then put it down, took a deep breath. "I'm being blackmailed."

Her statement confirmed what had been playing in the back of my mind. I didn't think Mira had posed for the picture for her family album. There had been a glassy look in her eyes. My first guess had been three or four extra cocktails.

"How did Rimmey fit in?"

"He was my go-between. He was to pay the blackmailer last night and get the rest of the pictures and negatives. Fifty thousand dollars. It cleaned out my personal account. I've been up most of the night waiting for him to call. I . . . I was afraid something had gone wrong. I guess it did."

"Where was the exchange supposed to've taken place?"

"In some warehouse out by the auto junkyards in North Las Vegas. Rimmey said he knew the area. You said he's dead? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, Mira."

"I'm sorry. It was a dumb question to ask." She shook her head. "I'm just, I don't know . . . Did he have the other pictures with him?"

"Just that one," I said, trying the coffee. It was hot, and that was the best thing that could be said for it.

A noticeable shiver went through her. "I don't know what I'll do if my grandmother sees those pictures. I'm not the strong person she is. She knows it, but she's put a lot of trust and hope in me anyway. I've been trying, Trevor. I don't want to disappoint her again."

I was sure the "again" referred to Mira's first encounter with love. The chauffeur slash handyman turned murderer. Shy Mira, not used to male attention, had been an easy target. The chauffeur slash handyman had turned to murder to protect his interest in Mira when Mira's cousin came to town and it looked like the cousin might well take over running Belle's business holdings. Belle might've even been on his list of intended victims.

Belle Navilone was a tough old bird. I didn't have any doubts that she could handle the fact that her granddaughter was being blackmailed. Nor did I have any doubts that she would clamp down on Mira for getting in such a vulnerable position in the first place.

"I've got to ask, Mira. How willing a participant were you when that photograph was taken?"

"I wasn't. At least not consciously, anyway. It had to've happened two weekends ago. I went to a party and woke up in a motel room the next morning not knowing how I got there."

"Have you any idea what had happened then?"

"Not really. I mean, my clothes were all over the floor. I . . . I figured I'd had sex with somebody . . . but I didn't know who. And I had an awful headache."

She wouldn't look at me as she spoke, and her voice had gone almost to a whisper. I had to ask her to repeat herself a couple of times before I got the full story out, including the trip she'd made to the family doctor to make sure the evening hadn't left her with anything unwanted.

"The party. Whose was it?"

She shrugged. "Friend of a friend's birthday bash. Sort of a girl's night out."

"How well do you know this friend?"

"Alicia? We roomed together at Nevada-Reno. She's a partner in a dress salon at the Fashion Show Mall."

"Any chance it might have been a setup?"

"You think Alicia could be involved? I hadn't thought of it before. I don't know. I don't want to believe she would do something like that."

"It could happen. Friends betray friends all the time."

Her thin lips were set in more of a grimace than a smile. "Rimmey said the same thing about you."

"How so?"

"The picture you had, I got one in the mail with the blackmail demands. I told Rimmey about it. The first thing he asked was if I thought the black man in the photo was you. I told him no, of course. He wanted to see the picture for himself, but I'd already destroyed it. Not that I would've let him see it anyway. He went on about the possibility of you being the man in the picture. Said he had never trusted you."

"The feeling's been mutual between us for years," I said, wondering if it was possible to distrust a dead guy. "The photo you got in the mail, a copy of the one you took from me, or a different pose?"

She shrugged. "I . . . ah . . ." She dug in her purse, taking out the crumbled photo and looking at it for a moment before jamming it back into her purse. All the time shielding it from me in case I wanted to take another look. She shrugged. "It could be a little different. I can't be sure." She paused, then finally looked at me directly. "Trevor, can you help me?"

"You should've come to me first, Mira."

She nodded. "I know that now, but with the working relationship you've got with my grandmother, I thought if I went to you, you'd go to her, and . . ."

"Yeah, well, for future reference, I wouldn't have."



Me Lady's Attire was on the upper level of the Fashion Show Mall, sandwiched between All Time Watch Emporium and Precious Bath and Beauty. Before my sitdown with Mira ended, I'd gotten her friend's full name and the name of her dress shop. Also, to the best of her recollection, the location of the money drop.

Alicia Perkins had a model's figure: tall, willowy, with enough meat on her bones to make it interesting, but not enough to get in the way of how the clothes would drape on her. She was a fiery redhead with deep green eyes. The creation that draped her was gold satin, sleeveless with a wide neckline, and stopped abruptly at her knees, which allowed for a decent display of shapely legs and bareback high heels.

She studied the card I'd given her for a moment, then the green eyes looked at me, her thin lips somewhat pushed out. "Okay, Mr. Oaks," she nodded, "just what can I do for you?"

"Running an errand for a friend of yours, Mira Navilone. If I could just get a few minutes of your time."

She looked around the place. There were a half dozen or so women digging about in the racks of clothing, some assisted by staff members while mannequins stood sentry in evening gowns and lingerie.

"I guess I can give you a few minutes," she said. "Come on, we can talk outside."

I followed her out of the shop into the mall and over to the railing that afforded a view of the shoppers milling about on the first floor.

"Ever stand on the edge of someplace high up and feel like jumping?" she asked, leaning slightly over the railing. "The urge is supposed to be in all of us." She turned back to me, smiling. "I've never felt it." She paused, waved a finger at me. "You're the guy that dropped the hammer on Mira's so-called boyfriend?"

"I guess that's one way of putting it."

"Back in school I was the one with all the dates, and she was the one who kept her nose in the books. I used to try to get her to get out, have some fun. Then I guess the first guy she finally makes some connections with turns out to be a murderer. When I first heard about it, I thought she'd dig a hole and hide forever."

"She's managed it very well."

"Yes, I know. She actually looked me up. We've had a lot of long girl talks. I've helped her with her makeup, some clothing selections. She's still a work in progress, but we're getting there." She paused again. "What did you say you wanted to talk about?"

"That party you took Mira to. She thinks she might've lost a

bracelet there. It was something her grandmother gave her, and she'd like to get it back if possible before the old girl finds out it's missing." I'd come up with the bracelet story on the drive over, hoping it was a plausible enough excuse for my being here.

"I met her grandmother once when Mira and I were roommates. She seemed like a sweet old lady, but Mira said she could be a bear." She shrugged. "You know, I've spoken to Mira since the party, she didn't say anything about a bracelet."

"Got me, I'm just a hired hand."

She reached over and gave my left bicep a little squeeze. Shaking her head, she said, "If you were my hired hand, I wouldn't have you running around looking for some old bracelet. I'm going to have another long talk with Mira." She paused, moistening her lips with her tongue. "Well, anyway, the party was at Dexter Drexall's. He's in advertising. He hit the big 5-0. Great guy. We had a blast."

"So I heard. I was curious about something, though . . ."

The bright green eyes looked quizzically upon me.

"You drove Mira to the party, any particular reason why you didn't drop her off back home?"

"Didn't Mira tell you?" She showed some dentist's masterpiece in her smile. "I, uh, hooked up with the guy I knew, and we left before the party was over. I did check with Mira first, she said she was okay with it. Said she'd met somebody herself."

"Did she say who?"

"Sure you're just a hired hand?"

"Just thinking of all the ways a bracelet can come up missing."

"Sounds more like you're checking up on her."

"I assure you I—"

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Anyway, I haven't the slightest idea who she was talking about. I was just glad she'd found someone. It freed me up. I guess I was thinking more of myself at the time."

On the way to the parking garage I examined my impression of Alicia Perkins. Naturally, one of the first things on my mind was had she sat Mira up? It was a possibility, but I couldn't honestly say I felt that way. From what I saw of the dress shop, it looked to be a prosperous operation. Not to say that Alicia didn't have money problems; after all, this is Vegas.

But a lot of what I do in this business is on gut reaction. And right now my gut reaction of Alicia pegged her as being not as flighty as she pretended to be, definitely a flirt, and above all, a good friend to Mira.

The address that Alicia had given me for Dexter Drexall was up

in Summerlin, near Charleston and Town Center. The place where Mira had said the money drop was to have taken place was on the tail end of Lake Mead by the auto junkyards. Both locations were north of the Fashion Show Mall, Summerlin to the west, and the money drop maybe twice the distance longer to the east.

Since I didn't know the exact address of the money drop, logic dictated I head out there first. Well, my logic anyway.

It hadn't rained any more; in fact, the sky was clear and the sun was doing its best to turn the rest of the day into a pleasant one. I took I15 out to Lake Mead, making it in under a half hour, which was pretty decent. During drive time, when folks are going to and from work, the freeways out here can turn into parking lots real quick.

Heading east on Lake Mead, the junkyards were on my left, with the majority of the warehouses and construction sites on my right. It took me three tries before I found the right white single-story building. It was set back off the street a good forty yards or so, and from the looks of the place it hadn't been used for much of anything lately. Of the four windows facing the street, three were boarded up, and the glass of the other one was cracked. There was no driveway, paved or otherwise, and I kicked up a little dust storm as I pulled up to the place.

The place looked deserted, but I knocked anyway. I got no response so I tried again, louder this time. I tried the door next. It was unlocked and opened inward. I was confronted with a big empty shell of a building, well empty except for a few crates at the far end of the building on my right. Shafts of light came through several holes in the high ceiling, illuminating the dust particles dancing in the air. Even with the holes in the ceiling there was a stuffiness about the place. The building probably hadn't been in use for over a year. An ideal spot for the money drop.

Coming out here was a longshot. I'd hoped to get some kind of hint of where the money had gone, but truthfully, I knew the chance of that happening was pretty slim, and I was expecting to come up empty handed. I definitely wasn't expecting to find a body lying on the floor behind the crates. He was on his back, his arms stretched out above his head, his right hand still clutching a nickel-plated automatic. As far as I could see he'd only been shot once, right at the bridge of the nose of his Al Sharpton mask.

One of the guys in the photo with Mira? It was an easy enough assumption.

The crates also hid an oblong table from my view. The body was on the floor at one end of the table; a metal bowl sat on the table

at the opposite end along with a can of lighter fluid. Ashes and twisted celluloid filled the bowl.

I wasn't a math major, but I never had any trouble adding two and two. Rimmey had destroyed the photographs and negatives after pocketing one print for himself. While the light show was going on he'd probably shot the guy in the Al Sharpton mask in an effort to get the money for himself. But I hadn't found the money in Rimmey's car, so the odds are the guy in the Al Sharpton mask hadn't been alone, most likely his buddy was "George Bush" from the photos. Rimmey hadn't been able to get both of them, getting himself shot instead, and the guy in the George Bush mask had made off with the money. It didn't explain everything, but I had a feeling I was pretty damn close.

Tampering with evidence at the scene of a crime, especially where there is a death involved, is a big fat no-no. There was nothing I could do about the slug in the guy on the floor, which I was sure ballistics would match to Rimmey's revolver. But I couldn't let the ashes of the photos stay around; there was no telling what Metro's forensics team might be able to piece together.

I've gotten into the habit of keeping a few plastic bags in the trunk of my car ever since the second time I had a grocery bag break on me. The ashes and bowl went into one of the bags after I took another look around to make sure I hadn't overlooked anything or left any fingerprints behind. Then I was off to Summerlin.

Driving west this time of day is never relaxing. Regardless of the polarized glasses and tinted windshield, there are angles where the sun just blinds you. You tend to look downward more than up, or at least I do. Yet there are dips in the streets and freeways that consistently test your relationship with the break pedal.

Dexter Drexall's home was in one of the few communities in Summerlin that wasn't gated. It was on a street called Star Spruce Lane, which mustn't be confused with Star Spruce Drive, or Star Spruce Way, which all ran parallel to each other. It was a two story rust-colored tiled roof structure with a three-car attached garage.

I parked on the street in front of the place and made my way up the walk. I was just about to ring the doorbell when the door swung open and a dimpled brunette in shorts and halter top said, "Oh, Bill, I was . . ." She stopped, mouth and big brown eyes wide open. "God, I'm sorry. I saw the car and you were coming up the walk, I thought you were someone else."

"I gathered that," I said.

She shrugged well-tanned shoulders. "I could've sworn that was his car. I mean it's the same color and everything. And you're both bla— that is, uh, sometimes the sun hits the window . . . I just took

a quick glance. Bill's a photographer friend of ours. He lives just down the street on the corner. He was supposed to have been coming by to do some layouts. I just jumped at thinking you were him."

Some people get embarrassed and clam up, others keep tripping over their own tongue. As fumbling as it was, she'd said all I needed to hear.

"You know, I've got to apologize myself. I was looking for Bill, and I got turned around. On the corner, you said, right? I'll let him know you're still looking for him, see if I can hurry him along."

"Well, uh, thanks," she said, with some relief in her voice.

I left her standing in her doorway, got in my car, and headed for the end of the block. I didn't have to guess whether it was the house on the east or west side of the street. The garage door was opened, and I saw the car sitting there. It wasn't the same year Town Car as mine, but the silver-gray color matched. It would be easy to mistake one for the other.

I pulled into the drive in front of the open garage, spotting the blood on the garage floor as I got out of my car. I rarely carry a gun. For the most part it stays in my safe behind my desk in my office at the Game Room. But at times like these I rethink my decision not to be armed all the time. Being careful not to track through the blood on the floor, I could see more blood inside the car through the driver's side window and on the crumpled George Bush mask that lay on the passenger's seat.

The door leading into the house was slightly ajar. I knocked, calling out, "Hey Bill, you in there? We've got to talk . . ."

I tried knocking again, and the door swung inward under the force of my clenched fist.

He'd just cleared the door before collapsing at the foot of the washer and dryer. I felt the side of his neck for a pulse, knowing it was a waste of time. The money made it farther into the room. Some of it had spilled from the gym bag that lay by his outstretched hand.

I got the money back into the gym bag, and the whole thing went into one of the plastic bags in the trunk of my car. Then I got my ass out of there, hoping that when Bill's body was discovered, the woman down at the Drexall home wouldn't feel compelled to volunteer any information to the police.

It looked like they'd killed each other at the money drop, or at least that was the result. Bill had gotten away with the money, and Rimmey had come after me thinking we were one and the same. Mira had said he had suspicions about me. Bill and I were both black, and we drove similar cars. It would explain why Rimmey

had bypassed the hospital to come banging on my door. Not the best of judgments, but he would've been enraged and wanting to get the money back, or simply get even.

I'd been at this thing nonstop all day, and the first pangs of hunger let themselves be known. As soon as I wrapped things up with Mira I promised myself a hearty meal. The Steak House at Circus Circus was one of my favorite places to pig out. Fighting your way through the kids in the thoroughfare was always worth the trip.

I called Mira, told her I thought I'd gotten things wrapped up the best I could. We agreed to meet back at the Helping Hand Money Mart in an hour, which would be just about how long it would take me to fight my way through traffic.

When I got there the Escalade was parked in the same place it had been this morning. I pulled in alongside, climbed out, and got the two plastic bags out of my trunk. The young lady at the counter looked at me with a little wrinkle on her brow when I walked in with a plastic bag in each hand. But when I gave her my name, she said I was expected and buzzed me through the security door, which gave access to Mira's office.

Mira was standing in front of her desk when I came into her office. She'd changed outfits sometime during the day. She was wearing a long-sleeved flowered dress now, mostly beige in color. It wasn't until I'd closed the door and turned back to her that I saw Belle sitting behind the desk.

Belle Navilone, Mira's grandmother, the one person Mira didn't want to find out about the blackmail.

"Guess you didn't expect to see me," Belle smiled up at me.

"Where you're concerned, Belle, I'm never surprised." It hadn't been anything I'd ever thought of, but once I'd said it I knew it was true.

She nodded, not a hair out of place on her silver-gray coiffure. Rings sparkled from every finger as she beckoned me closer. "I presume those are the pictures and the blackmail money. You did get all of the pictures, I hope?"

I looked at Mira, but she wouldn't look at me. She backed up as I got closer, sitting in one of the chairs in front of the desk.

"Mira?" I said, waiting for a reply, but she kept looking at the floor. She seemed to be shrinking somewhat, her shoulder drawing in, head bowed, like a small child looking for someplace to hide.

"Mira?" I repeated. "What was all the bs you told me this morning?"

"Most of it was true," she finally said, barely above a whisper.

"You caught me off guard. I didn't know what to tell you and what not to."

"You did good enough," Belle said. "Let's get on with it. Did you get the money and the pictures, Trevor, or didn't you?"

"I got them," I said, putting the bags on the desk.

She nodded with a smile this time. She could've been a hundred and twelve, but she could pass for someone in her late fifties. Her makeup was done impeccably and with an even hand; there were just a few crows' feet giving away a hint of age.

"I'd be careful with this one," I said, indicating the smaller of the two bags. "It's got the ashes of the photos in there. You might want to scatter them out in the desert someplace just to make sure. The money's in the other one. I'd take care there too. I'm sure some of the bills have got blood on them. It would be wise to get rid of them."

"I hope you didn't have to put yourself in harm's way."

"No, Belle," I said, sitting in the chair across from Mira. "It was just legwork."

I explained my day to them then. There was no reason to hold anything back.

Belle listened silently, with a few more nods and another smile or two, until I was finished. "So, essentially they all killed each other?"

"I'd say that's what happened."

"And Rimmey came after you thinking you'd gotten away with the money?"

"It looks that way. He probably got a look at this guy Bill's car. We're both black, drove similar cars."

"Any chance the police can come back on you for anything?"

"Could be. But I've played dumb before."

"You're a good man, Trevor. Be sure to send me a bill for your time. You can list it as miscellaneous surveys."

"I'll do that," I said, standing, took a step, and then stopped. There were a few things I had to be sure of. "So, whom did they send the blackmail photos to?"

"To Mira," Belle answered, only hesitating a moment. "She didn't want to, but she was wise enough to bring them to me. Embarrassed as all hell, and about to piss her little panties just like she is now."

"Grandmother," Mira protested, then went back into her shell.

"Just what did you tell Rimmey to do?"

"Mira's just about the only family I've got left," Belle said, a slight vein growing at the side of her neck. "Those bastards attacked my family. Nobody attacks my family and gets away with

it. I told him to see to it that it doesn't happen again." She'd gotten louder as she practically spat the words, her mouth in an evil curl. But then she relaxed and the vein faded. "Let's say he took me more literally than I intended, and leave it at that. Personally, I think everything worked out for the best." She stood up. "We're finished here, aren't we, Trevor? Don't forget to get that bill to me."

You can't be with Belle Navilone fifteen minutes without coming away thinking about her. She was all in my head as I pulled out of the Helping Hand Money Mart's parking lot. Her husband had been the connected guy, who'd blown his brains out when the Feds started putting the screws to him. No jail time for him. He'd settle things on his own terms. Up yours Johnny-law tough.

But it was episodes like the one back in Mira's office that always made me wonder just who had been the mob boss in the family. ♣



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MURDER: A USER'S GUIBE

NEIL SCHOFIELD

I have had some time to consider the question, and I have decided that it cannot have been a coincidence that almost the very week I decided to do away with Petunia, I found The Appliance on the Internet. Perhaps it was my unconscious mind working away as I wandered down that broad Highway. There is indeed a highway where most people travel in perfect safety, but pay attention: Stray once off that broad and familiar thoroughfare and you will also find yourself on side roads and country roads less well trodden. And there are paths and tracks, some of them weed grown, some of them stinking and muddy, smelly and grim, where bad things live. It was down at the bottom of one of these noisome side paths, far away from the comforting and homely thrum of the highway traffic, that I came upon The Appliance.

In the rather clever moving illustration, a stylized person sat inside what amounted to a cage composed of wooden and metal beams. It was a complicated structure with many cross bracings and supporting struts that went from hither to yon. This stylized person (the gender was problematic), wearing a rather insipid smile, sporting gear, and little else, was sitting on a sliding seat, pedaling with its feet, turning a set of overhead hand cranks, which in turn lifted and lowered sets of weights in cages behind—and was into the bargain also having its stomach muscles massaged by a wide vibrating belt, operated by an electric motor, which also appeared to move the sliding seat back and forth. The first question that occurred to the casual observer was, which muscle groups was this person exercising? The answer appeared to be all of them and then some.

My first thought was, golly, here's something that Petunia would give her triceps to have, then my handyman's eye spotted that it could be made to serve *my* purpose as well as, or as opposed to, Petunia's.

Because Petunia was, is, keen on exercise. No, that is an under-

Hank Blaustein





statement. She is fanatical about exercise. All her free time is filled with exercise, either alone or with the monstrous regiments of large, leaping, terrifying muscular women who form her entourage. She has explained to me that, given her large frame, exercise is vital if she is to prevent her muscle turning to fat. So, since our marriage our basement has become a sort of gymnasium; we have her weight machines, her rowing machine, and all manner of other arcane contraptions, the purposes of which are a closed book to me. But then much about Petunia is a closed book to me. To the dispassionate observer, I suppose, we might appear as the classic mismatch.

When I first met Petunia, I was a bookkeeper with the water company, already in early middle age and unmarried. Petunia was a shelf-stacker in Sainsbury's. The very first time I laid eyes on her, hefting with nonchalant ease a box of two hundred fifty Twix bars from a pallet she was in the process of unloading, I was fascinated. I reached past her to take a Mars bar from the upper shelf (a Mars a day helps me work, rest, and play, I find). As I did so, I smelled her animal scent. She seemed to be surrounded by a miasma of vibrant glowing perspiration. The Mars bars were on a shelf a little beyond my reach, I being of compact build. Petunia, who is a foot taller than I, reached lithely up and plucked a Mars bar from the shelf and handed it to me.

"There you are, Titch," she said, "chew on that. You need building up, you do." And in that moment I knew that I had to marry this woman. Why? many people have asked. Why did I, a slender, bookish, bespectacled retiring person, seek to bond myself with this Amazon? The heart has its reasons, I usually say, without adding that it was to avoid marrying my mother, which is what most men do, or so the authorities on the subject have it. Petunia was as far removed as anyone could be from my mother, that genteel, faded, wispy creature, with whom I had lived (to the secret and not so secret amusement of others), and who had faded and wispied away at the end, quitting this life, leaving no visible trace. I lived on in the family house, rattling around it like a pea in a drum. Petunia was far from anything I had previously known, I was lonely, I had never experienced a woman like her, and over the period of my admittedly timid courtship she seemed to develop a genuine fondness for me. And, against all expectations, we married.

And now I wanted to kill her. Why? I have read many murder stories involving spouse killing, and most of the time the husband is a perfect swine, has a mistress, and is locked in a clearly unsuitable union, which, usually for financial reasons, he is unable to dis-

solve, save by bloody means. I could claim none of that. I had no mistress, in fact Petunia is the only woman I have ever really possessed. I could divorce her, but that would have been cruel, she would suffer dreadfully. No, in truth I had begun to think of Petunia simply as an unendurable burden of which I must disencumber myself. Life had become intolerable after a mere two years in her proximity: the smell of sweatsuits and socks, leg-warmers, and other arcane items of athletic apparel; the sheer noisiness of living with this lumping creature forever in movement; and above all, the greedy physical demands that she made on me.

"Come on, Titch," she would say, throwing me onto the bed, which is another thing I hated, "a growing girl needs her greens." Then she would rip off whatever clothing I happened to have on me. Those were the days when I wandered dazedly and blearily around the house, barely able to walk or speak and clothed in rags.

There was not an ounce of malice in her, that I knew, and in her slow thinking, animal way she loved me. And perhaps that was the key: She was a large, embarrassing, slightly smelly animal who took up too much space, and that it was kinder to her simply to do away with her.

I had spent a lot of time going through all the crime stories I could find in the library, trying to find some quick and, above all, easy way of killing Petunia. It couldn't involve hand-to-hand business with knife, pistol, or blunt instrument. A counterfeit burglary, for example, or an attack in a darkened park would have been suicidal: She would have disarmed me and half killed me before I had a chance to inflict even a flesh wound. I had considered and discarded car accidents (too chancy), and a fall onto an electrified railway line (she never took the Underground, but walked or cycled everywhere).

I had abandoned crime fiction murder methods as useless, being unrealistic, fanciful, or just plain foolish and had turned to the Internet, the Great Library in the Sky. And there I found The Appliance. My first thought was, Oh there's an interesting thing for Petunia, and then my handyman's eye spotted that, with a little change *here*, a slight reengineering of that bar thing *there*, and with the help of the wiring of the powerful electric motor attached to it, The Appliance, as they titled it, could be the answer to my prayers. Some Assembly Needed, they said. Well, that was no problem, I was very good at Some Assembly. Witness the chair-lift I had installed for my mother.

Very well, if you insist, I *helped* the man my mother inexplicably called in to reinstall it, and put up with some extremely

uncalled-for remarks on my DIY skills into the bargain.

However, The Appliance didn't look difficult at all. If the instructions were clear, any fool could do it.

Fortuitously, some time before, Petunia had announced her intention of passing two weeks in the company of some of her girlfriends at Deauville, where they would be taking a course of *Thalassothérapie*. In other words, people would be spraying them with sea water from high-pressure hoses, smearing them with algae, plunging them into iodine baths. I have seen the pictures in the brochures. They were like windows into Hell.

But those two Petunia-free weeks would be a godsend. I could spend them very profitably on The Appliance. Without telling Petunia, I arranged two weeks' leave from the water company, with no questions asked and that very day, with beating heart, ordered an Appliance, through the good offices of the Internet, using our joint credit card.

Obviously, I did this in Petunia's name, thinking ahead to the inevitable interview:

"I had no idea she was ordering things on the Internet, Inspector. And especially not things of this nature. She must have assembled it herself. She was a competent woman and in superb condition as you can see from the—the remains."

"Calm yourself, sir. Come along now, come along, do. Take my kerchief, sir, and dry those tears. Youngster (to the apple-cheeked constable gazing at me with wondering eyes), run along and fetch a cup of tea for this bereaved gentleman."

Leaving day came and went in a great flurry of giant girlfriends, suitcases, and taxis. I waved them off at the door and wished them well of Deauville, which is full of French people, French plumbing, and, no doubt, French germs. Good luck to them, and to the French.

The Appliance arrived the next day, as promised. I was doing the washing up and taking the opportunity to organize the kitchen drawers. No one can accuse me of being a fussy man, but Petunia's habit of putting knives in the fork compartment of the cutlery drawer was something about which I had had occasion to speak to her more than once. I am surely not overstating the case when I say that that sort of thing, taken to its ultimate, can only end in chaos and anarchy and the breakdown of our social fabric. The same is true in our bedroom. A sock drawer, I have quietly and gently explained to Petunia several times, is by definition for *socks*,

no? Otherwise it would be called something other than a Sock Drawer, no? But Petunia's so-called sock drawer is a travesty, packed with brassieres, knickers, leg warmers, and things with straps and buckles into whose functions I am far too fastidious to inquire—in short, everything *but* socks.

I went to the door. There was a man there who wore a smart brown uniform, and behind him there was a matching truck.

This man looked at the flowered pinafore that I had donned to avoid splashing my trousers and had forgotten to take off. He said, in a very truculent manner, "Mrs. Melchett, is it?"

I bit back the sharp retort that came to me. "What is it?" I said shortly.

"Packages for Mrs. Melchett."

"Oh, great heavens," I said with impatience, "what has she been and gawn and ordered now?" I was quite proud of this, establishing as it would at the inquest, my complete ignorance of Petunia's activities. The characterization was drawn from my role of Cruet the butler in a production of *The Spouse Trap*, that celebrated mystery play by Tabitha Crustie, which we had performed with some success at the Church Hall the winter before. My portrayal of Cruet had been singled out for special praise in the local press.

The delivery man handed me a clipboard. I looked at the delivery note clipped to it. There were ten packages noted there. "All this?" I said, not having to feign surprise. The Appliance must be more sturdy than I thought.

"I hope you're feeling strong, Mrs. Melchett," said the delivery man, making far too much of what had been a feeble joke to begin with, "cos I can tell you that this lot weighs a mucking ton." As he spoke, one package hurtled out of the back of the van and crashed to the ground. There seemed to be some large animal in there. So much for employing a courier service whose name is clearly pronounced "Oops!"

It took me half an hour and cost me ten pounds to persuade the man and his assistant, or "mate," as they apparently call them, who was a large, dim-witted youth and not a trained orangutan as I had feared, to transport the packages the paltry few yards into the hall. So much for the free market. But farther than that they would not go. Even the offer of a further five pounds would not incite them to descend into the basement. That, it seemed, was against all custom and practice. The fellow even invoked the Workman's Compensation Regulations, with which dread authority there was, it appeared, no arguing. So the packages remained in the hall.

It took me the rest of the day to haul them down to the basement. They weighed, as the man had said and if I might stray

briefly into the vernacular, which normally I abhor, a mucking ton.

But at length, I had them all arrayed in size order. The heaviest, a wooden packing case, which had given me much grief and a nasty graze on my shin, contained, when I managed to pry it open with a hammer and chisel, the large electric motor, complete with cabling. After this, I went upstairs to have a cup of tea and a nice sit down. My head was throbbing, and I had a nasty little wavy pattern dancing in my left eye, usually the sign of an oncoming migraine, something that often afflicted me when Petunia had insisted on a particularly large helping of greens. I decided to prepare something to eat and have an early night. The morrow, I would begin.

The following morning, my tea and toast, without Petunia there to immolate it, was perfect. There were no dabs of butter or smears of marmalade on the tablecloth as is normal when Petunia breaks her fast. And my tea was perfection. I am not in the least obsessive, my worst enemy could not say that, but when I take my tea in the morning the single lump of sugar that I allow myself must be upright in the very center of the cup as I pour on the tea. If not, the day is ruined.

I went down to the basement to commence the Some Assembly. With the aid of a Stanley knife and a pair of shears, I soon had the elements of The Appliance arrayed on the concrete floor. There were a lot of them. Some were made of bright chrome, and some, uglier than the others, of black, surly iron. Yet others, and there were sixteen of them, were made of teak, *tectonis grandis*, unless I miss my guess, presumably from the forests of Java.

There was also a large, bulky yellow envelope, which presumably contained the plans and instructions for assembly. I took it upstairs to the kitchen to read while having a cup of tea.

I was right. The envelope contained a sixteen-page booklet of very detailed instructions.

In Chinese.

I said "Tchah!" I think, or it may even have been "Pshaw!" This was a most aggravating setback. I thought about it as I drank my tea. On the back of the manual, there was a telephone number, the only thing that was not in Chinese.

I decided to ring the number. I had to suffer three minutes of music plus five of computerized directions, pressing 1 for Customer Service Helpline, and then a six-minute wait while a robotic voice told me that my call was in a queue and would be answered directly. At last, a human voice came onto the line.

"Hello? How may I help you, sir or madam?"

"To whom am I speaking?" I asked; I always like to know the name of my correspondent.

"Mr. Rajit Patel at your service, sir," said the voice, "and what seems to be the problem? Whatever it is, be sure that I will do my utmost to help you out of your current quagmire."

I was pleased with his tone and explained.

"Ah," he said, "The Appliance. I am knowing this product. There is none better. Mrs. Patel's sister purchased one such. But it is to be employed with moderation, sir. Mrs. Patel's sister now has arms like a stevedore, not attractive in a woman of small stature, which is her case."

"However, the instruction booklet is in Chinese," I informed him.

"Which, of course, you do not speak or read, sir. I understand. This is not uncommon."

"Could you go and ask someone to send me instructions in English?"

"I would, sir, but the 'go' part of it is somewhat problematic."

"Why?" I asked, "Are you not at the factory?"

He engaged in a long and, to be honest, irritating peal of high-pitched laughter.

"Oh, my dear sir, no, no, not at all. I am merely an insignificant cog in a vast worldwide machine. You are in communication with a call center."

My heart sank.

"A call center where?"

"In Peshawar, my dear sir."

I had a hazy idea of where this was.

"You are in India?"

"Indeed not, sir. Peshawar is an important regional capital of Pakistan."

"Mr. Patel, if you are in Pakistan, how are you able to help me?"

"Simplicity itself. I merely have to call the manufacturer, who if memory serves me correctly, is in the city of Anadhapura."

"Is that close to Peshawar?"

Again the peal of laughter.

"Oh sir, I can see we did not score highly in geography during our schooldays, dear old golden rule days. Anadhapura is on the lovely island of Sri Lanka."

I was puzzled.

"I'm sure that my delivery didn't come from Sri Lanka."

"That is correct sir. Your appliance came from the regional distribution center nearest to you."

"Well," I said, "couldn't we call the distribution center?"

“That would be the very last thing I would do, my dear sir. They are mere muscle, donkeys, beasts of burden. They have zero intellectual capacity; their tasks do not involve brainwork. No, the recognized procedure is for me to pass on your complaint to the factory in Sri Lanka, who will no doubt expedite your instructions as a matter of urgency. Fear not, my dear sir, I will treat this as an emergency. I will tell them that you are chomping at the bit, suffering agonies of suspense. I may tell you, in brackets, that my wife is in similar throes with her electric Hoover.”

After some mutual and cordial banalities, I left Mr. Patel, not without asking him to give my regards to Mrs. Patel and to wish her well with her electric vacuum cleaner.

“I will tell her, sir. She will be gratified.”

Well, this was an annoyance and no mistake. I went down to the basement and began to open the packages and lay out the components of The Appliance neatly on the floor. Time spent in preparation is never wasted, as I have told Petunia many times. I looked at them and wondered how this assemblage of beams, rods, bars, struts, braces (flanged and unflanged), brackets, tracks, together with the several plastic bags containing cogs, cams, sprockets, grommets, nuts, hinges, bolts, couplings, and coach bolts could ever come together to form a rational and coherent whole.

I could also use the time to install the new cabling for the electric motor. I plumbed in a new socket and switch by the door and ran cable up to the circuit-breaker board in the utility room, where I wired the cable to one of the vacant thirty-two ampere breakers. So far so good.

A nice surprise came the next day. A flat packet arrived, not by Oops but by DHL.

Inside I found, on tearing it open, the promised booklet.

I took it into the kitchen and prepared a cup of tea. Tea always helps the cognitive processes, I have found. I opened the booklet. It was in English, or very nearly. On the first page at the head, were the words: TO PRUDENCE!!!

Flushing a little at this familiarity, I read on:

To assembling The Appliance is of the necessity the care total. The Appliance are being of a delicacy instrumentalode. Therefore! For assembly the ingredients asks for a competency professionnel of the utmost. To not attempting assemble unless required skill possessing of the proprietor.

I began to think I would have done better to stay with the Chinese version.

However, the next page contained a comprehensive and comprehensible list of the ingredients, and the requisite number thereof. I went down to the basement and began to tick them off, which took me the rest of the day. The plastic bags in particular were intractable and vicious things, apt to explode, and several times I had the floor covered with annoyingly small metal components. At the end, I found I was two transverse track right-angle couplings short, as well as an overhead tracking brace swivel locking pin. The locking pin, I decided I could probably improvise with a two-inch nail, but the transverse track right-angle couplings were irreplaceable. I also had two diagonal cross braces that were four inches longer than the other two. These being of teak, I decided that I could solve this problem by cutting off the excess with my saw. But for the couplings, I realized that I would have to have recourse again to Mr. Patel, who was sympathetic.

"Ah," he said, "Good day, my dear Mr. Melchett." I wondered how he knew my name, then realized that of course he had my client number in front of him on his screen.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Patel," I said. "I'm sorry to disturb you—"

"Disturb?" he said. "Oh but we do not disturb, we involve, we implicate! Such is my job, my dear sir. I am here to be disturbed!"

I explained my problem.

"Oh," he said, "those villains at the factory. I will be giving them a piece of my mind when I contact them. But fear not, Mr. Melchett, I am ringing immediately Mr. Chakrabahti, the despatch supervisor, who is by way of being a friend of yours truly, and who will spring into action, the idle fellow, once I have inserted a flea into his ear. It is necessary to keep these chaps on the hop, you know. Failing which they will undoubtedly take one's trousers down. I have already been obliged to administer several sharp reprimands in the matter of Mrs. Patel's electric Hoover."

"I'd be obliged to you," I said.

"No! No! It is for me to feel obliged, if obligations to feel there be," Mr. Patel said. "You bring meaning into my life, Mr. Melchett. You bring purpose and motivation."

I rang off. I was slightly perturbed by all these setbacks. Already nearly a week had passed. I had nine days left in which to complete the Some Assembly, verify the workings of The Appliance, and make the several adjustments necessary.

Never mind. I decided that I could, in any case, begin the construction of the base frame and the vertical beams.

This was a simple matter of bolting together the teak beams and the iron diagonal bracing struts. I was also able to fix on the

two motive unit supporting brackets and bolt to them the electric motor. I liked the look of that motor. It had a powerful look to it.

The only disappointment came with the transverse cross braces. I had spent half an hour with a saw, cutting down the two braces that were too long, according to the plan. Only to find that it was the other two that had been, in fact, too short. The measurement I had read as yards on the plan was apparently in meters. Why on earth can people not be clearer? And what is wrong with the good old Imperial measures, which have served us well and faithfully for hundreds of years? Now they come along with their newfangled foreign meters and liters to bedevil our lives. Petunia has insisted for some time on referring to her weight in kilograms. To thwart this subversive behavior, I had been obliged to dismantle her bathroom weighing scale, paint over the kilograms, and replace them with the requisite equivalent in pounds and stones.

I would have to call Mr. Patel, I saw. But I noticed that I was breathing hard and had a high color, so before doing so, I went to the kitchen to calm myself down by tidying the kitchen stock cupboard, something that had long been overdue. I could never understand why Petunia was constitutionally incapable of following the simple system I had created of putting our alimentary products and conserves in alphabetical order. Thus: *Asparagus*, *Broccoli soup*, *Chutney*, and so on and so forth. A child of three could understand it. Perfectly simple and perfectly ordered. But no. Petunia simply thrusts the cans and bottles in the cupboard with a blithe disregard for the system. Despite myself, I had to laugh when I found the *Pepper* in between the *Salt* and the *Mustard*. I mean to say, it was a perfect muddle and mess. Everything higgledy-piggledy and hugger-mugger. But the exercise and the laughter occasioned by Petunia's more risible blunders did me much good, and I was able after two constructive and profitable hours to face ringing Mr. Patel.

Who was kindness itself.

He sympathized on the matter of the transverse braces.

"A mistake anybody might make, my dear Mr. Melchett," he said. "You must not blame yourself."

And he promised to speak to Mr. Chakrabahti as soon as possible.

The next day, a heavy package arrived. I opened it with trembling fingers. This was surely the missing couplings. But no. Inside I found a small electric motor and a filter. On examining the paperwork that accompanied them, I found that these objects were replacement parts for the vacuum cleaner of a Mrs. Patel in Peshawar.

I rang Mr. Patel immediately.

"Those bungling fools," he said with some irritation. "You see the sort of thing that we are up against, Mr. Melchett? Incompetence abounds. Silliness is rife. Small wonder that economies totter and ready cash is in short supply."

I did not envy Mr. Chakrabahti. I had the impression that Mr. Patel was going to insert another flea in his ear.

I got on with the construction. Now that I had the main cage assembled, it seemed that it would all be plain sailing. Once, that is, I had the couplings and the transverse braces to hand. But I could get on with mounting the sliding weights in their cages and attaching their cables and installing the sliding track support members and the sliding track itself. This was child's play. The sliding track body support came next. This looked something like an old-style metal tractor seat with an extended backrest and may well have been, for all I know. The next part was more complicated. The motor had to be connected to the sliding track drive bar and to the vibrating belt by a system of geared sprockets and cams and what looked like a motorcycle chain. Whether it was or not, I shall never know. This subassembly alone took up three pages of the booklet.

That went surprisingly well, at the slight cost of some slight mangling of my fingers between chain and sprockets. I went upstairs to have a cup of tea and put my fingers in cold water. I had found during the day that I was sweating excessively and talking to myself, so I made myself a refreshing glass of liver salts to cool my blood down.

The following day a large package arrived. At long last! My couplings and my replacement transverse braces. The courier service also took away with them the replacement parts for Mrs. Patel. I mean, of course, for the vacuum cleaner of Mrs. Patel, not for Mrs. Patel herself, that would be foolish talk.

I went straightaway to the basement, where I set to work installing the transverse cross braces and the right-angle couplings. I stood back when I had finished. I looked upon my work and found it good. The Appliance gleamed and glowered and glowed with chrome, iron, and teak. It was a magnificent piece of work. It looked immensely powerful and purposeful, squatting there, crouching almost, ready to spring. I decided that when Petunia saw it, she would not be able to restrain herself from leaping into it and setting it in motion.

All that remained was to fix what the instructions called the overhead handy-bar on the tracking bar handy-bar fixing slots to secure it with the handy-bar column locking pins and then to attach the weight cables to the large diameter wheel, which was

turned by the hand pedals or handlys. I looked around the base-ment, there were no parts left. Everything was in place.

I could not resist it. I switched on the current at the door. The electricity hummed a little. I walked over to The Appliance. The seat beckoned. I stepped inside the framework and sat down on the seat. I fastened the vibrating belt round my waist. I put my hands up and took hold of the handly-bar grips and turned exper-imentally. As each hand went forward and round in turn, the weights behind me rose and fell. This was very good. I put my feet on the pedals and pedaled. The handly-bar had rubber grips. Ah. If I took those off, then Petunia's hand would be in contact with bare metal. And her bottom would be in contact with the metal seat, protected only by a thin layer of cotton shorts. That was it, of course. And if the motor cabling was carelessly connected just so she would know nothing about it. Genius.

I mimed the result, sticking out my arms and legs and throwing my head sideways. I giggled. This would be so easy. My left elbow struck the red button on the casing of the motor, which immedi-ately came to life. The chain clacked around on its gearing, the seat beneath me slid back and forth with an easy motion. The vibrating belt thrummed around my abdomen. I was entranced. The whole appliance was trembling like a dog eager for the chase. I turned the handly-bar and the weights rose and fell in their cages, the seat slid back and forth, pulling me against the seat belt anchored to the transverse braces behind me. I pedaled and ped-aled and turned and turned the handly-bar.

Everything worked! The Some Assembly had been a success. I thumbed my nose mentally at my mother, may she rest in peace.

The rhythmic movements of The Appliance must have lulled me into a light doze for a few minutes because I suddenly snapped open my eyes. Something was not as it should be. There was a sharp rattle. Then there was another. I looked up. The overhead tracking brace swivel locking pin, which I had improvised with a two-inch nail was worming its way out. As I watched, it eased all the way out and fell to the floor. The swivel then, true to its name, swiveled, which allowed the end of the tracking brace to detach itself from the tracking brace bracket.

Now, I know that at this point I should have freed myself and stepped out of The Appliance, switched off the motor, and then made the necessary repairs. But everything at this point was hap-pening slowly. There seemed no need for alarm.

But without the overhead tracking brace, wobble had set in. In fact, wobble was ineluctably increasing, and as I watched, the overhead tracking brace freed from its bracket and inclined slow-

ly downward. The other end was still in *its* bracket, but the weight was obviously too much for the transverse braces behind me, which yielded with a sharp cracking sound, and caused what I estimate to be the transverse brace connecting bar to detach itself and deal me a sharp and painful blow on the back of the head. This in turn caused the two weight cages to which it was also bolted to fold slowly and fall outward, taking with them the vibrating belt motor assembly fixing brackets. I say this, although I am not sure, since I was held in my seat by the vibrating belt and was unable to see, but I could guess from the fact that the belt began to tighten to an unusual degree. The overhead tracking brace, freed from its bracket, was still ineluctably descending, pulled by the collapsing weights and bringing the handy-bar assembly toward me. I would have been easily able to lean agilely to one side had it not been for the vibrating belt, which had now slipped up from my stomach and was gripping me painfully round the chest. Other things were happening too. Some sort of structural meltdown appeared to be occurring, a deadly chain reaction in which beams, struts, and braces seemed to have taken on a malefic life of their own. The Appliance was falling to pieces around me. During the next thirty seconds everything seemed to be in motion around me. It was like being in one of those little glass snowstorms that my mother used to collect.

I may at this point have shouted "No!" or "Stop!" or "Don't!" I cannot clearly recall. In any case, it was to little or no avail, I fear. The handy-bar was now pressed against my chest and wanted to go farther. The restraining belt was pulling my head farther and farther backward, but clearly unaware of this, the motor, silly thing, was pushing the sliding seat farther and farther forward. As if this weren't enough, the diagonal bracing strut (*r*) freed, I imagine, by the fracture of the transverse braces behind me, had fallen across my right arm, and had become unaccountably lodged under the seat track, and my left arm was held in what I believe is irritatingly known as a vicelike grip by the diagonal bracing strut (*l*). The handy-bar and its subassembly and its overhead tracking brace rested its full weight on my chest. There was a fleeting moment of dangerous equilibrium, and then the motor, which had been trying to maintain the sliding seat's movement and at the same time pull the vibrating belt through my throat, began to overstrain itself and emit sparks. Then we were plunged into darkness and everything stopped before, thank goodness, the belt had actually succeeded in pulling my head off.

At first I thought I had fallen into a swoon. But then I realized that the motor's overexertions had asked too much of the circuit

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breakers, which had flipped open. And judging by the lack of even reflected light from the doorway, it was the main circuit breaker that had gone.

That, as far as I can judge, was two days ago. Time has ceased to have any significant meaning for me, but I have been able to track the passing of the hours by the moon and the sun, which shine in through the tiny window at the top of the wall. And an amusing little incident occurred last night, when a tiny ray of moonlight, passing through the framework of The Appliance, shone directly onto my leg. Despite my position, I could see a tiny glint of metal. This puzzled me for a while, until I realized that it was the missing overhead tracking brace swivel link pin, which must have fallen into my trouser turn-up during the unpacking process. This humorously ironic note made me rock with (obviously) suppressed laughter and lifted my morale to no end.

I have to admit I am hungry and tired. I cannot sleep because of the pain in my arms and back and throat. But the picture is not all black. Because there is no heating down here, and the air is humid, during the night, moisture forms on the chrome handles of the handly-bar, and by turning my head sideways as far as it will go, I have been just able to lick it off with my tongue. So thirst, at least overpowering thirst, is not one of my problems.

The telephone has rung several times. I imagined once or twice that it might be Mr. Patel ringing me to see if everything was going well with The Appliance. I invented a little scenario in which, warned by some sixth sense that all was not well and that I was in mortal danger, he marshaled his vast network of contacts and succeeded in contacting the local police, who broke in and released me. But this was only a waking dream brought on by hunger and thirst, and perhaps a slight case of chromium poisoning.

And help will be at hand ere long.

By my reckoning, Petunia will be returning tomorrow night. She will be coming in on the evening flight from Deauville St. Gatien, I remember quite distinctly her telling me. So she will arrive at the house after dark.

She will enter the house, puzzled at the lack of illumination. But she will wipe her feet before entering the hall as I have trained her to do. She will hang up her coat and *not* throw it in a heap on an armchair in the sitting room, as the small printed notice pasted next to the hall stand will remind her. She will then try the light switch and when it does not work, she will understand the situation. She will therefore pick up the torch that I keep on the hall

table for just such emergencies. At that point, I will call out to her as loudly as my condition permits.

She will descend to the basement and open the door. She will shine the torch upon me and, with her handyman's wife's eye, will understand exactly what has happened. I may not be able to explain to her what is needed, but I will make such rudimentary gestures as I am capable of.

But Petunia will already have assessed the perilous situation I am in. She will see that the handy-bar is pressing against my chest and the vibrating belt has a murderous hold on my throat. She will observe my position, enmeshed in this devil's spiderweb of metal and wood, pinioned like an insect. She will understand perfectly that if the motor starts again I will be a dead man, and she will discern exactly what it is she must do if she is to save her husband's life.

So she will *unplug* The Appliance at the door *before* going upstairs to close the main circuit breaker.

The idea, which has occurred to me in my darker moments, that she *won't* is, of course, ridiculous.

Isn't it? 🐦



Note to Our Readers:

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The winning entry for the January/February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

A PRISONER OF MEMORY

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

“**H**ey, handsome! Need your help.”

She was a presence out of my past, but I knew at once it was Laura Dane. There was no mistaking the growl exploding in my ear with that trained stage actor’s ability to send a whisper up to the back of the second balcony, every precisely enunciated word blasting its way out of a throat sandpapered by years of chain-smoking.

I made sure anyway, verifying the source like the good newspaperman I am: “Laura?”

“I should be insulted that you’d have to ask,” she said. Coughed out a web of phlegm. “I didn’t have to wonder if it was you on the phone, Neil, did I?”

“You called me, Laura.”

“Still smart as a whip, you are, the same way you were so snappy smart in untangling the truth about Elvis and Marilyn in the long ago.” She was talking about a rumored love affair, which led to a series of murders I had a hand in solving. “Got something for you not nearly as glamorous, but dangerous. Down the line it’ll make front page headlines and some damn fine fodder for that *Daily* column of yours.”

“Dangerous how?”

“Like I could be dead any minute, murdered, before you have a chance to mount your white charger and ride to my rescue, the way Errol Flynn—bless his dear, drunken soul—did in Fort Worth.”

“I remember Flynn in *San Antonio* and *Virginia City*, *Santa Fe Trail*, but *Fort Worth*? I don’t know that movie. Is it out on DVD?”

“Not a movie. We were in Fort Worth on a war bond tour, Errol and me and a bunch of other Warner Brothers contract players. That crazy galoot saved me from having to go to bed all by my lonesome.” She laid in a lusty groan. “Think he’d also saved all the other dames on the tour before the Superchief got us back to

L.A." Another cough from lungs that sounded in trouble. "So, what do you say, Neil? Come give an old broad a helping hand?"

"As dangerous as you say, aren't you better off calling the cops?"

"You hear why straight from the filly's mouth, you'll understand why not. At Burbank Studios. On the *Melancholy Baby* set the rest of the day. I'll leave your name on the pass list at the Barham gate."

She was off the line faster than I could raise another question.

A couple hours later, I tagged a "-30-" to tomorrow's column, an emotional screed decrying the destruction of another landmark, the Ambassador Hotel and its fabled Cocoanut Grove, where the stars came out to play when Hollywood was Hollywood and Laura Dane was a name-above-the-title movie star who specialized in playing "the other woman," much as she had done in real life most of her life, wreaking havoc on Kay Francis, Miriam Hopkins, Claire Cavanaugh, Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, and others of her peers.

I e-mailed the piece downtown and took off for a landmark that had withstood the ravages of progress, the Warner Bros. Studio, renamed the Burbank Studios after a shotgun marriage of economic convenience with Columbia Pictures. It was a typical Los Angeles afternoon, the slate blue sky lush with cumulus clouds, the Hollywood Freeway flush with bumper-to-bumper traffic, impatient drivers answering one another with honking horns and expressive middle fingers.

After forty minutes, I pulled up to the Barham Boulevard entrance. A gatekeeper hiding behind reflective shades checked my name against the list on his computer screen and overacted giving me a once-over twice over, logged in my aged Jag's license number, and directed me to the outdoor set where *Melancholy Baby* was shooting.

The company had broken for lunch.

Nobody seemed to know who I was talking about when I asked for Laura Dane, except a prune-faced actor in his late seventies or early eighties, costumed in Sunday best, an extravagant handlebar mustache, and a halo of thick white hair, who stepped over at the mention of her name and said, "Check Marnie Nichols's trailer. Back there, the biggest one of all. Can't miss it."

Marnie Nichols.

The name gave me a smile and a jolt of memory as electric as my first dose of morning coffee.

When I met her, she was this fresh-faced kid from Columbus, studying acting with her Great Aunt Laura, driven by the usual

wide-eyed dreams of fame and fortune that's oversold in bulk on television and magazine racks. She'd become one of the few who could cash in her bus ticket back home, as attested to now by the glitter-speckled gold star adhered to the door of her trailer. I rang the bell and when that got me nowhere hammered with my fist and called her name.

After a few more failures, I turned to leave, till I heard the door creak open a crack. A voice full of challenge demanded to know: "That you, Neil Gulliver?"

"In living Technicolor," I said, swinging around again to confirm it was Laura.

"Get the hell hurry-up inside," she said, pushing the door wide enough for me to see the Colt .45 caliber automatic she had aimed at my chest, struggling with criminal intensity to keep her two-handed grip steady.

"That's a prop gun, right?"

She ignored the question. "C'mon, handsome, give it the gas," she said. "Inside before the son of a bitch spots me."

There was more luxury to Marnie Nichols's motor home than to my Westwood condo, all the accoutrements of the stardom earning her twelve million dollars a movie and a modest chunk of the gross, more than your most basic math told me I'd make over my lifetime, however long or abbreviated.

And nobody would ever mistake Marnie for trailer trash, especially not looking the way she looked now, in repose like Ingres' *Grande Odalisque*, the risqué Mademoiselle Airière, on a plush chaise lounge covered in crimson velvet about halfway back, twenty-five feet or so, across carpeting a foot deep from an entertainment center out of Mission Control.

Her smile was warm and inviting, her almond-shaped cerulean blue eyes ablaze with the suggestion of more than homespun hospitality—unlike Laura, who alternated looks of dread and fear. Laura's thread-thin lips ticked recklessly into her hollow cheeks, her gray eyes dulled by time, shifting left and right while she used the .45 to direct me to the driver's seat. The equipment that had earned Marnie the deserved sobriquet "Body Bountiful" was on full display under a pink silk camisole, and I made a mess of averting my gape, drawing a tinkling giggle of appreciation from her.

Laura said, "You notice anything strange going on?"

"Outside or in here?"

"Not a laughing matter, handsome. Tell him, Marnie, how it's not a laughing matter."

Marnie threw an arm across her breasts, putting an end to my

peep show. "It's truly not, Mr. Gulliver. Somebody has been stalking my auntie, threatening to kill her."

I returned Laura's anxious stare with one of my own, briefly bagging her head to toe with disbelieving eyes. Long gone was the sex kitten who could get a gent's pulse skipping beats with a simple wink, replaced by a woman somewhere in her mid eighties, with the sallow complexion and wasted body of someone ill beyond repair.

Laura had turned into half the woman I'd dealt with before, when the astonishing key-ring waist and conical breasts of her stardom had given way to an elephantine body she routinely hid inside tent dresses. The hair she had let go naturally white then and wore like a tight snow bonnet had become a hodgepodge of cotton tufts and random strands.

She coughed into her fist again and asked, "You heard her. More than having to take my word for it."

I slipped Marnie a glance.

She answered with a wink and a furtive nod that seemed to say, Play along with her.

I said, "When did the stalking begin, Laura?"

Laura closed her eyes and nodded to a silent count that ended with her deciding, "Forty years ago, maybe more."

At once, I had visions of a stalker using a walker. "A pretty determined fellow. And the threats on your life? Also forty years ago?"

"Starting ten days, maybe two weeks ago. Calling me up again and again, and how he got the unlisted numbers, I don't know. Every time telling me he's close as my shadow, and one day soon, he'll show himself, punch my ticket for good."

Laura parked the .45 on the copilot's seat, studied my reaction while scoring a cigarillo from the flip-top box on the dashboard. She slotted it in a corner of her mouth, tossed me the Zippo lighter on the dash, and crooned, "Put your hot one to my cold one and make my cold one hot, baby." Like I was Cagney in a scene burnt into my memory from the movie where he torched a cigarette for her, then used the smoldering butt to brand her on the neck.

She said, "You're doubting me, aren't you, handsome? I see it written on your kisser as clear as a Catalina sunrise." She shot a jet stream of smoke at me. "Marnie, handsome here doubts me. Tell him what else, go ahead."

Marnie eased into a sitting position with her legs crossed yoga style, picked up a throw pillow, and hugged it to her chest. "Auntie Laura's been staying with me since her operation, my place at the Oaks. I'd come home from the studio and find her in a state of

panic over the phone calls. Two nights ago, there was a break-in attempt. We both were awakened by sounds coming from downstairs, like someone trying to crack open one of the French windows. Armed security got there inside of ten minutes the silent alarm going off. Also police responding to my 911."

"And?"

"Whoever it was got away. Security said it was probably this band of gypsies that's been working Griffith Park, down over at the Estates and across the boulevard in Laughlin Park."

"We know better, don't we, sweetheart?"

"We do, Auntie Laura," Marnie said, heaping on a patronizing smile.

"Did you tell the cops about the calls?"

Marnie said, "Yes. They even checked, but it was a dead end. They said it probably was a disposable cell phone he used."

Laura added, "All they could do for now, they said, which is how I came to remember you, handsome. What a peach of a guy you were when it mattered."

"I don't know that I can be of any more help than the police, Laura."

"You're here, so already you're doing more than them, and—" She drew a puzzle on her face. "—just how did you know where to find me? I'd been on the lookout for you before the lunch break, but nobody at all knew I was even here."

I told her about the actor who had directed me to Marnie's trailer.

"And he was decked out in a bib and tucker?"

"Resplendent. And a handlebar mustache begging for a barber-shop quartet."

She swung her face to Marnie. "You hearing what Neil just said, sweetheart? That's him, finally, the SOB who's out to get me. My stalker's here on the lot."

I searched Marnie's for confirmation, saw it as her expression slowly dissolved into mild alarm.

She said, "We were originally scheduled to do the ballroom scene today, but construction had a problem with the grand staircase collapsing, so word came down that we'd move instead to the standing outdoor setup. No fancy dress called for. Strictly street wear, me in one of the great Orry-Kelly outfits Bette Davis originally wore in *Now, Voyager*."

"And the guy who steered me here—"

"He wouldn't have known about the change unless he was on

the cast list and got the late call from the A.D., same as everybody else—”

“Not if he were working off a shooting schedule he somehow got his hands on. He would finagle his way onto the lot today dressed for the ballroom.”

“Exactly,” Marnie said.

“But that doesn’t explain how he’d know you’d be bringing Laura with you.”

“Stalkers stalk, that’s how,” Laura said, her head unable to settle on a direction. “He saw us leave. It didn’t take a crystal ball to figure out where we were heading in the studio limo.” She looked around for someplace to extinguish what was left of her cigarillo.

The beanbag ashtray on the dash was a mountain of butts. Grumbling, she maneuvered to the door, pushed it open, tossed away the butt, and quickly pulled the door shut. “He’s out there,” Laura said, struggling for breath. “I saw him right now, across the drive, not twenty feet away, and he saw me too. He waved at me. The SOB waved at me.”

It took a few seconds for the news to sink in.

I grabbed the .45 and charged out the door after Laura’s stalker, checking in all directions for a tuxedo among the dozens of extras returning from the meal break, all of them costumed for an afternoon stroll along a section of street dressed like a quaint New England village.

Mustache Man had shown terrific speed for his age.

No sight of him.

Back inside the trailer, Laura was more distraught than ever, clutching Marnie like a life preserver, wailing about her stalker’s ability to sneak onto the lot, get this close to her. Insisting through crocodile tears that she’d be dead sooner rather than later if he had his way. Begging an answer from anywhere to questions that were on my mind as well: Why me, dear Lord? Why now, after forty years? Who is this creature?

Before I could ask them, an A.D. was knocking on the door, calling out that Marnie was needed in wardrobe in ten to double-check a fitting. Laura made a sound like she’d just been pricked with a needle, and her eyes exploded with dread. She pushed away from Marnie and threw herself against the door. Her words a soulful moan, she begged, “You can’t leave me now, not now, sweetheart, not with knowing he’s right outside there somewhere.”

“Auntie Laura, of course not. You’ll come along.”

“No, no, no.” Laura was adamant. “No. Outside, not safe, not safe at all.” She looked to me for confirmation. “Not safe at all.”

"I'll stick around and wait with you here," I said. "It'll be you, me, and—" putting the .45 on display—"our friend Mr. Colt."

The answer didn't satisfy her. "Not safe at all, not anywhere here," she said, wailing the words like they were lyrics out of a Billie Holiday songbook. "Anywhere but here. Anywhere. Here, not safe at all." The declaration set off a spate of uncontrollable coughing. She looked at her hand despairingly, rubbed it dry on the floral-patterned muumuu that fit her like a practical joke.

Marnie said, "Would you feel safer at the house, Auntie Laura? I'm sure Mr. Gulliver would be happy to take you and would keep you company until I get home." She gave me a hopeful smile.

Her place took five or six minutes to reach once I turned off Los Feliz and onto Fern Dell Drive, gliding over the creek bridge, past the lush vegetation, the quaint waterfalls, and the cedar, pine, and leafy fern trees bringing modest relief from a summer heat now in the high eighties that had drawn an unusual number of midweek picnickers unconcerned about the shopping cart bums who'd made this part of Griffith Park their home and the gay extroverts sunbathing on the grassy slopes, to Star Bright Lane.

A series of ascending turns led to Star Bright Circle, one of the many hillside cul-de-sacs with flat lots and a magical overview of Los Angeles that extended past the downtown high-rises, long a favorite of celebrities who could afford a fancy pricetag that lately had reached seven and eight figures, going back to the heyday of Ramon Navarro, Cary Grant, and Randolph Scott, and more recently Diane Keaton, Nicolas Cage, Brad Pitt, and briefly my ex, Stevie Marriner, the one-time "Sex Queen of the Soaps."

Marnie's two-acre estate was situated behind a shoulder-high wall of natural stone topped by coiled barbed wire. The gate slid open to the numerical code fed me by Laura, and I drove into a rustic courtyard where, were this France, D'Artagnan might have met up with Porthos, Aramis, and Athos. The open-faced garage had space for six cars; adjacent to it was an empty stable.

"Pretty hoity-toity, huh?" Laura said, indicating the house. "When she went shopping for a place, this here reminded her of a house she stayed in the south of France, Provence, when she was there filming *Adieu Times Two* a couple of years back. Piece of junk, you ask me, but it got my sweet girl an Oscar nomination, so what the hell. That place was in the hills above Luberon National Park and here was Griffith Park, so Marnie didn't even quibble about the price. Wrote out a check on the spot."

The house was typically village provincial, unpretentious in

design and construction. A comfortably sized living room was furnished simply around a hand-built fireplace of eccentric stone that stretched from the natural wood floor to the wood-beamed ceiling. The kitchen was twice as large and outfitted with top-of-the-line professional appliances, a well-stocked walk-in freezer and larder, and a carved wood dining table large enough to seat a dozen or two without crowding. A wrought-iron staircase took me upstairs to three bedrooms feeding off a mezzanine lounge, whose stucco walls featured framed posters of the movies that had starred either Marnie or Laura, the only signs of star ego anywhere.

I hung out there for a few minutes, enjoying the view of the Griffith Park Observatory before heading back to my Jag to fetch Laura, who'd insisted on locking herself inside until I checked out the house for a stalker in residence.

Halfway down the stairs, I heard noises that suggested her fear might be well placed.

They were coming from Marnie's master bedroom, a room I'd given cursory inspection, barely a glance, anxious not to invade her privacy.

I pulled Laura's .45 from inside my belt, got a good two-handed grip on it, and used my foot to ease open the bedroom door. Jumped inside and did a lot of that robotic twisting around the police do for real as well as on *Law & Order*, ready to squeeze the trigger if it came to that. Instead, it came to a couple of pigeons that had flown in through the patio window that overlooked the courtyard. They were psycho in a major way, banging into walls and knocking over doodads trying to find their way back out.

I windmilled my arms and shouted instructions that finally got them soaring in the right direction, but not before they'd rewarded my good intentions with a series of pigeon bombs that caught me on the head and shoulders.

I stepped onto the patio to curse them farewell.

Looking down, I saw the front passenger door of the Jag was open.

Laura wasn't in the car or anywhere visible.

After ten or twelve minutes of exploring the grounds, I found her cowering at the rear of a stall in the stable, knees drawn to wattles and anchored by a trembling grip. The place smelled of equestrian history and fresh dung I assigned to squirrels, rats, skunks, coyotes, and other park animals scavenging for food or seeking shelter from bad weather. I kicked aside a stale pile and, settling along side her, said as gently as I could: "Laura, you okay?"

At first, she looked at me like I was a stranger, but recognition set in and she ripped me full of guilt with her icicle stare, challenging, "Where were you when I needed you? The stalker, he came after me, handsome. I saw him first, though, and I got away. Got away. Got away. Where's the gun? Go after him. Go get him. Okay, handsome? Now. You'll do that?"

I eased out of my jacket and used it to blanket her. "What did he look like, Laura?"

"What do you think? Like you said. Big handlebar he had, and gussied up for a ball or something. An old fart, moving like the dickens, but I spotted him before he saw me and got in here in the nick of time. Go now. Find him for me and kill the SOB." She pressed a bony hand against my cheek. "For me, handsome, and I'll owe you big time," she said, like she was offering me a free pass to her bedroom.

It was the same tone she'd used on the drive here from the Burbank Studios, a failed try at recreating the insinuatingly passionate voice of her stardom years, while resurrecting one memory after another, like they were a cure for her cough and the cobwebs of time.

Some of Laura's stories I remembered from our brief history together, others from her uproarious, outlandish visits with Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*. They flowed out of her like she was reading from a well-rehearsed script, leaving no doubt they were imprisoned in her memory as well as the autobiography that rode the bestseller lists for half a year, *Dane, Down & Dirty*.

"I was once a hooker, you know that?" she had said early in the drive, anxiously, needing to hold center stage. I played along. "Yeah, top of the batting order in Hollywood's blue-ribbon pussy palace, a favorite with all the important chippy chasers at all the talent agencies and studios. How I met the gent who engineered the breaks that landed me my contract with Warner Brothers and in bed with every star and costar you care to mention—no names, please—and even a leading lady or two."

When Laura tired of those anecdotes, she opened a new chapter. "I suppose you know I was roommates with Marilyn? She was always Norma Jean to me and I was always Dubinsky to her. My real name, did you know? Jack Warner, Steve Trilling, they heard that and said, No way, which is how I got to be Laura Dane. From the Fox movie *Laura*, with Gene Tierney and Dana Andrews, because Colonel Warner said I resembled a blond Gene, and Dane rang his bell better'n Dana did. The moguls at Fox decided on Marilyn after she picked Monroe in honor of her granny, but that's old news already." Laura rattled off a telephone directory of names

rich and famous from the Fifties and into the Sixties, challenging me to guess who of them had been bedded first by her, then by Marilyn. Abruptly changing her mind with a flick of the hand. "Let's us just call it a tie, okay, baby? Although I hate to admit I never made it into the White House any more than the White House ever made it into me."

Abruptly, she changed the subject. "You know I was AA?"

"Heard something about it somewhere."

"The career turns sour, the need turns more and more to sour mash, so to speak. Can't get a call through or a callback from anybody who could throw me a life preserver. Won't even try to describe what it looks like below the bottom, but I was there, baby, riding the merry-go-round to nowhere, until I woke up one day knowing I wouldn't wake up some day if life kept leading me on this way. So, I quit. Cold turkey after one last fling with Wild Turkey, you dig? I dragged myself into AA, said hello to familiar faces, and signed autographs for the others, and stuck with it, still, one day at a time. Anytime I felt like abandoning the wagon, which was often, I helped myself to a smoke. The habit climbed up to two, sometimes three packs a day, but it kept me off the sauce, and I'm still here, so that's that."

Now, when Laura paused for a dry mouth cough in the middle of telling me how she'd come to work for Hollywood's most notorious madam in a mansion above Sunset Plaza Drive available almost exclusively to the elite of show business, I said, "You think it could be a guy from those days who's finally acting on a grudge he's been holding for forty years?"

"Baby, when I loved 'em, they stayed loved. And loving."

"How about when you and Marilyn were roomies, or maybe somebody at Warner Brothers who—"

"No and no, and . . ."

It was as if she'd stumbled onto an idea that made sense.

She snapped her face to me and broke out a half smile edged in hope. "There was this gawky-looking kid, a gofer trying to make his mark, sucking up to Hal Wallis, Johnny Huston, Jerry Wald, even Mike Curtiz, who was busy turning the English language into a jigsaw puzzle when he wasn't taking Bogie or Flynn through their paces. Crawford was playing him for a pet until she wangled that Oscar, and after, that's when he became my uninvited shadow. Finally, I had to say something to Trilling about the pest not leaving me alone. Before the day was over, the kid was on his way to the unemployment line." She played with the notion. "Elrod was his name. Elrod Stump. You know what any studio would do with that moniker he ever got signed on as an actor. Stumpy,

everyone called him. He bothered me a while longer before the murder put him out of commission."

"The murder?"

"Stumpy caught on at Monogram, or maybe it was Republic, and got involved in a love triangle with some B actress and the exec who booked the studio's casting couch. Next anybody knew, the exec was dead and a judge was sending Stumpy to San Quentin to learn how to make license plates."

"That might account for the forty-year hiatus."

"What?"

"This Stumpy holds a grudge against you for getting him fired, which led to the murder and the conviction. His need for revenge festers for forty years before he's finished serving out his sentence or gets paroled. And your stalker is back, only now with your murder on his mind as well. How's that sound, Laura? Make sense?"

"What?"

"What I was suggesting about Stumpy?"

"Who?"

"Elrod Stump. Your stalker."

A deep crevice developed between her brows. Then, her eyes brightened with enough wattage to light a premiere at Grauman's Chinese. "That's him, the bad apple! You nabbed him, handsome. Bless you." She pushed herself off the dirt floor and onto her feet with a suddenness that brought on a sonic change in her pulse and caused her to falter. She reached for the wall as dizziness buckled her legs and swooned.

I caught Laura before she hit the ground, cradled her in my arms, and stepped from the stable into the courtyard, anxious to get her into the house. Even in a fading daylight, backlit by the exotic blend of orange, lavender, and scarlet painted across the skyline, I recognized the man moving in on me by his elaborate handlebar mustache.

Marnie skipped out of the limo idling across the courtyard, calling, "It's okay, he's with me," and raced toward me shouting her aunt's name, asking, "What is it? What's wrong? What's happened to her? Is she all right?" She tripped over a moss-covered rock jutting from the ground and vaulted forward, belly-flopping on the dirt.

Mustache Man wheeled around and helped her up, stepping back while she shook the surprise from her face and dusted herself off. Once again he had moved with a speed belying his age. "I'm fine, Mr. Hatcher," she said. She tugged her sweater and a pair of jeans that fit her like body paint into place, covered the rest of

the distance between us, and waited for me to tell her about Laura.

"A fainting spell that doesn't look to be serious," I said. She let out enough breath to stir a windmill. I asked, "She do that a lot?"

Marnie's modest overbite disappeared behind pursed lips while she weaved her head left and right in slow motion. "Not as often as we have to change her sheets," she said.

"What's his story?" I said, inclining my head toward the Mustache Man.

"Let's get Aunt Laura to her room first, okay? Clifton, give Mr. Gulliver a helping hand, won't you?"

We settled in armchairs across from one another on the mezzanine landing, separated by a glass-topped table decorated with fashion magazines and outdated issues of *Daily Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, silently waiting for Marnie to finish with Laura and join us. Mustache Man avoided me by leafing through the trades, while I subtly examined him over the top of a *W Magazine* whose cover offered one of those sexily posed someones mostly famous for being famous.

On close inspection, there was something tricky about his face. It didn't match the body that had traded in the fancy dress for casual wear, tailored slacks, and a camel's hair jacket, high collar dress shirt open at the neck, showing off a gaudy sterling silver cross nesting on a bed of reddish brown hair.

He looked up from his *Reporter*, caught me staring. "Clifton," he said. "Clifton Hatcher." His voice stronger, far more vibrant than it had sounded at the studio. "Miss Nichols told me all about you on the ride over. I read your column once in a while, Mr. Gulliver. It's not so bad."

Once in a while.

Not so bad.

Mustache Man knew how to win friends.

I said, "What don't I know about you?"

"Enough to fill one of your columns," he said, suddenly my greatest fan, his overripe smile exposing an abundance of capped teeth. "I'm an actor. You probably figured that out by now."

"The face isn't familiar."

"Not even under this ton of makeup, but someday," he said. "It's for a Brynie Foy movie shooting next door to Miss Nichols's film on a third of the budget. My friend the casting director got me the gig knowing I needed a credit to keep from losing my SAG medical. Only a bit, one line, delivered by an old geezer." He rose and took a few tottering steps away, touched his brow with the back

of a hand like he was measuring a fever, tilted up his chin, and recited in a British accent: *Yes, so teddibly hot for this time of year.* His makeup was better than his accent.

"And you made a wrong turn on your way over and wound up on the set of *Melancholy Baby*."

"Knew from the trades it was Miss Nichols's flick. I'm a big fan, so when I heard the shoot was so close to ours, I took a chance and headed there instead of for the lunch wagon. Arrived in time to see her entering her trailer. Gussed that might be Laura Dane with her. Her aunt, and an actress my pappy admired in his day. Time ran out and I had to split before I could catch them to say so much as hello."

Marnie had rejoined us in time to hear his gushing adoration and picked up the thread. "I asked around after you and Auntie Laura left and learned the shoot on Stage Eight was pirating a standing set from the Dennis Morgan and Jack Carson shoot, *Two Guys from Surrey*. Natty, my flack from the publicity department, went looking for me and located the man with the mustache, Mr. Hatcher here. Since seeing is believing, I invited him to come home with me, so she could meet him and confirm for herself it was no stalker closing in on her today."

He pressed a palm to his heart. "A beaucoup thrill," he said, enthusiastically, pronouncing it *bow-coop*. "And you won't forget about the autographed photo, will you?"

"I have a better idea," I told Marnie. "One that can put an end to this stalker business once and for all."

Marnie motioned us into Laura's room after about twenty minutes.

Laura was propped up in a reclining position in her canopy-covered bed, under a pair of lace-trimmed pillows.

Her eyes struggled for focus as I pushed Clifton Hatcher forward, hands locked behind his back, urging, "No tricks, nothing stupid, if you know what's good for you," loud enough for her to hear. At her bedside, I announced: "Look at the gift I brought you, Laura. This him? This the stalker you spotted at the studio today?" She reared back against the pillows. "Not to worry. He's cuffed."

She raised her head and squinted against the dull light, signaled me to bring the Mustache Man nearer. I applied pressure to Hatcher's shoulder blades, moving his face to within inches of hers. She studied him through eyes that quickly grew wide with alarm. "Him, yes!" she said.

"I also want you to hear him speak, confirm it's the voice you

heard on the phone," I said, then pulled Hatcher upright and ordered, "Recite the words I told you, mister."

Hatcher said, "I am as close as your shadow, Laura, and will be coming after you soon," in what I imagined he imagined was a nifty impression of Pacino as Scarface. How this guy got any acting jobs was beyond me.

Laura made a frightful noise. "Yes! Yes! Him, the SOB! Get the police!" she said and managed to pull the covers over her head.

Marnie eased Hatcher aside and, comforting Laura with her voice while she worked back the covers enough to level a kiss on her aunt's forehead, said, "The police are here already, dear, waiting outside to take him away once you've provided positive identification."

"Positive, positive, positive!"

A half hour later, the limo was whisking Hatcher and his autographed photo of Marnie back to the studio, and she and I were relaxing against my Jag, alone except for park creatures noisily scavenging in the hillside brush, exploring the truth of what had occurred today.

"The trick with Mr. Hatcher, I can't thank you enough for that, Mr. Gulliver. I think it's enough to satisfy Auntie Laura she doesn't have a stalker to worry about anymore."

"There is no stalker, is there?" I said.

"Yes, there is—in Auntie Laura's mind. Back to haunt her forty years later. Before that, she was getting daily calls from her agent, Meyer Mishkin, about a costarring role he said she was perfect for, with Randolph Scott and Lee Marvin in a Budd Boetticher film coming up at Universal."

"All of them long dead and gone."

"Not to Auntie Laura . . . The stalker made his first call soon after Meyer Mishkin called saying Gail Russell had been cast in the role and she sank into a deep depression, spent days in bed, bemoaning that Gail Russell has a bigger drinking problem than she ever had, so what was that all about?"

"It must be tough on you, Marnie."

"The half of it."

"The cough, her weight loss—the other half?"

Marnie stared into the darkness. "She's my auntie, Mr. Gulliver. I'd still be Marnie Who? not Marnie Nichols, if not for Laura Dane." She twisted around and pressed herself against me in a hug to end all hugs. Plastered my lips with a kiss that set my mouth on fire and was over far too soon. She whispered, "Thank

you for recognizing her condition early on and playing along anyway," then hurried back inside the house.

I heard from Marnie again three days later, shortly before six in the morning.

She called to tell me Laura was dead.

Murdered.

Smothered to death with one of her bed pillows.

Her voice drained of emotion, Marnie described how she was awakened around four A.M. by strange noises coming from Laura's room and charged over. It was too late to help her auntie, but she saw the killer's face when he tossed the pillow away, shoved her aside, and fled.

"It was Clifton Hatcher," she said. "Clifton Hatcher in that stupid makeup, the handlebar mustache and all the rest. Almost like he wanted me to know it was him."

"Did you report this to the police?"

"They're here now. Yes. Detectives are on their way over to the studio, the *Two Guys from Surrey* set, but they figure it's unlikely he'll show up, seeing as how I recognized him and all."

"In makeup again. We never got a look at his real puss."

"No, but the detectives said they'd know soon enough, if they had to, through the casting director or his agent. That there has to be his photo around somewhere."

There wasn't.

By midafternoon, the detectives had determined that everything about Clifton Hatcher was fake, not only the mustache. He wasn't in the Brynie Foy movie. He'd used it to angle his way onto the lot. The Screen Actors Guild had no member named "Clifton Hatcher." AFTRA records came up with a member who used that name professionally and gave an address and a phone number in Studio City for a private mailbox service that went out of business four years ago.

His real name was Elrod Stump, Jr.

He's still out there somewhere, Elrod Stump, Jr., under some name, some face I wouldn't recognize. Were I to stumble across him, Elrod Stump, Jr., would doubtless be surprised by what I'd have to say to him, words he'd probably least expect to hear out of my mouth: *Thank you.*

Before he murdered Laura Dane, she was another of those half forgotten stars who retreat into the past, a prisoner of memory until their minds fail them, then their bodies. They get a final,

brief review on the obituary page, sometimes accompanied by a photograph of the star that was, not the relic they became.

By killing Laura, Elrod Stump, Jr., restored her to stardom. He gave her the leading role in a murder mystery that remains unsolved to this day. He put her name and her photograph on page one of newspapers throughout the world. He turned her into another of the enduring icons in an exclusive club, the Stars of Scandal, whose members live in perpetuity in books, magazine articles, and films.

He took Laura Dane's life and gave her legend.

Who could ever ask for more than that?

Certainly not Laura, who lived to be remembered. 🐦



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GERMAN JOHNSON AND THE LOST HORIZON

L. A. WILSON, JR.

THE ETHIOPIAN COASTAL PLAINS, JUNE 13, 1940

A British doctor who had just dropped from the sky walked through a field hospital a few kilometers inland from the Ethiopian coast. He averted his eyes from the anguish-filled gazes of the sick and dying. The long open ward of the hospital tent was saturated with the odors of diseased and dying flesh. The doctor had to do his job quickly. The hospital was an international humanitarian effort, but the Italian invaders remained suspicious and only reluctantly tolerated its presence. As a citizen of a hostile Allied government, he would be shot as a spy if discovered.

At the end of the ward Adonis Abebe lay on a pallet. Abebe's face was covered by a thick layer of gauze wrapped around his head, giving him the appearance of a mummy. A woman completely covered in black robes sat on the floor beside him, fanning constantly to ameliorate the sweltering temperature as well as to discourage the flies.

The doctor spoke softly to the man as he began to cut away the bandages.

"Do you remember what happened to you?"

His associate translated the question, and Abebe responded painfully with a barely audible whisper.

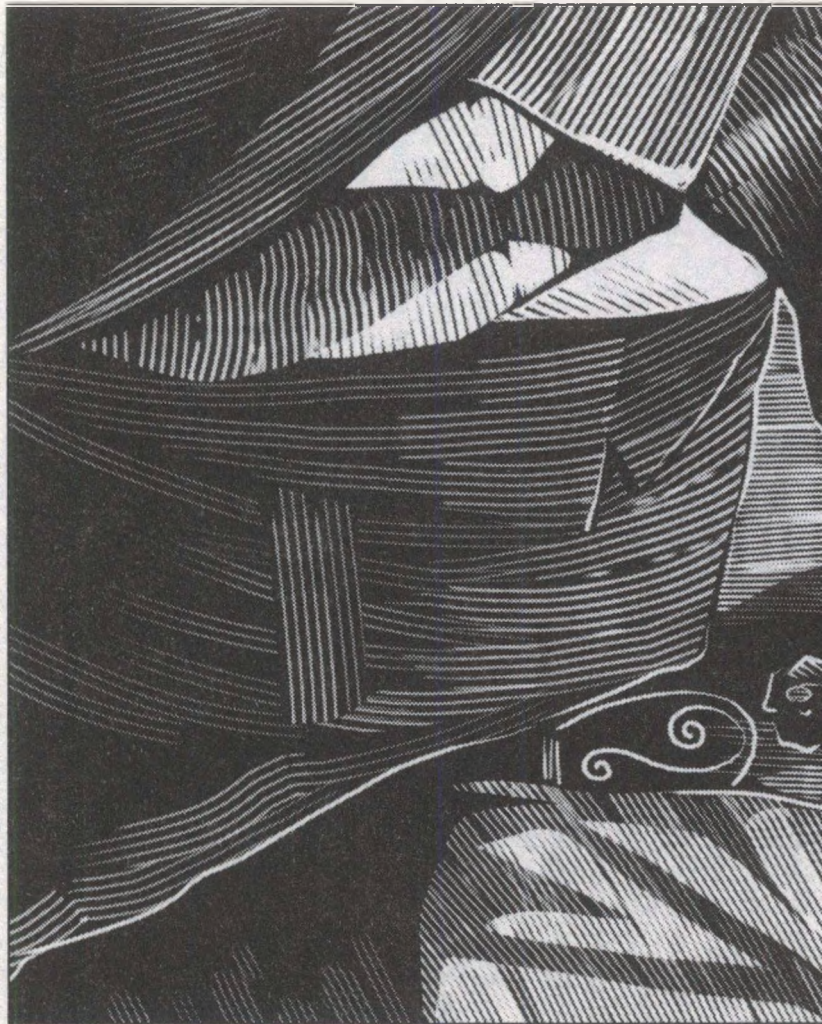
"Uh . . . something . . . I didn't understand all of it," the translator said. "He followed something into the desert. It disappeared over a dune."

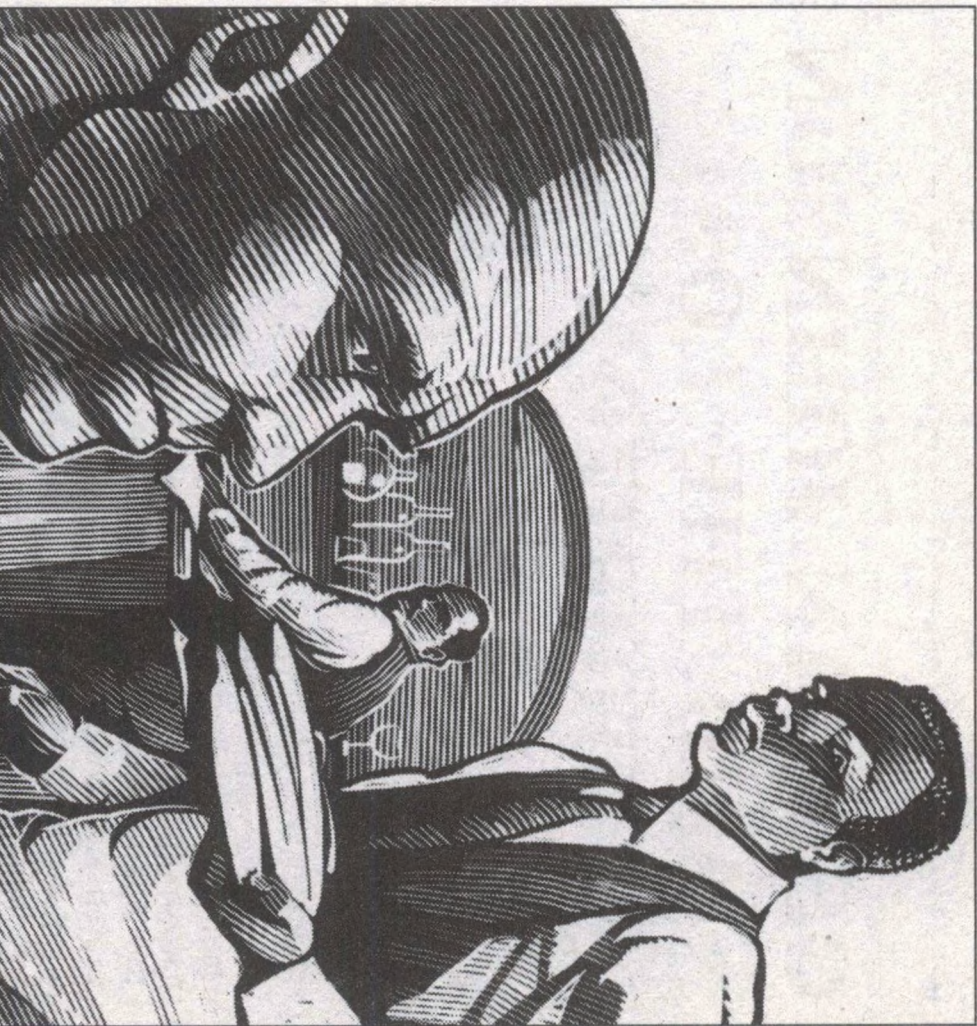
The outer layer of dry gauze was cut away revealing an ointment saturated dressing that had been applied directly to the skin.

"What was it?" the doctor asked. "How did this happen to you?"

Abebe responded with a hoarse and weakened voice. He summoned all of his strength in his effort to speak. The doctor's

Tim Foley





associate leaned close to him while meticulously avoiding direct contact.

"He says that he remembers light. I think he's confused," the translator said.

The doctor removed the final dressing and frowned as if repulsed by what he saw.

Abebe's face was a bloody bed of ulcers and blisters. His left eye was swollen shut, and the pupil of the right eye was opacified and gray.

"What did you see?" the doctor asked more forcefully. "What did you see?"

Abebe managed hoarse gurgles through fissured lips. The doctor nodded unconsciously at him, although it was obvious that Abebe couldn't see.

"I . . . I couldn't hear that," his associate said.

The doctor took a syringe from his bag and slowly injected morphine into a vein in Abebe's forearm.

"Is there anything I can do for you, old friend?" the doctor asked.

Abebe shook his head no in response to the translated question.

The doctor patted his shoulder gently before walking away. He knew Abebe would not recover, and he had done the only humane thing that he could do. Abebe would be dead before he reached the far end of the ward.

Outside the hospital a familiar figure wearing a quasi-military uniform without rank insignias awaited him.

"What did he say?" the man asked.

The doctor shook his head, indicating a lack of information.

"He followed a truck into the Denakil Desert where it disappeared over a dune. He saw a light somewhere. He said he saw the face of God."

German Johnson was forever a day late and a dollar short. He had learned to fly airplanes before he was sixteen, but when he tried to enter aviator training in Tuskegee, their quota had already been met. Eventually he joined the Army, only to find himself building roads with an all-black engineering unit.

Toward the end of 1939, it looked as though his luck was changing. He was chosen for a squad of black soldiers being trained for special operations, who were eventually loaned to the British government. They were inserted into a group of Ethiopian rebels in an effort to discover and report the nature of an increased Nazi presence evidenced by submarine activity off the Ethiopian coast. German Johnson spent a year of exploring the country from the northeastern plateau to the sun-baked coastal plains, but without

confirming anything useful, the operation was scrapped. The Italians were ousted, Emperor Haile Selassie returned from exile in England, and German Johnson returned to digging roads in some of the worst terrain ever conceived. When America entered the war in 1941, German Johnson kept digging roads.

Eventually the Nazis were defeated, Hitler committed suicide, President Truman bombed the Japanese, and German Johnson returned to a society that had no job for him. He became a man without direction. After eight years in uniform, his best available opportunity was waiting tables in a Harlem restaurant.

The Royce was located on Lenox Avenue, a short walk from 125th Street. It was a place whose name implied more elegance than it presented. The restaurant was owned by Leonard Royce, who had named the restaurant not for himself but for the Rolls-Royce he hoped it would allow him to afford.

Leonard was a big man—a towering six feet four inches tall with three gleaming gold upper teeth. He had a penchant for Cuban cigars and the music of the Caribbean in his voice. He never missed an opportunity to recount the lamentable failures of his life. He was a man made insecure by a limited intellect, and he craved acceptance in a society obsessed with discrimination. In such a society, a Negro with gold teeth and a weak mind generally had more detractors than friends.

German Johnson was a friend. Leonard had given him a job when nobody else would and tolerated German's depressions and bad manners.

German suspected that it was because he had always treated Leonard with respect. He didn't laugh behind Leonard's back when he spoke. He didn't belittle him for his garish taste in clothes. Leonard had passions and aspirations that were no different from his own; the fact that Leonard didn't articulate them well was no reason to demean him. Besides, Leonard had money, and a streak of mean tenacity that insured that he would keep it. Such a friend was valuable, although German refused to accept that as being the core of their friendship.

Four men gathered at a table in the rear of The Royce. White people dropped by The Royce occasionally, but these men had come consistently once a week for the past three weeks. They would huddle at a corner table, talking among themselves in hushed tones. They always ordered full meals, and they always tipped well. This was the first time they had been seated at

German Johnson's table, and he moved quickly in anticipation of a hefty gratuity.

One of the men, balding and in his forties, fixed German's eyes with a mirthless gaze. He ordered for the entire table in a slightly accented staccato voice.

German had to struggle to prevent himself from recoiling from the steely stare, yet he was still afraid his surprise was apparent. German had seen the man before, and his presence in this place chilled his soul.

"How do you know it was him?" Angie asked. "I mean, it was a long time ago, and you only saw him from a distance, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I saw him maybe fifteen or twenty times. It was him, Angie. It took me back. It was just like I was there again, and I could have reached out and touched him. I could see the pimples on his face. It was him, Angie. I could swear it."

"So what are you gonna do?" she asked.

"I don't know," he sighed.

He saw the expression on her face. The question she didn't ask was, Why are you talking about this if you're not going to do anything about it?

Angelina Ruiz had lived with German for two years. She had given his life focus and direction, everything that had been missing during his years in the military. Most people called her his wife, although he had made no effort to legalize their bond. German didn't understand his own reluctance. There was no other woman in his life, and they had talked about having children, so he had at least made a subconscious commitment to the permanency of their relationship. He found that he depended on her, needed her wisdom, and looked forward to awaking to her smile. Still, there were mysteries about her—things he didn't understand. He had begun to believe that those things were more about him than about her. He had grown up in a single parent home, and he had come to realize that it was hard to learn to be a man when he hadn't spent much time around one.

"What do you think I should do, Angie?" he asked.

"You got to tell somebody, German."

German Johnson had not been able to get the four men off his mind, especially the bald man with the penetrating eyes. Each time German saw the man, he became more convinced that he had seen him before. And if he was right, the man had a history of evil. His presence here could only mean the worst. The next week

they were seated at one of his tables again, and German dutifully served their needs while watching the balding man with a jaded eye.

As the restaurant filled quickly with hungry patrons, waiters scurried from table to table. Raucous laughter erupted from the bar and stole German's attention. Two uniformed police officers sat at the bar sucking down the free drinks that came with the beat, unless the business owner was stupid.

German perceived an opportunity, but he was hesitant to grasp it.

Hardy McPhail was a veteran officer. He was a big redhead whose stomach hung over his belt. He was no friend to the neighborhood. Cops like him came there to break heads and keep the masses in line.

German decided to try him anyway.

"Officer McPhail, can we talk for a minute?"

McPhail scrutinized him from head to toe and appeared annoyed at having been interrupted.

"Whaddaya want, Johnson?"

"Those people at that table in the corner. I think they're up to something."

McPhail responded with a skeptical frown. He leaned back on his stool in order to get an unencumbered view of the table at the far end of the restaurant.

"They look all right to me. What are they doing?"

German swallowed the lump in his throat. There was only so much information that he wanted to share with the likes of Hardy McPhail. He was afraid that his suspicions would sound so preposterous that he would be regarded as a fool.

"I don't know. They're acting suspicious. Maybe they're mobsters. I just thought they should be checked out."

McPhail's eyes shifted back and forth between German and the men he had pointed out. Finally, he tapped his partner on the shoulder, slid off the stool, and swaggered to the other end of the restaurant.

German watched from across the room as McPhail spoke to the men. Maybe, just maybe, speaking to a cop might rattle them enough to make one of them slip and reveal something incriminating. The more he thought about it, the more uncomfortable he became. The thought was foolish. It was too simplistic to imagine.

To his chagrin, within minutes McPhail was laughing and slapping them on their shoulders. The worst possible outcome seemed to unfold. They looked in his direction as the laughter continued. The balding man laughed as well, but there was no humor in his eyes.

McPhail was a dumb sonuvabitch. They didn't stick cops like him in Harlem as a reward. They were laughing at him. McPhail had told them who had sent him over there.

Eventually McPhail swaggered his way back to the bar and started gobbling down more free drinks and food.

"They're businessmen," he announced, while stuffing his mouth with hors d'oeuvres. "You ought to be glad they're over here putting money in your colored businesses. They could take their money somewhere else where they're appreciated."

The four men left shortly afterward. An uneasy feeling remained with German, however. The balding man's eyes never left him until they had gone.

"You seem to have developed an unusual interest in me, Mr. Johnson."

A week had passed and they were back at the restaurant again. The balding man's gaze was riveting; his eyes would not let German Johnson escape.

German fidgeted uncomfortably as he tried to formulate a response to the unexpected remark. Burning in his mind was the realization that the man had taken the time to remember his name.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he replied lamely.

"Of course you do," the man said. His voice exuded smug confidence while projecting an undercurrent of condescension. There was an element of darkness about him that German had seen before. It lay in that superior attitude others like him wore on their chests like medals of honor. But why come all the way to Harlem every week if that was the attitude they harbored? There were plenty of other places to eat in New York City.

Somehow German Johnson muddled his way through the evening. The man with the burning eyes attacked him with a silent malevolence. His gaze seemed to follow German throughout the room. Was it real or was it his insecurity? He continued to serve the four men while gingerly avoiding conflict. By the end of the evening he was convinced that he would have to convey his suspicions to someone of substance.

Waking up with Angelina was the most exhilarating part of German's life. She hugged him warmly and bathed his face with loving kisses.

"I've got to go," she finally said. "My mother's expecting me."

He released her reluctantly. The mention of her mother made him feel guilty. Rosaria Ruiz was a religious woman who could not

understand why a man of integrity would allow her daughter to live in a bond without the blessing of the Church. She never spoke about it, but her body language made her thoughts very clear. German started avoiding her a year ago, but her concerns seldom left his mind.

He and Angelina had settled into a comfortable pattern. It had become easier to continue than to change.

Breakfast odors quickly filled their apartment. Angelina's thoughts were always of him. She would never leave without bringing him breakfast.

Soon she was there—barefoot and clad in only a loose robe and the pleasant aroma of her morning bath. He wanted her more than the food, but she quickly slipped out of the robe and into her clothes.

"I'll see you this afternoon," she said and kissed him briefly before walking away.

"Angie, I love you," he said.

She stopped and turned toward him with a disarming smile.

"I love you too."

She started to leave again.

"Angie, I mean I really do love you."

Curiosity clouded her face. She came back and sat on the edge of the bed. Her dark eyes were trying to read him. She waited patiently for whatever was coming.

"Tell your mother that I'm not such a bad person," he said.

"Where'd that come from?" she asked. "She doesn't think that."

"Yes she does, but she's not right. I'm gonna do the right thing, Angie. I promise."

She looked at him intently without speaking.

"Okay," she whispered simply, and then she was gone.

"Captain Bracken speaking."

For a moment German wished he hadn't called, but Bracken was the only person he knew who might believe him. It was only that when it came to Captain Roger Bracken, his emotions got in the way. He disliked Bracken as much as Bracken disliked him. Bracken had disliked all of them.

They had never wanted Negro soldiers in the army, but once in, they certainly didn't want them in the same units with white soldiers. Of course Negro soldiers couldn't be in charge of themselves, so the Army chose white officers to command them. Roger Bracken's fortunes had led him to command a Negro unit. After President Truman integrated the military, Bracken's unit technically

qualified as an integrated unit because he was there, and to his chagrin he remained there.

In a sense, Bracken was as much of a victim as the rest of them. His life hadn't taken the direction he had planned, and he never learned to deal with it, but then neither had the Army.

"Captain Bracken, this is Sergeant Johnson."

"Who?"

"Johnson . . . Sergeant German Johnson."

"I thought you were out of the Army."

"I am, but I've seen something, and I think it may be important. I think it's connected to our mission."

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"Captain Bracken . . . Captain Bracken. You still there?"

German could hear Bracken sigh over the phone.

"Captain, I've seen men here in New York that . . ."

"Look, Johnson," Bracken interrupted. "I don't care what you've seen. I don't want to hear from you. Keep your ass in New York and away from me. Whatever problems you people have up there, they're your problems. Go tell it to that Garvey fellow. I just don't give a damn."

Bracken hung up before German Johnson could absorb the shock of his remarks.

German Johnson stood there holding the dead phone. What the hell was he thinking? It had been a white man's war, and this was a white man's problem. Who was he anyway, America's defender? He couldn't even get a decent job or make enough money to provide for a family. How could a man ask a woman to marry him on an income derived from two-dollar tips.

German went to work early in the afternoon before Angelina returned. He was still seething from his conversation with Bracken and hoped to work off some of his frustration before the customers arrived.

He could hardly keep his mind on his work. Every negative thought he ever had boiled up inside of him—every muddy road he had dug for the Army, every job that he couldn't get, every time someone had looked at his face and assumed they had the right to demean him.

The evening passed quickly. Business at The Royce was brisk and steady. German kept his eyes peeled for the four white men who frequented the restaurant, but they didn't appear, and he was happy about that. These men and their peculiarities were something that he wanted to escape. He wanted to go on with his life without worrying about unfounded suspicions.

The final customers left at two A.M., and German took the long walk back to his apartment.

The flashing light garnered his attention as soon as he had rounded the corner. Police cars and ambulances were such a common part of the Harlem landscape that they were almost unnoticeable. For some reason, a feeling of dread smothered him when he saw them on this night. As he drew closer, he realized that the commotion was in front of his apartment.

He began to run the final block. He bounded into the apartment building with his heart pounding and his mouth dry.

The stairs were congested with policemen as he reached the third floor. They were at his door.

"What has happened? This is my place! What has happened?" he cried.

Two uniformed officers restrained him while a plainclothed officer approached.

"Do you live here?" the plainclothed officer asked.

"Yes!"

"I need to know your name."

German handed him his wallet. He felt his heart sinking.

"The woman inside, Angelina Ruiz. Was she . . ."

"My . . . my . . . wife."

The words were difficult for him to say because they weren't true at a time when they should have been.

He grabbed the officer's arm.

"Please! Please! Oh, God! Is she all right?"

The officer stared at him without answering, and that alone was answer enough.

Angelina Ruiz had been beaten to death. The apartment's door had not been forced. Someone had knocked, and Angelina had opened the door innocently.

The pain in German's heart was inconsolable. He could not tear away the thought of the terror and pain she must have felt as one or more animals inflicted their torturous attack on her.

They had taken her away from him, taken away their joy and deprived them of what they would have become. The one thing that she wanted from him, and the one thing that he had withheld, was his name. Now she would never share it. It was a failing that he could never correct. He wanted to die with her because now he truly had nothing.

Weeks passed without any abatement from the pain in German's heart. He wandered through his life seeking refuge in

the repetitiveness of routine. He could find no solace and no answers to the questions that plagued him. He remained inconsolable. He came to work late and left early, with only the goodwill of those who cared to keep his head above water.

The four men who had frequented The Royce and raised his suspicions had strangely disappeared. That and the knowledge he held from his army days saddled him with paranoia. He couldn't escape the thought that they may have been involved somehow in Angelina's death. It was all the more terrible because he had come to believe that her fate might have been intended for him.

It all coalesced in his mind on a single rain-soaked day when his trek to work carried him past a storefront that he had seen a thousand times. He jogged under the awning of the store in hopes that the shower would soon pass. He looked at his watch and realized that he would be late again. A tiny semblance of reason had begun to return to his psyche. He knew that he couldn't continue his life in this manner forever.

He looked absentmindedly at the display in the plate glass window. It was a tobacco store where men could buy coffee and Cuban cigars. He looked into the store and locked his gaze on another pair of eyes staring back at him. The balding man with the staccato voice watched with an enigmatic smile.

German shook all over, and it wasn't the cold that made him shiver. He stepped up to the door as suddenly raging emotions threatened to consume him. The door was locked. He jerked at the knob to no avail. The balding man turned and casually walked to the back of the store and out of German's field of vision.

German pounded on the glass before realizing that other pedestrians were observing his agitated behavior. If he kept this up, someone would call the cops. He made a mental note of the store's location before he stepped back into the rain. He would be back.

Leonard Royce was waiting when German arrived, and the expression on his face told German that things were not well.

"German, I'm gonna have to let you go," he announced.

Reality was suddenly thrust onto German. He had known that this would eventually come, and he had been trying to pull himself together, albeit too late.

"Leonard, I . . . I really need this job. I'm sorry, but things . . ."

"I been tryin' to go easy on you, German 'cause I know what you been goin' through," Royce interrupted. "But you don't come to work on time, and when you get here, you're rude to the cus-

tomers. I'm losin' business, German, and don't nobody else want to work with you."

"You don't know what's been going on, Leonard, but it's worse than you think."

"How much worse could it be?"

German hadn't talked to anyone about this. He had kept it inside partly out of fear of how he would be perceived. Now, however, he was desperate. He needed to have Leonard Royce understand because he needed this job. He told him about the four white men who had come there every week. He told him about his suspicions. He told Royce that Angelina's death made no sense unless she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but how could she be at the wrong place in her own home? It only made sense if she was the inadvertent victim and not the intended victim. That meant the intended victim had to be German Johnson himself.

Leonard chewed on a Cuban cigar. He fondled it, puffed, and chewed again.

"Did you tell that to the police?" Royce asked.

"Have you forgotten where we live?" German asked. "This is Harlem. What do you think is gonna happen if I say some well-dressed white man broke into a colored waiter's place to murder his wife for no explainable reason?"

Royce leaned back in his chair and looked at German for the first time. He had been avoiding eye contact with German, as if embarrassed by what he had to do. Now the tautness in his face relaxed into an expression of calm, as if some burden had been lifted.

"Why don't you talk to this fella?" he finally said.

He handed German a scrap of paper on which he had scribbled a name and phone number.

"Who's he?"

"He's related to Sam Joseph, and I hear he has an interest in things like you just told me about."

"Thanks. Thanks, man!"

German jumped to his feet and grabbed Leonard's hand.

Leonard started looking away again.

"You're welcome, man," Leonard replied.

German released his hand and perused the scrap of paper.

"You still can't work here no more," Leonard said.

He fidgeted with a fountain pen while German stared silently with disbelief.

"Leonard, I . . ."

"I don't want to talk about it no more, German. I feel sorry for you, but you need to go somewhere else."

Leonard's tone dismissed him.

German backed out of the room silently. He didn't understand, but he didn't have to understand. He had screwed up again. He had tried to lean on friendship when he should have been doing his job. Leonard was still staring at his own hands when German finally closed the door.

The name on the paper was Francis Waxman. German called the man and arranged to meet him the following day. He had plenty of time since he no longer had a job.

Waxman lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where people who looked like German Johnson were rarely seen unless they were working. Waxman appeared to be in his late thirties, with swarthy features and an abundance of dark curly hair. He had the kind of appearance that made his ethnicity ambiguous, although his speech pattern was decidedly Caucasian.

Waxman's apartment was cluttered with boxes, folders, and papers that took up most of his visible living space. It seemed obvious to German that Waxman was single. No self-respecting woman would abuse such an elegant space like that.

"What is it that you think I can do for you, Mr. Johnson?" Waxman asked.

"I'm not sure," German replied. "What do you do?"

Waxman smiled.

"This and that," he replied with smug humor. "My uncle didn't know you, but he said his friend Mr. Royce mentioned that you had problems that may have related to your military activities."

"Maybe. I don't know. I was in the Ninety-Fifth."

"An engineering unit," Waxman interjected. "Road builders . . . the Alaskan Highway."

"That was later. I wasn't with them then. I was in Ethiopia in '41."

Waxman suddenly sat up straight.

"You and who else?"

"Four others."

"So, it was really true," Waxman mused.

"What are you talking about?"

"I had heard that a squad of Negro soldiers were sent to Africa to gather intel on the German presence in the Denakil Desert."

"We didn't find much," German confessed.

Waxman shrugged.

"A few months ago, four men began meeting at The Royce every week. I believe that one of the men was a Nazi officer whom I had under surveillance in Ethiopia."

"Are you sure?"

"I only watched him through binoculars. I never got closer than thirty or forty yards, but I think it was him," German replied.

Waxman stood, walked to the window, and gazed at the street below.

"I lost . . . my wife recently," German added.

"I'm sorry," Waxman said.

"I believe they meant to kill me," German explained.

"You think they did it?"

German nodded his affirmation.

"Had they seen you in Ethiopia?"

"No. Never."

"Then how . . ."

"He told me in the restaurant that I had developed and unusual interest in him. She was killed in our apartment the following day. The four of them never returned to the restaurant after."

"I see," Waxman mumbled.

"I saw him again yesterday in a tobacco shop off Lenox. The store was locked in the middle of the afternoon. There was an expression on his face. It was hateful . . . mocking."

German's face had become wet with tears, but he was barely aware of it.

"There are evil men in this world, Mr. Johnson," Waxman observed pensively. "They didn't all die with the fall of Germany. Many of them are here right under our noses. Let me tell you a story that I think you will appreciate.

"Long before America entered the war, British intelligence smuggled a military physician into a humanitarian field hospital near the Ethiopian coast. He was there to see an Ethiopian rebel who had become critically ill. The man died shortly after he left, but he was able to confirm the cause of death. The man died of acute radiation exposure."

"What are you saying?"

"The atomic bomb that your country dropped on Japan was developed from German technology."

"So that's why they sent us to Ethiopia," German said. "They thought the Nazis had a bomb in Ethiopia."

"No. Not a bomb, but perhaps some of the material and technology to create one. In case the war didn't go well, the Nazis decentralized some of their technology. It made sense. What better place than an isolated site protected by their fascist allies."

"But we never saw anything."

"Doesn't mean it wasn't there," Waxman replied.

"So what do you think this is about? These men . . . my wife."

Waxman fumbled through several folders and finally laid a series of grainy black and white photos before German.

His eyes immediately settled on the picture of a young man wearing a Nazi uniform who had a receding hairline. The similarity was unmistakable. This was the man he had seen in Ethiopia—a younger version of the man with the staccato voice.

“Revenge, Mr. Johnson. The Nazi concept wasn’t just political philosophy. It was a faith, a religion, an evil that transcended Hitler’s moment in history. There are those who won’t accept defeat and the horror they are willing to visit upon you is beyond your wildest fears.”

“Who are you?” German asked. His mind was unable to fathom all that he was hearing.

“My country exists under a British mandate, Mr. Johnson, but we’re not foolish enough to leave our security to others. If we were to fall into that trap, we would share the same fate as our families who died in Hitler’s concentration camps. That’s all you need to know.”

“So you’re some kind of diplomat?”

“Something like that,” Waxman smiled.

German smiled too. He knew a lie when he heard one, but it was a lie he was willing to accept.

Another week had passed, and the knock at German’s door was completely unexpected. Now that Angelina was gone, his phone rarely rang, and the diverse visitors who colored his life no longer brightened his door.

“Waxman. How did you find me?”

Waxman’s only response was a smile.

Waxman needed to see the tobacco store where German had last seen the man with the relentless eyes. Waxman’s purposes were still suspect to him, but it was a task German was all too willing to pursue. The long hours spent alone in grief and reflection had convinced him that the Nazis were involved in the death of his wife. *Wife*. He had come to call her that as if it had been a reality.

They found a corner where they could observe the store in obscurity. The closed sign on the door never changed, but occasionally there appeared to be movement inside.

Finally they saw the men. Two of them exited the building and got in a car in the alley and left.

German wanted to do something immediately, but Waxman cautioned patience. They watched the building most of the day observing the random exits and returns of the men. There seemed to German to be a pattern of movement developing, but Waxman

dismissed it. Eventually all four men left together.

Waxman sprinted across the street with German close behind. He entered the locked door so quickly German thought he had a key. Waxman seemed to have more talents than would be expected in an ordinary man.

"Here," Waxman said as they moved inside the store.

He handed German a pistol.

"What's this?" German asked.

"Security. Peace of mind. I thought we might need it. You ever shoot anybody?"

German diverted his eyes and turned away. During his entire tour of duty, he had never fired his weapon. For that matter, he had never felt an immediate threat to his life until he returned home.

The store smelled of the rich odor of tobacco. It appeared well stocked with cigars, pipe tobacco, and cigarettes. There was also cigarette paper for those rugged souls who preferred to roll their own. A few tables and chairs sat in the middle of the floor for customers who wanted to relax with tobacco and coffee.

Waxman moved cautiously toward the back of the store with his own pistol in hand.

A back door led down a darkened stairway to a lower level. A wall switch turned on a single naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, illuminating an unoccupied room, which appeared to be a storage area. There were several unopened crates along the periphery of the room. Waxman inspected the markings closely while scowling. He rambled through papers and folders left on a desk. He found notebooks and perused their contents.

"Just as I suspected," he muttered.

He used the phone on the desk to make a call.

"Who are you calling?" German asked.

"Friends," Waxman answered succinctly, without making any effort to explain further.

"What is this place? What's going on here?"

"These are dangerous men, Mr. Johnson."

"Shouldn't you call the police . . . the FBI?"

"Nobody's going to help us," Waxman interrupted. "There are no suspects in your wife's murder, and the police aren't asking questions anymore. Your former commanding officer didn't even want to talk to you. There are others coming who could help us, but they won't be here in time. I'm not absolutely sure how much time we've got, but if I guess wrong, hundreds of thousands of people could die. These men who killed your wife want to kill you, and they want to destroy your country as well as mine. We have no choice."

"I don't understand. What's happening?"

"Mr. Johnson," Waxman began with a weary sigh. "Many of the scientists and theoreticians in Germany were not friends of your country. Some of them accepted every word the Nazis spoke. Had the timeline been slightly different, it could have been New York and Washington going up in smoke and flames rather than Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This man you saw in the Ethiopian desert was in Hitler's nuclear research program. What better place to hide than Harlem? Hide among the invisible and you become invisible. With a device as small as one of these crates, they could destroy this city and all of its people."

German thought he felt his heart stop. His mouth was dry. He could feel the flesh peeling from his bones just like the pictures in *Life* magazine.

They both heard a soft thump. A closing door, perhaps, disrupted the stillness.

Waxman looked toward the stairway and backed into the shadows.

"Get behind me," he whispered.

"The light!" German exclaimed.

"Don't worry about that," Waxman replied.

The four men were halfway down the steps when the man in the lead stopped. He said something to the others in a foreign language before taking another cautious step downward. He looked around the poorly illuminated room suspiciously.

German gripped his pistol tightly. He could feel his heart pounding with anticipation. The man had remembered that the light should have been off.

Suddenly Waxman made a move, and German's anxiety accelerated.

Waxman stepped out of the shadows and fired point blank into the first man's chest from no more than five feet away. As the first man fell, the others stumbled over each other in their panicked attempt to escape, but Waxman kept firing.

German bounded out of the shadows. Three men lay bleeding on the stairway. The fourth one—the balding man with the penetrating eyes—stood with his back plastered against the wall, but he wasn't moving. His eyes appeared glazed, and bubbles of blood emanated from his trembling lips.

"Shoot him!" Waxman yelled.

German just stared at the man. His hands were sweating and trembling as he walked closer to him.

Waxman was frantically trying to reload his revolver.

"Shoot him, dammit! He killed your wife!"

German took another step toward the man. The expression on

the man's face was not one of fear or anger. It was surprise.

"I don't know your wife," he gurgled.

The sound of his voice prompted a rage in German. He shot him without hesitation—once, twice, and a third time after he fell.

German couldn't stop trembling. It wasn't as he had imagined. There was no feeling of satisfaction. There was no fulfillment. He felt ugly inside.

"The first one is always the most difficult," Waxman said, but it was no consolation.

There was more noise upstairs. With amazing speed, German's gun was suddenly pointing toward the top of the stairs.

Waxman quickly moved in front of him and pushed his arm aside.

"It's all right," he said.

To German's amazement, several men wearing coveralls moved past them down the stairs and began gathering the papers. They hovered over the crates with equipment German had never seen.

"Geiger counters," Waxman explained.

German sat on the floor and cried for the first time since Angelina's funeral.

German watched several minutes of hushed discussions between Waxman and the men in coveralls before Waxman approached him and informed him that they had to leave.

"What about all of this?" he asked.

"They will take care of it," Waxman replied.

"What's in the crates?"

"Nothing. Tobacco. Cigars."

They went up the stairs into the store.

"But you said . . ."

"Look, we didn't find what we were looking for," Waxman interjected impatiently. "There was no evidence of radioactivity down here. That's good. That means that perhaps nothing has been imported into your country yet."

German stood stiffly. For a moment he was frozen by his thoughts.

Waxman looked at him with a curious expression.

"What is it?" he asked.

"They weren't armed," German said. "We killed four men, and they weren't armed. I mean, if they were dangerous spies, wouldn't they have been armed?"

"Their papers indicated they were interested in explosives. You know their history. You think we should have waited?"

"They had no guns."

"They killed your wife."

"He said he didn't know my wife."

"You believe him?"

They left it there. They walked together for a time but said very little to each other, then Waxman shook German's hand and walked down a side street and was never seen again.

Six months later, German was beginning to live again. He had found work, and the pain in his heart was finally beginning to diminish. He saw Irella Hardy as he entered his apartment building and transiently thought that he might linger at the entrance in hopes of avoiding her. She wasn't really so bad, just an elderly busybody who rarely ventured outside her apartment but still managed to keep up with everyone's business.

She spotted him and smiled pleasantly as she waited for him to approach.

"Mr. Johnson, I never got a chance to express my sympathy. I was so sorry to hear about your loss."

"Thank you," he replied, hoping his terse response would be a sufficient end to the conversation.

"They ever arrest that man who was over here that night?"

"What man?" German asked, suddenly interested in Irella Hardy's words.

"I told the police all about him. I don't appreciate strangers hanging around here."

"A stranger? Did you see him go near my apartment?"

"I don't know, son. I was scared, so I closed my door. He was so big he looked like a big black giant with them gold teeth shining like they was headlights."

German's mouth dropped open. It couldn't have been. It was impossible. German mumbled something unintelligible and walked away.

His pain returned in an instant. All of his memories and the agony of Angelina's death came back as if it had happened yesterday. The drawer of his dresser had the only answer he was willing to accept, the gun that Waxman had given him. He stared at it for several seconds before shoving it into his pocket and hurrying out of the door.

The street was dark, but he moved along the familiar route without hesitation. Although lost in thought, his feet moved deftly around a corner and down Lenox, past the tobacco store where the light faded from the eyes of the man he had feared. He hadn't been

on this street since the killings. He looked up at the building, almost stunned by what he saw. The building was boarded up and plastered with warning signs. A uniformed police officer stood on the corner warning people to keep moving.

"What happened here?" German asked the officer.

"Don't know. Government business. They condemned this building four months ago. Some kind of contamination on the upper floors. They don't tell us what's what. They got us here round the clock to make sure nobody goes inside. They come down here every day inspecting and testing. I tell you, I'm getting pretty damn tired of this. Hell, it's cold out here."

German nodded and moved away. So it wasn't in the basement, he mused. Somehow that didn't make him feel much better. He had killed a man. Maybe he was a bad man, but looking the man in the eye while pulling a trigger stole something from him he could never regain. He had consoled himself with the knowledge that the man was a killer who had taken the only person he had ever loved. Now, he wouldn't even have that to help him to rationalize his deeds.

The Royce was busy. The waiters who knew him were clearly surprised at his presence.

"Where's Leonard?" German asked one of them.

"Haven't you heard? Leonard's in the hospital, man. He's pretty bad. They don't expect him to make it."

German suddenly had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. That couldn't be. He was determined to find Leonard and do what he had intended. He needed to do this for his own sanity. He couldn't bear to breathe the same air as the man who had killed his Angelina.

Harlem Hospital's rectangular edifice sprang into the night sky. German walked through the doors adjacent to the emergency entrance and was obscured by its perpetual organized chaos. He was directed to Leonard Royce's room and stood outside his door steeling himself for what he knew he must do.

He stepped inside with his hand in his coat pocket and the pistol firmly in his grip. He was startled by what he saw. Leonard Royce lay still, with his eyes closed as if unaware of German's entry. His once muscular frame had become an emaciated shell. His skin, devoid of its subcutaneous tissue, had become only a covering for his skull.

German found it difficult to look at Leonard. He stood at the bedside and pointed the pistol at Leonard's head. Nothing mattered anymore except the need to stop the pain that raged inside

of him. Only the cessation of Leonard's breathing could satisfy the anger he felt.

German's finger pressured the trigger. He was surprised at how easy it seemed to be.

Royce's eyes suddenly opened, and the unexpected development momentarily unnerved German. His finger relaxed as he observed Leonard's labored breathing. He appeared to be straining to focus on German. His eyes shifted from German to the gun. His lips began to tremble as he managed a hoarse whisper.

"I never meant to hurt her."

The big man began to cry, but it meant nothing to German. German already had blood on his hands, but it was the wrong blood. He could see the scenario unfold in his mind. Royce, with all of his personal failures, had come to covet acquisitions as symbols of his success. Angelina was elegantly beautiful—too beautiful to waste her life with a mere waiter. She was the kind of woman Royce would think deserved to be with him.

Angelina would have been surprised by his presence at her door, but his familiarity would have provided her with enough comfort to let him in. She would have been disgusted and repulsed by his attempts to approach her. She would have pushed him away, fought him.

German couldn't bear the thoughts anymore. He jerked the weapon back toward Leonard's head. Waxman had been right. The first time was the most difficult.

"I always wanted to go back home to Jamaica."

Leonard's voice was barely discernible. German's hand trembled as a moment of indecision crept back into his mind.

He was looking at a breathing dead man—a living skeleton. A bullet in the head would be a blessing, and why should Leonard have that? This slow, agonizing death was exactly what he deserved. What could be any better than Leonard Royce dying by inches in the stench of his own excrement? He pulled the gun away and slipped it back into his pocket.

As he backed toward the door he imagined he could see the disappointment in Leonard's eyes. Death would not be his rescuer today. There was a certain satisfaction in that.

"Excuse me, are you a relative?"

A physician with a white smock approached him as he left the room.

"Uh . . . yes, a cousin," German lied quickly.

The doctor pulled him to the side and in a sympathetic voice informed him of the hopelessness of Leonard's condition. He was dying of metastatic thyroid cancer. Like a number of others who

had frequented the tobacco shop, he had suffered from repeated exposure from a radiation source that had been hidden on an upper floor. Since it had been stored in crates of tobacco products, the cigars Leonard liked to smoke were contaminated as well.

German walked out of the rear of the hospital and into the Harlem night. He walked past his apartment and past a hundred dark streets. He kept walking. He walked until he saw the sun being reborn on the eastern horizon. It was a beacon, like the spirit of Angelina leading him to a new beginning. ♪

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SCHOOL FOR BURGLARS

MELODIE CAMPBELL

He was a well-dressed burglar, Marge had to admit. The black turtleneck fit his lean body in a manner most Italian, and the jeans were unmistakably Gap. He was clean shaven, dark haired, and wore a thin black mask à la Zorro. Not a bad look at all, she mused, although on the whole, damned inconvenient at the moment.

Marge leaned against the kitchen doorframe and took a sip from her mug. He must be okay at the break-and-enter part, as Max hadn't heard a thing. Well, if Max wouldn't growl, she could.

"What do you want?" she said, drawling.

The burglar looked up with a start. A shiny black pistol appeared in his hand.

"Your money," he said in a low voice.

Marge laughed. "My money? You want my money? You and a thousand others, Zorro. Take a number and get in line." This was too much. As if the bank report hadn't been enough for one day. What else could bloody well happen . . .

Marge eyed the intruder intently. Poor kid, he looked confused; this obviously hadn't been a situation covered in course 101 at the school for burglary. Marge watched him shift from one foot to the other, while trying to steady the gun.

She nodded to it. "Where'd you get the gun?"

The burglar started. "Wot?"

"The black shiny thing in your hand. Where'd you get it?"

He looked down at the weapon. "This guy from Toronto . . ."

Marge snorted. "You kids, these days. Spoiled rotten. In my day, we had to go to Buffalo." Marge took another sip. "Is it loaded?"

"Of course."

"Then will you do me a favor? Can you aim for that chartreuse vase over there?" She pointed to a shelf in the adjoining dining room. "Ghastly thing. My mother-in-law gave it to me. Please shoot it."

"No!"

"Then give it to me, and I'll shoot it." Marge set her mug down on the faded wood-grain countertop and reached for the pistol.

"Christ, no!" He appeared aghast. "It'll make a noise!"

"Then why do you carry it if you don't want to make a noise?"

The burglar ran a shaky left hand through his hair. "To scare you."

"Oh," Marge said carelessly. "Want some coffee? It's Starbuck's." She reached for the pot on the counter. The burglar yelped and dropped the gun. Both hands shot up to protect his face, and just as swiftly, Marge moved forward to pick up the firearm. She held it up in her right hand and peered down the sights.

"Christ, are you crazy?" The man in black peeked through fingers.

"Crazy?" Marge looked up, startled. "Am I crazy? You're the one who comes bursting in here with a gun you don't even have the decency to use, asking me for money. And you think I'm crazy? Have you looked at this place? Is there anything here you'd want?"

She marched into the dining room, signaling with the gun for the intruder to follow. An ancient bulldog lay sleeping in the sun in front of the bay window. He opened one eye, then closed it and rolled over.

Marge grabbed a bowl off the fireplace mantel with one hand. "Here. Like this? Take it. I hate it. Want the ashtray? It's ugly." She shoved the bowl into the burglar's arms.

"Want this picture?" Her free hand reached for it. "It's my husband. He's a bum. Mother was right. Don't you hate it when your mother's right? You don't want it? No? Neither do I." Marge threw the framed photo on the hardwood and stomped on it. The glass made a pretty bell-tinkle sound.

"Lady, you're nuts!" He put the bowl carefully down on the dining table and tried to inch his way back to the kitchen. The dog lifted his head and growled. All movement stopped.

"There isn't a damn thing in this house worth a damn thing." Marge grumbled and glanced around. So this is what her life had come to. Entertaining a Gap-clad burglar in the shoddy remains of a faded dream home. What could she begin to offer him that was worth taking? It was embarrassing, that's what it was. There was a time when she would have been proud to show any thief through her stylish home, and there would have been lots to interest him, oh yes. But that was then and this was now. That was before the high-tech crash, and the midlife crisis, and Bipsy or Popsy, or whoever the hell she was.

Now the shabby couch perfectly complemented the worn area

rug and faded curtains. The once-trendy dusty pink and pale green color scheme screamed circa 1980. Everything in the place dated from long before the Berlin Wall came down. Funny how things that looked good twenty-five years ago had a tendency to look cheesy and unappealing today. Marge had often thought this house would be a perfect makeover project for one of those television design shows, "From Muck to Magic." But how did one actually get on those shows? And how did one person acting alone actually manage to get rid of tacky furnishings . . . or cheating husbands, for that matter?

"Don't you have any money?" The burglar spoke in a whiny voice, which didn't fit the image at all. This guy was just not her vision of a villain. Were all men destined to disappoint her? Just where were they training burglars these days—in day-care centers?

"No money," she said morosely. "At least not here. Apparently, it's all in an account I didn't know about. Oh don't look so surprised—I only found out today."

"Three accounts," she continued. "We're supposed to have three accounts. One for household, one for savings, and one for vacations to Florida. Except apparently there's a fourth account I didn't know about. Maybe he's been keeping it for a surprise, huh? Maybe it's a big whacking surprise for my forty-seventh birthday next month. Yeah, and I'm Pamela Anderson's twin sister."

Sounds of snuffling and shuffling came from the backdoor mat. Max lurched up from his position on the floor, wandered over to the man in black, sniffed one leg ("Argh!"), then the other ("Don't do that!"), and then ambled into the kitchen. He stopped right at the back door, blocking it, and flopped down on the mat.

Marge continued to stare at the black firearm in her hand. "You married?" she asked finally.

The burglar shook his head in earnest. It seemed to calm the shaking of the rest of his body.

"Don't. Not worth it. I used to dream about getting married when I was a girl. No kidding, I'd dress up my Barbie dolls and spend hours rehearsing just the perfect wedding ceremony. 'Barbie, do you take Ken to be your lawfully wedded husband,' et cetera. You know, that sort of thing. And then Ken would kiss Barbie, and her little legs would fling right off the ground. Like this." Marge used the gun to demonstrate.

"But mostly I dreamed about wearing a long, frilly white dress and opening all those presents. Lovely big boxes wrapped in silvery paper with great big bows, and inside, all those wonderful surprises. That's the best part of getting married. From then on, it's downhill all the way. About as exciting as Bohemian lead crys-

tal goblets on a shelf. Twenty-four ninety-nine a set and available in nice stores everywhere. That's what my marriage has been like. Empty wine glasses. Cheap ones. As a matter of fact . . . since you're here . . ."

Marge walked over to the china cabinet and reached inside with her left hand. "Take this china, will you? It was a wedding gift. What a mistake; the china and the wedding. You want it? It's Doulton."

Marge held out a plate. The burglar shook his head.

"Then stand back. I'm going to smash it."

Marge heaved the plate against the wall, then another and another. That felt good. Rather fitting how they all split in two, just like the marriage they were supposed to celebrate. Too bad this Zorro-guy was such a wimp. If only he'd stop yelping . . .

"This is fun. Heeeeyahh—" Marge continued heaving plates and making karate noises. "Wanna help?"

"Goddamn looney!" The burglar muttered and yelped from behind the table barricade.

"Gawd that feels better," Marge said. "And a lot cheaper than my therapist. Want a cigarette?" She pointed to a pack on the dining room table.

The burglar shook his head violently.

"Mind if I smoke?"

The man in black blanched. "What, are you trying to kill me?"

Marge groaned. "Oh glory. A New Age burglar. Probably a health nut too. How did I get so lucky? I'll bet you even jog."

The burglar nodded.

"Vegetarian? Yogurt and wheat germ and all that?"

"No yogurt. That's dairy."

Marge almost choked. "I've just got to say it: You're from Vancouver, right?"

He nodded apologetically.

Very polite people, the West Coasters. This poor kid, he wouldn't last a month in Toronto. Marge frowned. "You know, I thought you outlaws were supposed to lead depraved and exciting lives, full of drugs and alcohol and wild sex. I mean, isn't that supposed to be the point of it all? I don't mean to be rude, but your life sounds about as exciting as a yoga class."

"I like yoga."

Oh dear. He was starting to sound defensive. Marge tried to be more understanding. "Frankly, I think you should lighten up a bit. Have a few laughs. For a yoga nut, you look awfully tense. Man in your line of work . . . must be stressful. You need to let it all hang out. Go wild for a bit. Sure you don't want a coffee?"

"Caffeine." He shrugged apologetically.

"Oh right. Well, I tell ya—this plate throwing zaps the tension out of you. I feel much better. Sure you don't want to try— wait a minute . . . why don't we use the gun? Here, you hold the plate, and I'll aim for the middle of it—"

"Argh!" screamed the burglar. He careened around the table, tore down the front hall, and flung open the far door. It opened to a small den.

"Wait," yelled Marge, running after him. "Wait! Don't go in there—"

A middle-aged man lay slouched on the ancient couch. He appeared overstuffed, as did the couch.

"Jeeze," the burglar gasped, "is he dead?"

"No, just a teensy bit sedated. I was thinking a pillow, but," Marge looked lovingly down at the pistol in her right hand, "this might be perfect." She lifted the gun, lined up the sights, and fired. The body on the couch shuddered slightly, then relaxed into the pillows for a long snooze. A crimson bib bubbled up from under the chin.

"How do you like that? First try, even. What a neat little thing."

"Holy shit," yelled the burglar. "Holy, holy shit!" As Marge turned, he dodged forward and grabbed the gun from her hand.

"Silly. I wasn't going to kill *you*." Her smile beamed. "The way I see it, we have two options. You can help me get rid of the body, or . . . I can call the cops. 'Officer, a burglar broke into my house today, and he had a gun! I just got in from shopping to find the backdoor glass shattered, and my husband lying in a pool of' . . . Hey, wait!"

The front door slammed. Marge stood by herself in the empty home and shook her head.

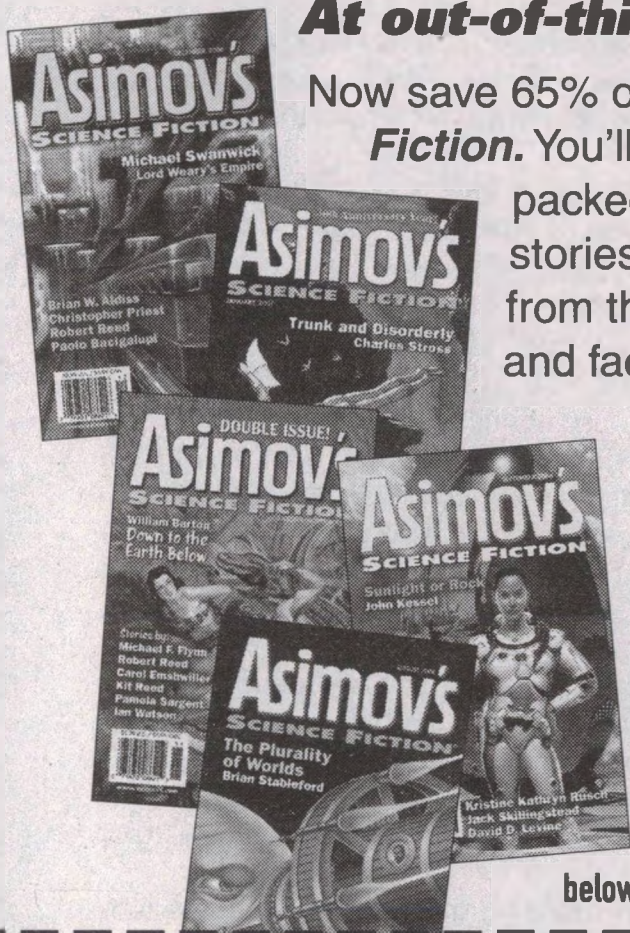
"Burglars these days. Where the hell are they training them?" She reached for the phone. 🐦

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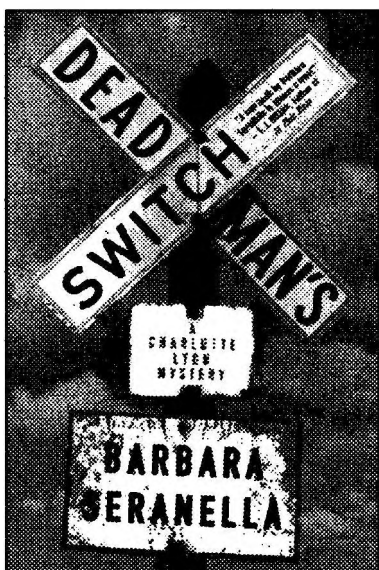
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BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Our three books this month share a Southern California setting. They feature a new direction for a veteran author; a star turn for a colorful sidekick in a long-running series; and an award-winning debut novel.

Barbara Seranella, who died earlier this year at the age of fifty, drew on her own unconventional life experiences to create her popular character Munch Mancini. According to Saranella's



author bio, "she's been a hippie, a heroin addict and a biker chick," and like Munch, she was also an auto mechanic. Her last novel, *DEADMAN'S SWITCH* (St. Martin's, \$23.95), is not a Munch Mancini story, however; instead, it introduces Charlotte Lyon, a crisis management expert in North Laguna Beach who cleverly turns her obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) into a strength. C. Lyon Communication Management provides media training and litigation support among other services, but her specialty is

crises response strategy and "crisis unwinding"—managing the discovery phase and the changes that inevitably follow.

When the Sunliner Express train, headed for the Indian casinos in Palm Springs, derails with six passenger cars jumping the tracks and the engineer and an elderly film star-turned-philantropist dying in the wreckage, Charlotte is called in by the company heads to manage the media attention that follows and get to the bottom of the tragedy.

Seranella makes the crisis management portion of her story fascinating as Charlotte works to anticipate what she can and to respond quickly to unforeseen turns of events. But it is the investigation of the accident and the investigator of the accident—Todd Hannigan of the National Transportation Safety Board—that adds the spice one expects from Seranella. Running a modern train is not an uncomplicated task and Charlotte and the

reader get an education in just how complex the operation really is.

In the course of the investigation, Seranella takes Charlotte from the polished boardrooms of Sun Rail past the stock farms and horse estates to the nearly deserted desert stretch where the train derailed and to the company's stockyard in Anaheim where their cars are refitted and repaired and tested. The end result is a cleverly plotted mystery with a most unusual and engaging hero and sharply drawn ancillary characters, ranging from Charlotte's manipulative mother to the old woman who saw aliens steal her forklift.

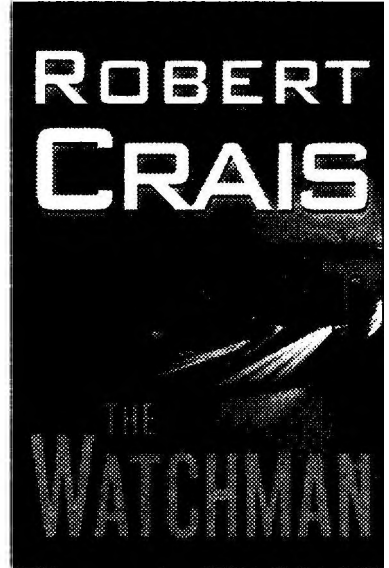
Most of us know the authors we read only through their published works. Barbara Seranella had the ability to transmute her life experiences into novels that reflected a courageous and fierce optimism. It is sad that *Deadman's Switch* is her last book, but she leaves a lasting legacy of personal and professional achievements.

Joe Pike and Elvis Cole made their debut in Robert Crais's Edgar-winning novel *The Monkey's Raincoat* in 1987. But while Elvis became the star of the series that followed, Joe waited in the wings for twelve years before taking the leading role in 1999's *L.A. Requiem*. Now Pike

once again takes center stage in **THE WATCHMAN** (Simon & Schuster, \$25.95), while Elvis plays second fiddle.

Joe Pike has always been an important element of the Elvis Cole mysteries and his return to the spotlight is accomplished in brilliant fashion by Crais, who sacrifices none of his trademark suspense, twists, and violent action. In an earlier case (*The Last Detective*), Pike and Cole had received help from a man whose only stipulation was that one day he would call on Pike to do a job and Pike would do it without question. Now that call has come and the job is to protect a "package" (i.e., a person) that is already "hot," meaning an attempt has already been made on the target's life. The target is Larkin Conner Barkley, a rich brat whose reckless driving lands her in the middle of a deadly mess where even Joe Pike's considerable skills may not be enough to protect her.

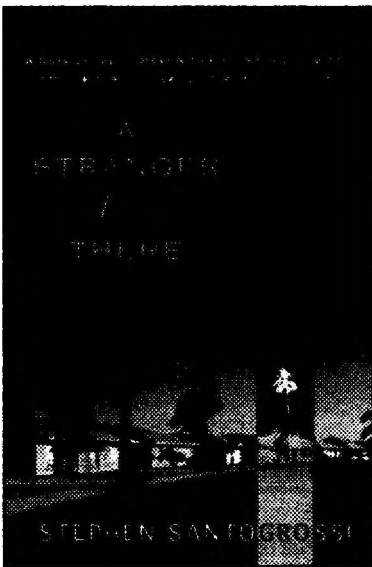
Being on the defensive is not Pike's style, and after successfully thwarting a couple of attempts to get at Larkin, Pike (and Cole) take the offensive. It's not easy when all Pike knows is that no one can be trusted—not Larkin's father, not the federal agents, not the police, not the real estate mogul nor the putative drug kingpin



who supposedly wants her dead. Moving from safe house to safe house trying to stay ahead of the hunters, Pike and his charge hit Malibu, Eagle Rock, and Echo Park as they stay on the move in and around L.A.'s glamorous neighborhoods as well as its gritty industrial warehouses. Crais keeps the wheels spinning, literally and figuratively, at breakneck speed. Pike and Cole don't always play by the book, but it would be foolish to argue with the results they get or the vicarious pleasure derived from those results.

A STRANGER LIES THERE (St. Martin's, \$24.95), Stephen Santogrossi's debut featuring ex-con Tim Ryder, has been published as the winner of the Best First Traditional Novel contest sponsored by St. Martin's and Malice Domestic. As the novel opens, Ryder and his wife Deirdre have left colorful pasts behind—or so they think.

As an idealistic but not naive college student near the end of the Vietnam War, Tim and several friends got caught up in the machinations of an older activist named Turret, who talked the kids into robbing a bank as a means of funding candidates opposed to the war. The botched robbery resulted in long prison sentences for



both Tim and Turret, who went to prison on Tim's testimony. Thirty years later, Tim has served his time and constructed a better life for himself as a woodworker; his wife Deirdre, a drug counselor, has her own past demons to contend with. Tim's new life is blasted the morning he wakes to find the body of a young man on his front lawn and subsequently learns that Turret has just been released from prison. The investigating police officer views neither Tim nor his wife sympathetically, and Tim's first bumbling efforts to learn more about the unidentified

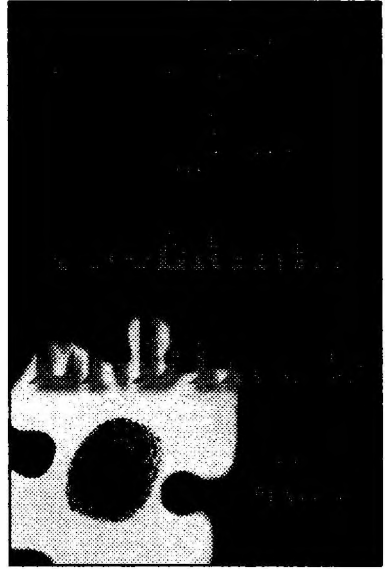
body result in additional problems. But Tim continues to dig deeper, plumbing such disparate places as the New York club scene and a strung-out desert community as he follows faint clues from his own past and his wife's as well.

The plot of *A Stranger Lies There* may be weaker than those of the veterans' novels reviewed above, but Santogrossi writes powerfully and movingly about a man who has paid for his mistakes only to find out that he's not through paying and never will be. Tim Ryder's long strange journey is one that could happen to anyone, and that universal chord helps lift Santogrossi's debut to a winning level and makes him an author to watch.



Crime fiction connoisseur and prolific anthologist Otto Penzler presents *UNCERTAIN ENDINGS* (Pegasus Books, \$23.95), a collection of classic mystery shorts with unsolved endings, ambiguous endings, or no endings at all.

Penzler does well to include the highest quality of storytelling from some of crime fiction's most notable authors from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries: O. Henry, Aldous Huxley, Mark Twain, and Roald Dahl, and lesser-known authors Peter Godfrey, Owen Johnson, and Gerald Kersh, each make appearances, delivering time and time again a clever premise and a vexing riddle that will at once torment and entice readers.



Three-time Edgar winner Stanley Ellin sets the pace for the anthology, opening with his tale "Unreasonable Doubt" (1958), in which a story within a story cuts off abruptly, leaving the protagonist, to whom the story is being told, anxious and ignorant—a plot that foreshadows the formula for the eighteen stories that follow. In these otherwise frustrating riddles, the author's brusque and playful closing of the curtain is the reader's greatest reward.

The stories in the collection often complement each other. For instance, Ray Bradbury's "At Midnight, in the Month of June" (1954), which takes the reader into the mind of a serial strangler, offers a denouement to his earlier "The Whole Town's Sleeping" (1950).

Frank Stockton's notoriously unfinished "The Lady, or The Tiger?" (1882), tells of a young lothario whose must choose between two doors. The riddle, left unanswered, led Stockton to continue the tease in "The Discourager of Hesitancy" (1886). That story, and author Jack Moffitt's own solution to the mystery, "The Lady and the Tiger" (1948), are included in the anthology, rounding out this exemplary sampling of crime fiction's most confounding short tales.

—Nicole K. Sia

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: J. A. Konrath serves up another mystery cocktail in *DIRTY MARTINI* (\$23.95), the latest in his Jack Daniels series, out this July from Hyperion. • Best-selling author Lawrence Sanders' *THE BURGLAR IN THE LIBRARY* (\$7.99, Harper) is now available in paperback.

THE WEIGHT

TIM MALEENY

“I found a dead pimp last week.”

Danny Rodriguez spoke the words without inflection, his eyes flat, utterly devoid of emotion. Sometimes a dead body was a friend, a partner, a fellow cop. But most days it was just another corpse. After eighteen years on the job, he'd stopped counting.

“Anybody we know?” Sam disappeared behind his kitchen counter as he opened the door to his refrigerator, bending at the waist to retrieve another beer from the bottom shelf. He stood and gestured toward the small living room as he handed a bottle to his former partner.

“Gracias.” Rodriguez twisted open the beer. “I needed a drink.”

Sam waved his arm in the direction of his kitchen. “This bar never closes.”

“Never?”

Sam nodded toward the open window across the room, sunlight streaming in. “Some would say we shouldn't be drinking at all.”

“Only a civilian would say that,” countered Rodriguez. “My shift ended at six this morning. Right now, it's the middle of the night for me.” He moved his chin in the direction of a clock above the stove. “What time do you pick up Sally from school?”

“Don't worry, not till three.”

Danny raised his bottle in a quiet toast. “How's retirement?”

“It's only been a couple of months, Danny.”

“That bad, huh?”

Sam laughed as he took a seat on the small sofa. “I'm busy as hell but bored out of my mind.”

Rodriguez smiled. “So it's good I still come over for a drink.”

“Beats watching Oprah.”

“I was worried you were getting tired of my stories,” said Rodriguez. “Hadn't heard from you in a while.”

Sam shrugged. “Like I said, I've been busy lately.”

“Watching Oprah?”

“I prefer Ellen, you want to know the truth,” said Sam with a straight face. “You try playing Mr. Mom sometime.”



Rodriguez shook his head. "I'm not ready."

"You better get ready," said Sam.

"Still can't imagine what it's like."

"Like nothing else," said Sam. "You'll think your heart's going to explode. You'll do anything to make them happy, keep 'em safe. How many more weeks till the bambino arrives?"

Rodriguez sighed. "Three. My wife's as big as a house."

"Don't tell her that."

"Too late."

Sam chuckled. "You're too honest for your own good."

Rodriguez raised his beer. "Coming from a cop, I'll take that as flattery."

"Ex-cop."

"You can always come back, you know, we still got plenty of homicides. We're up to ninety this year, and it's not even September."

Sam shook his head. "I'm not that bored." He absently rubbed his right pant leg, feeling the hardened plastic of the prosthetic through the denim. Part of his brain still registered surprise at the lack of sensation, though at times he'd swear the leg was itching. Not for the first time, he wondered where the hospital sent all the severed limbs, and whether there was some mass grave where someone's arm lay buried next to his leg, idly scratching it for him.

Rodriguez broke Sam's morbid reverie by moving across the living room to the small fireplace. Sam watched a pair of cop eyes soften as Rodriguez slowly scanned the photographs along the mantel.

In the first set Sam was holding a young girl who looked a lot like him, brown hair going in all directions, hazel eyes set wide. Moving along the mantel she aged, each click of the shutter a year or more. Rodriguez chuckled softly when he saw himself smiling back from one photograph, his arm around Sam, their patrol caps askew. The girl was sandwiched between them, almost as high as their shoulders.

"Sally grew up fast, didn't she?"

Sam smiled but didn't say anything.

Rodriguez moved along the row of photos, his eyes clouding as he found Marie. Sam's wife was always smiling, her warmth palpable even from an old photograph. And Sam looked more alive whenever Marie was in the frame, much younger than the man sitting on the couch, even though some of the pictures were only a few years old. Rodriguez turned toward his ex-partner slowly, feeling older himself from the weight of it all.

"I still expect to see Marie every time I come over," he said quietly. "Can't believe she went so fast."

"Cancer's a lot more deadly than any bullet," Sam said, rubbing his false leg. "It never misses."

Rodriguez nodded. "I know it's been tough on Sally."

Sam worked the muscles in his jaw. "She's still angry."

"With you?"

"With everyone," said Sam. "Mad at the doctors. Pissed at me for not being able to save her mom."

"Don't you think she's being a little hard on you?"

Sam shrugged. "I was never around much."

"Because of the job."

Sam nodded. "But her mom made it okay when she was little—made me seem like some kind of hero or something. Told her stories about her dad at bedtime. Now her mom's gone, and she found out her dad isn't Superman after all, just Clark Kent. Can't say I blame her for acting out. No one should lose their mom like that."

"Or their wife."

Sam didn't say anything. The two men sat silently for a long minute, looking at the bottles in their hands. This always came up, no matter where the conversation started. And despite all the times Sam had wanted to talk to someone about Marie during those long, dark months in the hospital, he couldn't change the subject fast enough when someone else—even a friend—brought it up. He refocused his eyes and set down his beer.

"You were telling me a story," he prompted.

Rodriguez took the hint. "It's a good one."

"A good story about a pimp."

Rodriguez nodded. "A dead pimp."

"Someone we know?"

"Remember Shortball?"

Sam's eyes narrowed. "Bill Jackson."

Rodriguez nodded. "His legal name."

"The midget pimp."

"A real scumbag—all three feet of him."

"Worked the Mission District."

"Yeah, kept a bunch of rooms in the dive motels, next to the Grand Cinema."

Sam nodded.

"Specialized in runaways," continued Rodriguez. "Nice girls from the suburbs, looking for a little excitement. Local girls from the public schools, hooked on some shit they tried on a dare but can't afford anymore. Most of them no more than fourteen, if that."

"The only good pimp . . ." Sam let his voice trail off.

Rodriguez nodded but didn't say anything.

"Where'd you find him?"

"One of his dive apartments," said Rodriguez, wrinkling his nose. "Been dead two days."

"It's been hot lately—how'd he look?"

"Like a dead midget pimp," replied Rodriguez. "Body was bloated, the skin split in places. Looked like he was gonna pop, shoot across the room at any moment. I asked the M.E. if the cause of death was a bicycle pump."

Sam smiled despite himself. They'd both told that joke a thousand times, but for some reason the medical examiners never thought it was very funny. The M.E.'s reaction was the best part.

"Shot?" asked Sam.

"Nah," replied Rodriguez. "Overdose. Our man Shortball shot up one time too many."

"Smack."

"Yup. Right between the toes."

"So it's not your problem," said Sam. "It's not a homicide."

"Maybe," said Rodriguez. "See, he'd been worked over a bit."

"You said he looked like a balloon."

"Even so, there were signs."

"What'd the M.E. say?"

"The heroin killed him. It was nasty, cut with some kind of antifreeze or something."

"So?"

"So maybe he got beat up by an angry john."

"One of his girls more likely."

"You got a point." Rodriguez shrugged. "He was a little guy."

"So maybe he got beat up, was depressed, and *then* shot up."

Rodriguez nodded. "But this time he crossed the line."

Sam saw the look in Rodriguez's eyes. "But maybe . . ."

"Maybe someone helped Shortball shoot up."

"What's the captain say?" asked Sam.

"Captain says we've got a dead pimp with no family," replied Rodriguez. "Says our closure rate sucks, and I should leave it alone. We start an investigation and I come up empty, it looks like an unsolved homicide."

"Guess things haven't changed so much since I was on the job."

"Still got the same mayor." Rodriguez flashed a cynical smile.

Sam nodded. It was all over the papers. The mayor was young, good looking, and a magnet for the press. His latest crusade was fixing the "dismal" rate of homicide closures. Never mind budget cuts that slashed the size of the force. Forget that most of the

deaths were gang-related shootings in parts of town the city council had turned its back on. There were too many suspects, no help from the courts, and no witnesses. The local residents didn't trust the cops because the force was spread too thin to have any real presence in the neighborhood.

But those were cop problems, not the mayor's. The press took the bait like sharks to chum, and now the police were second-guessed on every investigation. Under a microscope until a case was closed. It was the one part of the job Sam didn't miss.

"It's only gotten worse since you retired," said Rodriguez. "Our balls are getting squeezed by that pretty-boy, so a messy case just means more pressure. And I must tell you, my friend, my balls can't take much more pressure."

Sam nodded again. "But if you go with the overdose story—"

"No case, no pressure, no problemo." Rodriguez drained his beer, stood up, and walked back across the open kitchen to grab another. He looked over his shoulder. "You mind?"

Sam shook his head. "That's why I buy them."

Rodriguez came back and sat heavily on the chair facing the couch. "So you see why I wanted a drink."

"So you left it alone?"

Rodriguez smiled. "Not a chance."

"You're looking into it?"

Rodriguez broadened his smile. "Already did."

Sam's eyes widened. "And?"

"I found the perp," Rodriguez said triumphantly.

"Already?" said Sam. "What did the captain say?"

"Haven't told him yet," replied Rodriguez. "Just put it together last night, and I'm still checking my facts—I did this under the radar, called in a couple of favors. Got the boys in the labs to do a couple of tests. Now I gotta see if I can do it by the book."

Sam nodded. Unless the lawyers would buy it, there wasn't a case. If Rodriguez couldn't back it up, it would be worse than if he never went digging in the first place.

"So the perp's still out there?"

Danny shrugged. "For now; he's not going anywhere."

"You sure it's the guy?"

Rodriguez held up his hand. "Let me break it down for you."

"It's your story, but I need an intermission." Sam drained his beer and pressed down hard on the arm of the couch, getting the momentum behind his good leg. He walked down a short hallway past his bedroom to the bathroom beyond. When he came back, Rodriguez handed him another beer.

"Thanks," said Sam. "So what happened next?"

Rodriguez leaned forward, obviously pleased with himself. "I figured a scumbag like Shortball, he's got lots of enemies."

"Plenty of suspects."

"Too many," replied Rodriguez. "So instead of looking at Shortball, I decided to look at his girls."

Sam nodded his approval. "Smart."

"I thought so," said Rodriguez. "I asked around, finally connected with a girl named Molly, who used to work for Shortball before going solo. She hooks me up with one of the girls in his stable, Sadie."

"And she saw something?"

"I wish," replied Rodriguez. "But I got a lead on a girl who doesn't belong there."

"How so?"

"She's supposedly a runaway, but she's not the type, according to Sadie. She tells me a guy came around last week looking for this girl—an older guy."

"Private dick?"

"Maybe," replied Rodriguez. "Or maybe the dad."

Sam nodded. "You get a name?"

"Not right away," said Rodriguez. "Nobody uses their real names anymore. Sadie was probably Betty Sue back home—you know how it works."

"So?"

"So the lab guys come back with something from the autopsy, give it to me on the q.t.," replied Rodriguez. "Narrows the field. I do a little follow-up, I come up with a name."

"And?"

"Turns out I know the guy."

Sam's eyebrows moved up an inch. "The killer?"

"Yeah, a guy I met when I worked the neighborhood, back when I was on patrol."

"You still knew where to find him?"

"That was easy."

Sam nodded. "Always is, once you got a name. So what did you tell the captain?"

Rodriguez looked disappointed. "Wouldn't be much of a story if I just ran it up the flagpole, would it?"

"What did you do?"

Rodriguez took a deep breath, pausing for dramatic effect. "I'm so paranoid these days, I decide to take it a step further on my own. I visit the perp at his house and lay it out for him."

"No Miranda, no arrest?"

Rodriguez shook his head. "*Mano a mano.*"

“And?”

Rodriguez held up his hand again, not wanting to rush his narrative. He was clearly enjoying himself.

“At first we’re just talking, like I’m talking to you now. I ask him how he’s doing, tell him I’m working on a case in the Mission, thought maybe he could help out.”

“Nice and easy.”

“Reminisce about old times, tell a few jokes, like that.”

“He didn’t get jumpy?”

“Not so much at first. Just listens, you know. Then, maybe half an hour into it, he starts asking questions.”

“He knows that you know,” said Sam.

“Or maybe he just wants to talk.”

“Get it off his chest.”

“But you never know. So I wait till he leaves the room, then I loosen my gun in its holster.” Rodriguez reached down and patted his Glock, sitting on his right hip in a black leather clip-on holster.

“You think he’s packing?”

“He might be, right? I know this guy from way back, and he always had a piece.” Rodriguez shrugged. “And he’s moving around the apartment during our chat, ’cause I want to keep it casual—it’s not like he’s always right in front of me.”

Sam nodded. “Can’t be too careful.” He shifted on the couch, moving his weight back to his good leg. “So you brace him?”

Rodriguez shook his head. “I decide to let him make the next move.”

“Didn’t you once tell me a guilty man always runs?”

“Not always,” replied Rodriguez. “Remember that kid Mikey, the one they called The Fly?”

Sam smiled. “Climbed up walls, broke into houses hanging upside down on a rope—guy was right out of a comic book.”

Rodriguez nodded. “They bust down his door, wake him up, tell him that his ass is arrested, and what’s Mikey do?”

The two men spoke in unison. “*Mikey goes back to sleep.*”

Both men laughed. Sam shifted his weight, trying to get comfortable. Rodriguez waited for his friend’s smile to fade before draining the last of his beer and standing up.

“How you gonna sleep tonight, Sam?” he asked.

Sam looked at his ex-partner.

“Like a baby, Danny,” he said. “Just like Mikey.”

Rodriguez nodded. “I told you the guys in the lab found something?”

Sam nodded back. “The needle wasn’t clean?”

“Wasn’t just smack in there.”

Sam didn't say anything.

"It was insulin," said Rodriguez.

Sam rubbed his prosthetic leg slowly, digging his fingers into the knee where the metal clasps wrapped around the plastic. "You think the killer would use his own needles?"

"He might have improvised at the scene," replied Rodriguez. "I would."

"Maybe Shortball was diabetic."

Rodriguez shrugged. "It's a possibility." He nodded at one of the photos on the mantel, the gangly girl beaming as she stood between two smiling policeman. "That picture right there of Sally—she's a couple years older now, but she still looks the same."

Sam worked his jaw. "I guess she does."

"Absolutely," said Rodriguez. "Anyone would recognize her."

Sam looked at the picture but remained silent.

"You gave me a copy," said Rodriguez. "I still have it."

"Did I?"

Rodriguez moved his right hand to his hip, wrapping his fingers around the contours of his gun.

Sam looked up at him. "You always were a good cop, Danny."

Rodriguez moved his thumb across the safety strap and snapped it home, securing the gun. His hand came away from his waist and dangled loosely at his side.

"Still am," he said simply, bending to pick up his empty bottle. "Thanks again for the beer."

Sam looked up at his ex-partner with a curious expression. "You didn't finish your story."

"Didn't I?" Rodriguez frowned.

"This guy you think killed Shortball," said Sam. "What did you say to him?"

Rodriguez leaned down and put a hand on Sam's shoulder.

"Be more careful next time, partner."

Rodriguez turned and set his empty bottle on the kitchen counter. Without turning back he crossed the small foyer to the front door and silently let himself out.

After a few minutes Sam leaned forward and eased the snub-nosed revolver from the small of his back. He stood awkwardly and crossed the room slowly, pausing to set the gun on the kitchen counter. Checking his watch, he pulled open a drawer, dropped in the gun, and pulled out a set of car keys. School was over at three, and he hated being late. 🐦

COUNTRY MANNERS

BRENDAN DUBOIS

Being the only woman private investigator within a fifty-mile radius in a rural county in upstate New Hampshire, one would think that business would be sparse. Maybe so, and maybe I was lucky, but I always had enough work to pay the bills, sock some cash away every year in my IRA, and still have enough free time to canoe the local streams, do some stargazing, and pretty much stay out of trouble.

And staying out of trouble was something I always try to do. So no deranged boyfriends looking to find their girlfriends, no young ladies looking for creative ways to eliminate their parents, and nothing else equally shady ever made my client list. Which is why I should have cuffed my visitor that late morning, tossed him out onto the sole sidewalk of Purmort, New Hampshire, and then taken the rest of the day off.

But maybe I'm getting older, or bolder, or something, for I didn't sense trouble when he first came in.

My office is small, with a desk, phone, three chairs, computer, and two three-drawer filing cabinets with good solid locks. The walls have a framed print of Mount Washington, my framed license from the N.H. Department of Safety, and an award I received in a previous life from the New England Press Association. The window behind me overlooks a set of abandoned B&M railroad tracks and some marshland, and the front glass door gives a nice view of the Purmot grass common, once you get past the gold leaf lettering that announced K. C. Dunbar, Investigations. Next door, in the same building, is an Italian restaurant, the Colosseum, which is run by a second-generation Greek family, which is typical for New Hampshire. But don't ask me why.

So the door opened up that morning and a man came in, slim, late thirties, short, dark blond hair. He was wearing a nice black suit, light blue shirt, and red necktie, and carried a slim, black leather briefcase. I looked at him and he looked at me, and I thought, lawyer, out of town, looking for something or another from the local

talent. Said local talent being me. Still, I opened the center drawer of my desk and waited. Yeah, probably just a lawyer.

And in a way, I was correct, but only correct in the manner of stating that if you loved ice, the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* was a brilliant success.

"Miss Dunbar?" he asked.

"The same," I said.

He put his briefcase on one of the two polished wooden chairs in front of my desk, held out his hand, which I promptly shook. "Stewart Carr." And then he put his hand inside his coat, pulled out a thin leather wallet, and popped it open in front of my face. "Special Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

I looked at the photo and the accompanying detailed information card, and then looked up at him.

Perfect match, of course.

"Gee," I said, knowing I sounded awestruck but hoping my expression said something else.

"May I sit down?" Carr asked.

"Of course," I said, my first mistake of the day.

He sat down with a smile and looked over at me and said, "Just to clear the air, Karen Christine Dunbar, I'm not here about any of your clients or past cases. So we can get past the whole client confidentiality issue."

I leaned back in my chair, conscious of his nice suit and my own faded jeans and T-shirt advertising last year's Purmort Old Home Days. "All right. Consider it passed."

He looked around and said, "Nice office. Cozy."

"Thanks. It works."

"I would think that an investigator in your position . . . might be more comfortable working out of your home."

I smiled and decided I really didn't like Agent Carr. Tried to one-up me by knowing my whole name, and now telling me that he knew how much I made and no doubt how much I had in the bank. "Thought about that at first, but I decided that some clients, well, I didn't want some clients being in my private space where I live. Besides, the landowner gives me a break on the rent: He owns the restaurant next door, and I help keep an eye on the place during off hours now and then."

He grinned. "Really? Didn't think there'd be much crime in a place like Purmort."

"Not enough to reach the FBI statistics desk, but there's more than enough vandalism, break-ins, and the general stupid people

doing stupid things to keep some of us busy.”

“I see.”

“And speaking of stupid . . . What can I do for the Department of Justice today?”

Ouch. That left a mark. While his grin remained, his face colored a bit as he reached over, picked up his briefcase, put it on his lap. He snapped the lid open and said, “We want to hire you.”

I tried not to laugh and admired myself for succeeding. He waited for my reply, I suppose, and I said, “Go on. You’ve got my interest.”

“Good. Glad I’ve succeeded, Karen.”

A snippy tone but I let it pass. “For how long? And where? And why?”

“This weekend. Day after tomorrow. Friday evening to Sunday morning. The where is a farmhouse near the end of a dirt road called Dutton Hill Road. Number eighteen. Familiar with the road?”

“Road, yes. Farmhouse, no. What’s the deal with the farmhouse?”

“We’d like you to conduct a surveillance on the house for that period of time, Friday evening to Sunday morning.”

He pulled out a sheet of paper, examined it for a moment, and said, “Your normal rate of pay is eighty dollars an hour. The period of time we require your services is thirty-six hours, for a total of two thousand eight hundred eighty dollars. We’ll offer you three thousand for that work.”

Not a bad nut, I thought. Exhaustive work for thirty-six hours, but I could pull it off. And it would really help fatten up the old bank balance. Still, when the government comes calling, why not answer with enthusiasm?

“All right. Call it four thousand.”

Another little bit of color was added to his face. “You seem pretty confident of yourself.”

“I’m the only good P.I. within quite a distance.”

“There’s Roger Valliere. Out in Montcalm.”

This time, I didn’t succeed. I did laugh. “Roger’s a retired deputy sheriff. Nice old buck, if you want a car repossessed or a lawsuit served. For a thirty-six hour surveillance . . . he won’t last, sorry.”

“Thirty-five hundred.”

Oh, what the heck. “Deal. What’s the surveillance? Keeping an eye on who’s living in the farmhouse, or who’s going in and going out?”

“The place is empty. We want you to see if anyone shows up during that time frame.”

“Who?”

"Anyone, that's who."

"Sounds intriguing. All right, you haven't answered the most important question."

"Which is?"

"Why?"

"Sorry?"

I shifted in my seat. "Why? I've been in business long enough to know that private work and public work rarely meet, and when they do meet, they usually don't get along. So why is the FBI wanting to hire lil' ol' me?"

"Resources."

"Really?"

"Really. You know what's been on our mind since 9/11. White-collar crime, bank robberies, computer fraud. It's all taken a back seat to counterterrorism. We don't have the manpower anymore to do routine work. Which is why we're looking to hire you for those thirty-six hours. We have information that someone of . . . someone of interest might be in the area."

"Someone bad?"

"Let's just say someone of interest and keep it at that."

"Do I get to know who he or she might be?"

Another chilly smile. "If you take the job, you'll be given a secure, prepaid cell phone. If someone shows up—even somebody delivering a package or reading a gas meter—you'll give us a call."

I thought about the job offer, thought about my bank account, and looked at Agent Carr again. His face had a mocking look about it, like he was daring me to take the gig.

"And you're saying the farmhouse is empty?"

"Quite empty," he said.

"You sure?"

"The FBI says its empty. We'll leave it that."

I tried not to show my lack of enthusiasm for the FBI's capability to determine very much unless it was presented to them wrapped up in bright red gift ribbon.

"All right," I said. "You've got me. Thirty-six hours beginning this Friday evening."

I went to a side drawer of my desk to pull out a standard client contract, but he beat me to it. A sheaf of papers came out of his briefcase and went across my desk.

"A contractor agreement," he said. "Please review and sign. And note the nondisclosure and confidentiality clauses in the last two pages."

I suppose I should have sent him on his way and then spent an hour or two with a friendly local attorney to see what I was get-

ting myself into, but I still liked the thought of thirty-five hundred dollars for thirty-six hours of running surveillance. I skimmed through the form and signed the bottom, and Agent Carr did some magic of his own, and then passed over a cashier's check for half of the amount.

"Standard, am I correct? Half in advance."

I slipped the check into a side drawer. "Quite standard."

Two more items were now on the desk. A cell phone and a business card. "My business card, if you need to contact me. And the encrypted, prepaid cell phone, to make the contact. Any questions?"

A whole bunch, but only a couple came to mind. "This he or she. Dangerous?"

"You have to make your own judgment," he said quietly. "The fact that this someone is a person of interest to the FBI should give you the necessary guidance."

"All right," I said. "Do you want a report when the surveillance is done?"

An amused shake of his head, as if I were wasting his FBI-man time by asking such silly questions.

"No, no report necessary. If we don't hear anything from you, we assume no one showed up. And if someone shows up, you'll make the call, and we'll take it from there. Anything else?"

Well, I thought. This was sure going to be a day to remember.

"Nope, I think we're all set, Agent Carr."

He snapped his briefcase shut and stood up. I stood up as well and shook his outstretched hand. He said, "I'm pleased this went so well. Country manners, am I right?"

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Country manners," he said. "I'm originally from Boston, got assigned to the Chicago bureau when I graduated from the Academy . . . I like the pace, like the nice country manners up here. It's a nice change."

"Glad to hear it, Mister FBI," I said, putting on my most innocent smile.

And I waited until he got out of view before looking down at my center desk drawer, open since Agent Carr had first walked into my office. And nestled there, above a checking account statement from the Purmort Cooperative Savings Bank, was my Ruger stainless steel .357 revolver. For whenever a sole male comes into my office, I always have the center drawer open, just in case.

Country manners, indeed.

So after a while, I decided it was time to leave my office and get home to see Roscoe, my male better half, to see how he was doing

and to tell him about what had happened with the FBI. I got a free cheese pizza from my neighbors next door—being in a conservative small town, I leaned toward conservative eating when it comes to pizza—and a five-minute drive got me home. I parked my four-year-old Ford SUV in the dirt driveway, and apologies to all, but an SUV gets me out of trouble during rainy days, snowy days, and muddy days here in Purmort, and balancing dinner in my hand, I went home. My home, small and lovely, is a cottage of sorts on two acres of land on the Hanratty River, and it belongs to me, Roscoe, and the Purmort Cooperative Savings Bank. I got the door opened and yelled out, “Honey, I’m home!”

No answer. Typical.

Through the small living room into the combo kitchen and dining room, I put the pizza box down and said, “Roscoe, come on, it’s not nice to tease.”

Approaching footsteps. Finally.

I grabbed a Coke from the fridge and went to the countertop that served as my table, and sitting on a tall stool, washing a paw, was a black and white short-haired cat that was the size of a small raccoon.

I scratched his head as I opened the pizza box and popped open the Coke. “And how was your day, hon?”

In reply, Roscoe started purring. He’s not a lap cat, not a cat overbrimming with ootchie-cootchie cuteness, but he can always be counted on to start rumbling with pleasure when on the scene.

Which meant, in my universe at least, that he beat out most male bipeds.

As I munched on the first slice, I said, “So. Get this. There I am, minding my own business, wondering what to do for the rest of the day, when the FBI shows up. A representative from one of the top law enforcement agencies comes into Purmort and requests my services. Can you believe it?”

The purrs grew louder. “No, I can’t believe it either. If the FBI really wanted to do a freelance surveillance and not tie up their own resources, they’d bring in contract people, already vetted and experienced. Like retired military or FBI. Not a local yokel, as attractive and smart as she might be.”

The purrs seemed to slow. I finished one slice and reached for another. “I hope your purr drop-off isn’t a comment on my looks and abilities.” I took a smudge of tomato sauce and let Roscoe lick it off with his raspy tongue. Our own secret, never to be shared with his vet.

“So what does that leave me?” I asked. “It means we’re en route to make a nice piece of change that can get the house

painted before fall . . . for doing just a bit of surveillance work. It also means we're involved with something slippery with the Feds."

I thought some more, started to reach for a third slice, hesitated.

"And, my friend," I said, rubbing his face with both of my hands, "it means we're being set up for something. I don't know what it is, but I don't like it, money or no money. This whole deal stinks, 'cause when the Feds are there, they got the bigger guns, and you know what they say. God is always on the side with those with the heaviest artillery."

Then it seemed chilly for a moment, and I picked up Roscoe and hugged him tight and said, "Lucky for me, we've got a weapon or two hidden away."

The next day was Friday, the day my surveillance was set to start, but I had a little private work to take care of before I officially clocked in on the Fed's payroll. After my morning exercise routine—roll out of bed, shower, breakfast, pet the cat—I got out and went to the Purmort Town Hall, where I had an interesting few minutes with the town clerk, Mrs. Pam Dawkins, who helped me make sense of the town's tax records.

"So," she said, looking at me over her half-spectacles from behind the waist-high counter that separated the small office from the town hall lobby, "what interest do you have in this farmhouse on Dutton Hill Road?"

"Professional, what else? And I suppose I can count on your usual discretion."

"Sure," she said, winking at me. Last year I had helped her locate Mr. Dawkins, who had skipped out of town and had a philosophical opposition to paying child support. However, after I had located him, he found a higher philosophical opposition to having his cheating butt in county jail, and since then, the child support checks have been regular and on time.

Pam flipped through a bound computerized printout, running a thick finger down the columns of names and numbers, and she said, "Ah, here it is. Eighteen Dutton Hill Road. Two bedroom home . . . owned by something called Grayson Corporation. Property tax bills paid promptly, every six months."

"How long have they owned it?"

"Hmmm . . . looks to be ten years. Before that it was owned by Muriel Higgins, she used to be the principal of Purmort Regional High School, and it'd still be owned by the Higgins family, if it weren't for her two worthless sons. Morons decided to start a business doing day trading on the Internet, and when

they finally crashed and burned, they had to sell their mom's place to pay off the tax bills and penalties."

"I see," I said. "And what's Grayson Corporation?"

"Don't know," she said. "They're not local. The bills get sent to a post office box in Allentown, Pennsylvania. No phone number, no contact person. Sorry, Karen."

"No problem," I said, gathering up my bag from the countertop, but before I turned to leave, Pam said, "Want to know more?"

"Excuse me?"

"I said, do you want to know more about Grayson Corporation?"

"Sure," I said. "What do you have in mind?"

She smiled, flipped the tax book shut. "I'll give it to Stephanie."

"Steph? Your daughter?"

"Absolutely," she said. "She's not old enough to drive yet, but Karen, she knows how to dig out info from the Internet."

"Pam . . ."

She raised up her hand. "Please. Even though we settled up our bill, I still owe you. And I'd rather have Steph spend her computer hours doing something productive, instead of looking for boys to chat with. Deal?"

I smiled back at her, thought about Agent Carr. Well, he was right about one thing.

Country manners.

"Deal," I said, and I left Purmort's seat of government.

Dutton Hill Road started off paved, and after a couple of miles, became a dirt road. A typical rural road out in this part of New Hampshire, there were wire fences set on each side of the road, interspersed with rock walls that were about as old as the town. Small homes and farms were set off at a bit of distance, most of which had a few horses or cows or some chickens out there in the yards. Nothing that was really a working farm, but small homes with folks that liked to keep their hands in the rural tradition of their parents and grandparents.

Lucky for me, the mailboxes out here were numbered, and it took me about ten minutes of driving before I reached number eighteen. It was on the right side of the road, and the mailbox was black, with white numerals neatly painted on. The driveway was dirt and the home was about fifty feet away. I pulled to the side of the road, let the engine run for a bit.

"Well, Tyler," I said, speaking to an empty vehicle. "Time for you to make another appearance."

From the passenger's seat, I picked up a dog leash and a home-

made flyer, showing a mournful Labrador retriever's face, with the words LOST DOG at the top, with a description, name—Tyler—and my phone number, off by one digit. I switched off the engine, got out of my SUV and went up the driveway, calling out, "Tyler! Tyler! Where are you, buddy?"

With dog leash in one hand, flyer in the other, I certainly didn't look like a P.I. checking things out; I just looked like a concerned young lady seeking her lost pooch. One of the many advantages to being a female P.I. Strange men bopping around a neighborhood tend to be observed and recorded. Odd women doing the same are usually overlooked, especially if they're women looking for a lost dog, or women conducting a door-to-door survey, or women looking for an address. Nice bit of tradecraft that gives us a slight advantage, especially since male P.I.'s, when doing surveillances, can usually do their business with empty soda bottles when their bladder gets too full. I, on the other hand, know the location of every rest stop, gas station, and kind motel owner within fifty miles.

So up the dirt driveway I went, calling out poor Tyler's name—a dog whose picture I had downloaded off the Internet months ago—and checking things out. The first thing I noticed was the driveway; it was dirt, which is usual for this part of the state, but this one was in very good shape, a nice mix of dirt and gravel, nice drainage off to both sides. I went up to the farmhouse.

"Tyler! You around here, buddy? Tyler!"

Quick look around the place. Two story, maybe a hundred years old or so, with unattached garage and a barn to the rear. I went around to the outbuildings, dangling the leash. The buildings were empty. No rakes, no farm equipment, nothing.

"Tyler!"

The yard was in poor shape, with weeds and knee-high grass, but the buildings didn't reflect the landscaping. They were in okay shape. Hard to explain, but if the place hadn't been lived in for a decade or thereabouts, you'd expect things. Cracked windows. Shingles falling off. Siding cracked and worn. The place wouldn't make *Town and Country* magazine, but it was in better shape than one would expect.

"Tyler!"

Off to the house. Knocked on the door. No answer, of course. But procedures had to be followed. I made notice of the door. Nice and solid, lock and dead bolt. First class, all the way. Went to the side window, peered in. Place was empty. The big room had wide planks for a floor, and I could make out a kitchen counter off to the rear. Everything looked too clean, too neat.

I juggled the leash again. Empty house, well maintained, nice driveway up and back.

Like it was waiting for someone, someone to stop by for a quick visit on his or her way to someplace else.

The someone being my surveillance target?

Perhaps.

I went back down the driveway to my SUV. Looked at the flyer.

"Thanks again, Tyler. Can always count on you."

And I went into the SUV, closed the door, and said, "But don't tell Roscoe I said so."

Home, getting ready for my thirty-six hours. A small knapsack, digital camera, telephoto lens, cassette recorder, notebook, spotting scope, and iPod. Looked to Roscoe, scratched his head for good luck, tried to ignore the growing feeling in my gut, like a little field mouse, busily chewing away on my innards. I was getting into something, and this something I couldn't quite figure out.

Then my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Karen? Pam Dawkins here. How are you?"

"Doing fine," I said, scratching Roscoe's head one more time.

"What's up?"

"Can I come over for a quick visit?"

I looked at my small collection of gear. "Pam, I'm about to—"

"Karen," she said firmly, "it's about Stephanie. I'll be there in ten minutes."

So ten minutes later, I was in my driveway, waiting, when Pam drove up in a battered Toyota pickup truck, colored black except for where rust had chewed up on it some. She stepped out and I said, "Pam, I really don't have that much time."

"Whatever time you have, you'll have some for me," she said, leaning back against the truck cab. "Stephanie did her magic work on the Internet this afternoon. Found some things out. Told me what she learned."

"And why did you have to come here to tell me? Why couldn't you have called?"

She frowned. "Because Stephanie told me it'd be better to tell you face to face. And not over the phone. So here I am. And none too pleased that I volunteered my daughter this morning."

"Pam, I'm sorry if I—"

She held up her hand. "Nope, my deal, not yours. And I'm sure nothing will come of it. But look, can you give me ten minutes so I can tell you the ins and outs of that farmhouse's owner?"

I checked my watch. Tight but manageable. "Ten minutes will be fine. Want to go in the house?"

"No," she said. "Let's do it here."

Which is what we did.

So, fifteen minutes after Pám arrived, I was alone again, not counting Roscoe, of course, and back into my house I went. There, amidst my pile of gear, was the special encrypted cell phone that Agent Carr had given to me. I picked it up, made sure it was on, and then dialed the number on his business card.

I also wrote the number down on a pad of paper.

I put the phone up to my ear, listened. One ring and then it was answered, "Carr."

"Karen Dunbar here."

"You're early, and you're not where you're supposed to be," he said, his voice frosty. "What the hell do you mean by calling? I said you were only to call if there was a sighting."

"You certainly did," I replied. "But I wanted to make sure the phone worked. I didn't want to be in the middle of the woods at two A.M. and have a dead phone in my hand if somebody showed up. You see, what you get for when you pay me, Agent Carr, is my professionalism. And my professionalism demanded that I check the phone before I depart. Is that all right, Agent Carr?"

His reply was crisp and to the point. "Call again only if there's a sighting."

I said, "You got it," but by that time, I was speaking into an empty phone.

No matter.

I left shortly with my gear, and left the special phone behind as well.

Surveillances.

In moderate-sized towns and cities, it takes guile and patience, and finding a nice place to hang out for a while. Preferably a parking lot, a busy street, or someplace where a car parked all day doesn't bring much attention.

Sure. Try that on some of the roads around my town and surrounding towns, and after a half hour or so, somebody will stop by—probably somebody you know—and say, "Need some help?" And within an hour, a bunch of people will know that Karen's on the job, and within another hour, the whole town will know what you're doing.

So my best friend in doing surveillances is the U.S. Geological

Survey. They make wonderful topographical maps marking, among other things, roads and elevations, and with a bit of work, you can find a nice quiet spot that gives you a view of what you're looking at.

Which worked well for me this Friday afternoon. I backed my SUV up an abandoned logging road—and thanked Detroit again for four-wheel drive—and did a small hike up to a hill that overlooked Dutton Hill Road. There was a nice large maple tree and some low brush that offered some concealment, and within twenty minutes or so, I was set. I had a low-slung and comfortable camp chair that I settled into, and with my spotting scope at a sweet angle, I had no problem keeping an eye on at least half of the house. Maybe the mysterious he or she would approach the house from the rear; if so, there wasn't much I could do about that, but at least I had the road, the driveway, the front and part of the side yard in clear view. Among my collection of stuff was a down sleeping bag, which I unrolled for later use. I had water, instant coffee, some Coke in a beverage cooler, and some freeze-dried food to cook up on a small gas stove. For a bathroom I had the woods and a well-placed log. It wouldn't be perfect, it wouldn't be luxurious, but it would work.

Probably not as exciting as working a surveillance in midtown Manhattan, but I was outdoors and I was on my own, which situated me fine. Years earlier I had been a newspaper reporter for the state's largest newspaper, and a pretty good one at that. I found I enjoyed poking around and finding things out, and after a few years suffering under some editors, I decided to go on my own. About ninety percent of what I do now—records research, tracking people down, so forth and so on—is identical to newspaper work. But for the most part, I get to choose my clients and my own schedule, and that is nice indeed.

Surveillance.

Sounds so mysterious, so sexy.

So here's what it's like.

Sitting and watching. Taking a picture of the house. Listening to music on your iPod. Watching some birds fly by, deciding they're crows: They're always crows. Looking through the spotting scope. Feeling your heart race just a bit when a vehicle approaches, the letdown when it passes the house. Yawning. Scratching. Tiring of music, trying something else. Listening to a book-on-tape, which really isn't on tape anymore, since you're using an iPod, but it's a book about FDR that sounded interesting. Drinking water. Snacking on pretzels. Pulling the sleeping bag up over your legs

and lap as it gets cold. Watching again as another vehicle approaches. Another bust. Drinking a cup of coffee from a Thermos, knowing you'll have to make a fresh batch later on. Another photo of the house. Racing to the nearby log to do your business, coming back to find no lights on at the target house. Good. Listening to nature for a while. Yawning. Scratching.

It's now dark, as the stars and at least one planet slowly come into visibility. An owl hoots out there, hunting, and I think to myself, well, I'm here alone, unarmed. Maybe I should have packed the Ruger. It's too late now. I turn back to the spotting scope. Nothing. I murmur a few words into the cassette recorder, tracking the time and place of vehicles that went by. I figure on another cup of coffee in an hour, another photo of the house. It would be easier if I'd been born a pervert, for they get off on being voyeurs, but most times, surveillances are boring as hell. A vehicle approaches, my heart rate increases. Another bust. I check the time, pick up the digital camera, and take one more photo of the empty house.

Two hours have passed.

Thirty-four to go.

And so, at hour thirty-six and one minute, I stumbled back to the SUV, carrying my gear, stumbling, yawning, and feeling dirty and worn and used. No one showed up, no one at all, and if I wasn't so tired, I suppose I could have thought it through some, but no, it was time to go home.

I drove slowly, blinking my eyes, yawning hard, until I got home, and I decided the gear could stay right where it was, in my SUV. I unlocked the front door and Roscoe was there, bumping and rubbing against my legs, his meows no doubt stating, "Where in hell have you been?"

I knelt down for a moment, scratched his ears. "Later, pal. Later. Right now, Mama's gotta get some sleep."

In the kitchen I filled both his food and water bowls, and then half ran, half stumbled upstairs, where I unplugged the phone and dragged the sheets back, and I know it sounds like hyperbole, but I'm certain I fell asleep before I could even be bothered to pull the blankets up.

On Monday, I took a few more hours off, and I was at my office at eleven A.M. I had worked some from home, so I had my unrequired report ready, and I really wasn't surprised when Special Agent Carr came into my office, face set and reddened. For some reason his expression reminded me of something I had read once

about Admiral Ernest King, head of the U.S. Navy during World War II. His daughter supposedly said that her father was the most even-tempered man she had ever known: He was always in a constant rage.

So went Agent Carr, it seemed, for the first words out of his mouth were, "We've placed a stop-payment order on the check I presented to you last Thursday."

"And good morning to you, Agent Carr," I replied. "Have a seat."

He took the seat and said, "There's a lot of fraud and abuse in government contracts, Karen, but don't think you're going to get your share by cheating us."

"Cheating you how?"

"Cheating us by not being at the farmhouse, that's why."

"But I was there," I said, looking at him steadily. "For thirty-six hours. Friday evening to Sunday morning. Just like you ordered. And I expect full payment."

"For what? Sitting at home, watching television?"

"And what makes you think I was staying at home?"

A thin little smile. "We know, that's why."

In my open side drawer, I picked up the super-doooper encrypted cell phone that he had provided me and tossed it at him. I caught him by surprise, for he used both hands and fumbled it a bit.

"There you go," I said. "Your special cell phone. Very special indeed. More than just a phone, it was an active tracking device, even when it wasn't being used. You wanted to make sure I was on the job. Well, I was. I just didn't bring your Dick Tracy piece of equipment with me."

"Karen—"

And I interrupted him, saying, "Remember last Friday morning? I tested the phone. You chewed me out for not using the phone as directed, but you also let something else slip. You said I wasn't at the farmhouse yet. How did you know that? Because a tracking device in the phone told you where I was calling from."

Well, so far the highlight of my day was this little moment, getting an FBI agent to shut up. I tossed three more things at him, which he caught this time with more ease.

"First, I know you didn't want one, but here's my report of what went on, or didn't go on, during my thirty-six hours. The highlight was when a couple of deer came by at about four P.M. on Saturday."

Thump.

"Item number two. Seventy-two photographs of an empty house, taken every half hour, proving I was there."

Little thump.

"And in this envelope, item number three. The memory card from my digital camera. I'm sure your tech boys can analyze those photos, make sure they were taken at the time I said they were taken, and that I just didn't take seventy-two photos in a row, to cheat you and Uncle Sam."

He kept quiet, looking at what I had tossed toward him, and then he looked up at me and smiled. "Very good, Karen. You passed."

"Didn't know I was being tested, and don't particularly care. I did my job, and I want the second half of my payment. Now."

A pause. Decided to cut him some slack and smiled in return. "Please."

And surprise of surprises, the second check came out of his briefcase and was slid across the desk, and I promptly squirreled it away and said, "There. Anything else?"

"Don't you want to know what you passed?"

"Of course I do," I said, "but based on prior experience, why should I trust anything you say?"

"Because what I told you was the truth," he said. "I just left some things out, that's all."

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that we are short staffed, we are underfunded, trying to do too much with too little. Which is why I was here, looking at you, to see how good you were, to see your talents at work. That was the test. To see if you would stick with a boring surveillance for that period of time."

"Really? A boring surveillance on a house that you fine fellows own, is that it?"

His face flickered a bit, like the internal battery in that brain had just gotten hit with a power surge. "What . . . how did you find that out?"

With the help of a neighbor girl, about fifteen years old, I thought, but instead I said, "We're not as dumb out here as you think. The place is supposedly owned by Grayson Corporation, out of Pennsylvania, which doesn't officially exist. The state exists, of course, but Grayson is a fake. A front for something else that's a front to something else that's a front for the Department of Justice. What's up there is a spare safehouse, to be used when you folks need it, to hide people, interview subjects, so forth and so on. That's all."

Yet one more smile. "Congratulations. You passed with honor."

"With honor, then? And what does that get me? A gold star on my check?"

"No. An offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"A job offer, that's what. And here's our offer. You work for us as a contractor, perhaps doing an assignment here and there, keeping an eye on things, reporting anything suspicious to me, or whatever contact person is set up. Retainer of, oh, say, about five hundred a month."

"Why me, and why a private investigator? Thought you'd go through local law enforcement for something like that."

"Because local law enforcement means oversight, means paperwork, means bureaucracy. Working with a P.I. makes it that much more simple. And you in particular, Karen, because you've proven your abilities, and also . . . your location. You're less than fifty miles from the Canadian border. People of interest, illegally passing across, may end up in Purmort for a bit before heading elsewhere. And you'll be our contact."

"Your snitch," I said.

He shook his head. "No. A cooperative citizen, that's all."

I thought for a moment and then crossed my legs underneath my desk. "All right. The price for this citizen's cooperation is one thousand a month. Not five hundred. And I report to you anything I think may be of interest. That's my call. Not yours. I'm not going to rat out someone because they're holding a one-person protest in the town common against the government or something like that."

The cheery Agent Carr had now been replaced by the earlier Agent Carr, the one I had gotten to know and . . . well, had gotten to know.

"Impossible."

"Nope, quite possible. One thousand a month, and my call. And that's the deal."

He gathered up the paperwork, pictures, and envelope I had sent his way, and he said, "No. There's no deal."

"Oh, yes there is. Or else."

"Or else what?"

I leaned back, pointed up to my award certificate from the New England Press Association. "Or I contact some old friends of mine in the news media. At the TV station in Manchester. Or the Associated Press bureaus in Concord and Portland. Tell them what just went on, tell them what you just told me. How does that sound, Agent Carr?"

His hand was clenched tight on his briefcase handle. "We had . . . had an agreement. With express mention of confidentiality. You signed it."

"I surely did, and under false pretenses. And you know it. Come on, Agent Carr, what are you going to do? Shoot me? Arrest me? Threaten to ruin my business? Here, in a small state that distrusts government so much that we elect our governors just for two years?"

He glowered at me, like a rabid pit bull, deciding whether to go for the throat first or the groin. I gave him my best smile, usually reserved for Roscoe. "You know it's a good deal, best you can get."

"All right," he breathed. "Deal."

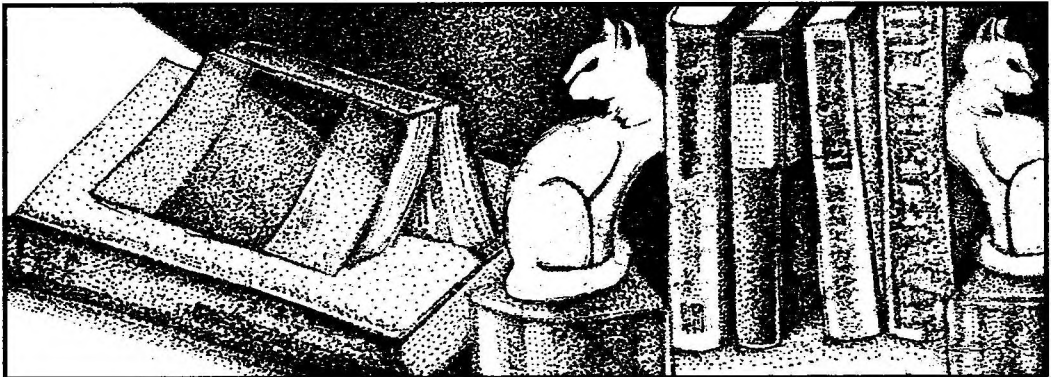
I felt some tension just ease away. House painted and a new roof before winter. Not a bad deal. "Delighted to hear it."

He stood up and went to the door and then looked back at me. He stood there for what seemed to be a long time.

"You know, some would call what you just did extortion," Carr finally said.

I thought of what he had put me through, how he had lied to me from the very start. I smiled and made an expansive shrug.

"Think of it as country manners," I said. 🐦



THE PALACE ROXY

JAS. R. PETRIN

The creepy thing about the old movie house, even a little scary, was that the small, dim, shrouded usher lights were glowing near the floor in the aisles. Maybe, she told herself, it was some sort of security effort—leave a light on and frighten the lowlifes away. And that was laughable; she was here, wasn't she? Or maybe the lights had been burning for ages because the last person to trot home to bed had forgotten to shut them off. Whatever. It was just as well. She had a flashlight somewhere in her pack, but it was dead—dead as the grave.

She'd got in through the unlocked emergency exit on the alley. Unlocked, hell! The door had been standing slightly ajar. And with the rain pouring down like crazy it might as well have had a motel vacancy sign blazing over it. A short dark corridor had led her to this room, the auditorium. So there was security for you.

She shrugged out of her sodden backpack and set it down at her feet. She needed shelter, a place to crash for the night, and this ought to do just fine. She wondered if there was a working toilet here. She'd feel more at ease if she could make out something of her surroundings.

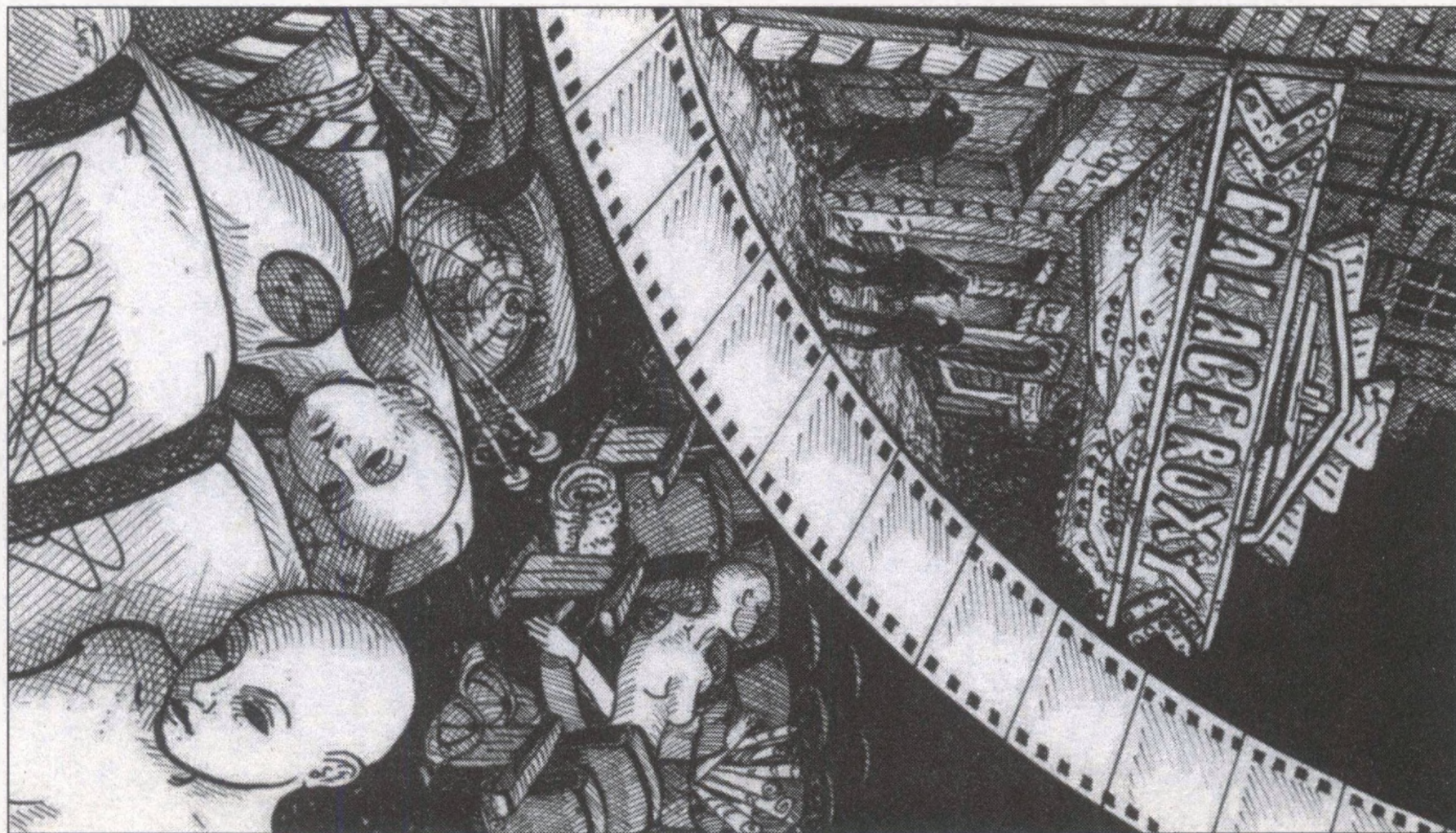
The room was big. She could feel the size of it. She had the sense of floating in a great, black immensity. All that the feeble lights revealed were the broken outlines of two aisles rising toward the back of the room. She couldn't make out anything else; the banks of seats were a featureless mass.

But if that direction was the back of the room, then—she turned and peered over her shoulder—the screen had to be right up there behind her. She couldn't make it out, though. It was just part of the contiguous darkness.

Still, it was better than the street. There might be rats, of course. There often were in derelict buildings. But she would spread out her sleeping bag, burrow down deep, pull the rain flap over her face, and they would leave her alone.

But spread it where? It was so darn dark!

Linda Weatherly



She turned away from the barely visible aisles and the indistinguishable seats. If she moved in the direction of where the screen ought to be, she ought to come up against the edge of the stage. Old theaters always had a stage. What had they called it in drama class? A proscenium? Or was that the arch over the stage? No matter. Climb up on that and she'd be safe from rats. Well, she'd feel safer, anyway.

She stooped to grip the pack in her right hand, straightened up, and took a very careful exploratory step. Nothing blocked

The logo faded and the music started: a jarring attack of nerve-racking violins.

her way. She took another, then another, placing each foot cautiously, feeling for rotten boards or open holes in the floor before

bearing down with her full weight.

After three short, tentative steps she halted. She'd felt something. A gentle draft of air against her face as if a door had opened in the building somewhere. No. She was being ridiculous. The creepy old place was starting to get to her. If she was going to feel like this, maybe she'd be better off out on the street after all.

Another step.

Another—

And then her heart gave a wrenching leap. Somebody had coughed. Or at least she had heard something that sounded like a cough.

She wasn't alone. That explained those freaky lights. She ought to have realized it in the first place, only—

She heard it again, or thought she did. A thin, short rasping sound that reverberated faintly in the unseen depths of the room. Instantly choked off as if suppressed by the back of a hand.

Her heart was now pounding so hard it seemed to be reverberating off the walls. If only it wasn't so damn *dark* in the place. If only she had brought a flashlight that *worked*. If only—

A floorboard creaked. Now *that* she was sure of. There was no mistaking it. And she was absolutely certain it came from somewhere off to her right. Now her knees were trembling so violently her whole body was shaking. A cold dread pressed around her like a suffocating weight. She turned back to the tracery of aisle lights.

"Anybody there?"

Her own quavering voice startled her. It didn't even sound like her. And why ask the question, anyway? She was the intruder. The situation was ridiculous.

Ridiculous but absolutely terrifying.

And then she heard the rasp of a breath. She *knew* she heard the rasp of a breath. And at the same moment the aisle lights winked as if something shadowy had passed in front of them. She felt herself losing control. Starting to panic. She lurched blindly toward the exit just as a whickering sound whipped past her head. What the hell was that? Were there bats in here?

The whickering sound came at her again, but she only heard the start of it this time.

"Look, Robideau," Chief Butts said, spreading his hands out flat on his desk and expelling a great whistling sigh, "the point I'm making here is that you can help me out. And you can bill me for it. I'll make sure you're paid."

"If you can get a bill from me past the town manager, I'll take my hat off to you," Robideau replied. "Seriously, what do you need me for?"

"I got a runaway on my hands. Wayward daughter of some big shot in the city. And not just any big shot. One with friends. Political associates. I could blow it off with no problem, tell them the kid never showed up here, but the problem is she was spotted by somebody." Robideau nodded. Only Butts would think spotting a missing person was a problem. "Ate her lunch up there at the Husky. The old man traced her that far himself with a private investigator, some guy named Doyle; and there's no one, nothing, to say the girl ever left here. No bus ticket bought by a single female, no rumors of anybody thumbing a ride."

"What's her name?"

"Mona Crainer."

"Any money?"

"Forty dollars she stole out of her old man's wallet."

"Well, Chief," Robideau said, "you know all this doesn't mean much. It rained like the devil last night. She could have been picked up the minute she stuck her thumb out. She could be halfway across the country by now."

"Yeah. And she probably is, too. But it don't cut no ice with the father. The kid was last seen in End of Main, and he wants every corner of the town shaken out. What we're talking about here is optics. I gotta go through the motions. Show that I'm doing something. And that don't leave me a whole lot of time for anything else on my plate."

"Like Bulwer Onager."

"Exactly. If I could phone the guy, drive over and talk to him—hell, if he was a halfway normal human being!—things would be

different. But Bullet is Bullet. There's nothing normal about him. Besides . . ."

"Besides, I know him and you don't."

"Well, that's a fact, now, isn't it? I've only lived here three, four years. You—hell! You been here all your life. You had my job for twenty years. You grew up here. I bet you were throwing spitballs from the balcony when he was still showing cliffhangers in that dump of a theater of his."

Robideau smiled. Butts was right. Except for the part about the spitballs.

"It wasn't always a dump, you know."

"Fine. And I wasn't always a potbellied old man. Time flies when you're having fun."

"So what do you want from me exactly?"

"I want you to go to him, talk sense to him, and deliver a message from the town council. Tell him he's got to clean up the Palace Roxy before the town expropriates and knocks it down. Tell him there are rats in it. Tell him anything you want. Tell him he's single-handedly threatening the Toyota—Koyota—"

"Kyoto?"

"That's it." He threw his hands up. "Those dumb pollution accords. And tell him to clean up his house, too, while he's at it. From what I hear it's even worse than his theater."

"He might not listen."

"I couldn't care less. Just so long as he's notified. Person-to-person, the town manager tells me. That's the rule. No messages left on answering machines, no letters through the mail slot. He has to be given fair warning, and then I can send in the front-end loaders."

Chief Butts suddenly stopped talking. He seemed to have run out of arguments. He sat behind his desk like a giant rat himself, neckless, shoulderless, looking a tiny bit vulnerable under the glare of the fluorescent light.

"Okay," Robideau said. "I'll give it a shot. But the minute the kid turns up, I'm off the case, all right?"

Butts looked alarmed.

"You think it'll take that long?"

First, Robideau decided, he would find out the latest on Bulwer Onager. He didn't want to confront an irascible man without learning everything there was to know about him. Leaving the Safety building, and aiming a wink and a grin at his old receptionist Claudia Webb on his way out, he jaywalked across Burton Street to the offices of the Netley *Leader*, climbed a flight of stairs,

and knocked at a door with a sign on it that said: THIS MAN BITES DOGS!

"Come in," muttered an amiable voice, "if you can stand it."

When Robideau leaned into the room, the long, lined face of Editor Delyle Allwood lit up. A tall man with wispy white hair, Allwood leaped to his feet and came around his desk with a grin. He gripped Robideau's hand and forearm, saying in his faintly British tones, "Chief Robideau! *Retired* Chief Robideau! I knew you had to be alive. I've been watching the obits and haven't spotted your beaming face there yet." He ushered his visitor to a chair. "What's your poison? Coffee that'll remove your stomach lining? Or would you prefer a spot of the other?"

He fluttered his eyebrows.

"Oh, the other," Robideau said, "by all means."

"Exactly right. Or no point being retired."

Allwood opened a sideboard liquor cabinet that was almost entirely filled with office clutter: loose papers, old camera cases, a broken light bar, and a horde of other junk. He rummaged out a couple of mismatched crystal glasses and sloshed a generous portion of Crown Royal into each of them. Passing one to Robideau, he said, "Here's to homicide," and downed his in one gulp.

"Woof!" He thumped his chest. "Excellent blood thinner. Better than aspirin." He dropped into his chair. "Now, what brings you this vast distance? This must be—what?—at least a good block and a half from your house."

"Sorry I haven't dropped by sooner."

"I'm a newspaperman. I'm used to rejection."

"I was just visiting Chief Butts."

Allwood's nose wrinkled. "I thought I detected an air of unpleasantness."

"He wants a favor. Wants me to speak to Bulwer Onager."

"Ah, now there's a mission almost impossible. Bulwer doesn't take kindly to being spoken to these days. I know. I've tried."

"Yes, well, I'm going to give it a shot. But before I do, I want to know a little more about him. And since you never forget a fact—"

"I see. You want to paw through my files." Allwood touched his brow. "The ones up here."

Robideau nodded. Took a small sip of whiskey.

"Well," said Allwood, "I'll give you the thumbnail sketch." He tilted his chair back, pulled out a desk drawer, and draped his long legs over it. "Bulwer is one of those odd individuals who has lived his life more or less in reverse. Where most people start with little or nothing and slowly progress to affluence and influence, he has marched steadily in the opposite direction. His father once

owned half the town, as you well know, including the movie house—the Palace Roxy. Of all the Onager interests, only the Palace interested Bulwer, so the old man signed it over to him. A comfortable berth for a year or two, but shortly after that two significant events occurred. In April of '53, television came to town, and in the fall of that year the old man died, relaxing his grip on the levers of power. Bulwer and his mother faltered. Couldn't cope. Squabbled. Made a belated effort to shore things up by hiring a boardroom full of MBAs. But too late. By the end of the Fifties it was sell-off time."

"I didn't know the Onagers squabbled," Robideau said.

"Squabbling was their lingua franca. In seven years all they managed to agree on was changing the Onager logo from a bold "O" against a starkly delineated siege engine, to a gentle lower case "onager" superimposed upon a soft black stripe. This was early days. And it was prescient."

"Was it?"

"You do know what onager means?"

"No."

"Ah, well. You must do more crossword puzzles. Anyway, after the first Onager establishment fell—Onager Flowers and Gifts—the rest toppled like dominoes. Only the Palace remained upright, but of course it was wholly owned by Bulwer. When his mother passed on, she left him to fight a brave but lonely battle against Jack Benny, Lucille Ball, and Wayne and Shuster of the tiny screen. The experience rattled him. Shook him. He couldn't walk down a street without compulsively counting the insidious TV antennas sprouting from the rooftops like alien life-forms."

Robideau mused. "I remember *Dragnet* . . ."

"You would. In the middle Sixties Bulwer gambled everything on a second screening of one of the blockbuster Hitchcock films—I forget which. It had been his biggest draw, you see. He figured if that smash hit didn't pull in the crowds again, nothing would. And the idea worked. To a point. For the first time in years, the Palace had a full house and a line-up. Bulwer even ran out of popcorn and had to rush across to the Family Fare for more kernels to feed into the machine.

"But it wasn't sustainable. He was soon back to empty seats. His accountant—you remember Heddy Halderson? Hot Heddy, as the fishwives called her?—advised him to start showing blue movies. Bulwer was scandalized. Refused to do it. And very soon after that, the Palace closed."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"None."

"And he disliked his mother?"

"Quite the opposite. Sure, they bickered, but that was surface tension."

Robideau sat back. "I remember going to shows at the Palace back in the Sixties."

"Yes, he had a couple of reprieves. Thiessen Electric stopped selling TVs locally after old man Thiessen slipped on an icy patch out front of his store one night, fell down and obligingly killed himself. And then Ronnie Ralston, who rigged TV antennas, met that girl at the Netley and ran away with her."

A silence descended.

"Is that it, then?"

"That's it."

"You're a wonder, Delyle."

"I most certainly am. And you, my friend, are a very slow drinker. I believe I'll have another whiskey while we sit around and wait for yours to evaporate."

From the offices of the Netley *Leader*, Robideau drove to the Onager house at 9401 Fairvale. He didn't need the scrawled address on the ragged piece of notepaper Butts had thrust at him; everybody knew where the old Onager place was. It stood well back on a large lot in an aging, once elegant neighborhood. The town's first real mansion, it had been joined over the years by the houses of other successful citizens.

It was a hulking place gone to ruin at the top of a commanding bluff. Storm clouds scudded behind it. The lot backed onto a deep ravine. The once stately black iron fence leaned dangerously in spots. As for the house, its paint was scaling away in strips, the roof had lost many of its shingles, and those that remained were curling at the corners and dark with moss. The gate was secured with a twisted coat hanger, which Robideau had to struggle with before proceeding up the walk to the porch.

He followed a line of derelict cars. Each one apparently replaced with a cheaper model as the owner fell upon progressively harder times. Nearest the house was the oldest of these, a robin's-egg blue 1960 Lincoln, the largest car shy of a limousine that Robideau had ever seen. It had two flat tires.

The front porch looked as if a tornado had roared by. It sagged under the weight of *stuff*. A rusting bed frame. Headboards with the wood laminate lifting from the damp. Coils of wire, pails of nuts and bolts, boxes of swollen paperbacks bursting open and spilling their contents into the yard. A grungy toaster, a small

stuffed rabbit, some chintz pillows, a heap of old office chairs, a pile of food wrappers, a book with no discernable printing on it, a bar of yellowing lye soap still in its dish. And everywhere, bundles of newspapers.

A narrow passage wended its way treacherously through the junk to the entrance. Robideau eased himself gingerly along it until he could knock on the leaded-glass door. Surreptitiously, a curtain lifted and a sallow face peered out, a prank of the light presenting a double-image of it. Robideau gazed back, not sure if he should smile, nod his head, or introduce himself through the glass. The curtain fell back into place.

He knocked again. He knocked several times. On his last attempt he used the ball of his fist to save his bruised knuckles.

No response.

Robideau cleared his throat irritably. He saw why Butts had pushed this job off on him. He backed away through the junk to the sidewalk, then threw one more glance up at the house.

To all appearances, no one lived there.

But he knew differently. Oh yes, he did.

As Robideau got back into his car, it began to rain again in large splashing drops.

Let there be light!

He dropped the douser to allow the carbon-arc light to blaze forth, brought up the sound, and hit the roll-back switch for the drapery. The music swelled, the opening credits blossomed, and the block print shifted eerily across the rattling, gathering folds of the retracting curtain.

UNIVERSAL
AN MCA COMPANY

The reels revolved in their opposite directions, the old Simplex projector purring steadily like a contented mechanical cat. The lamp house gave off a subtle scorching odor. The lacing lamp glowed on the tips of his fingers as he loaded the second machine with the next reel of film.

The film was no longer in prime condition. It was brittle with age, scratched in places, and had a rash of sparkles at some of the changeover spots. But the movie, well, that was top-notch fare. Nothing better made before or since. And putting aside that small unpleasantness of the night before, he anticipated another enjoyable evening at the movies.



Robideau parked downtown but remained in the car. His gaze traveled along the street, seeking enlightenment among the rain-streaked storefronts, finally settling on the Palace Roxy, its ponderous marquee looking shabby and slumped. He studied the rooftops, where Bulwer's despised TV antennas had been displaced by a crop of satellite dishes. Progress. But was it really? He sorely missed those days when, after a double feature, he and his friends would saunter home, their minds reeling, filled with delicious thoughts of mad scientists and bug-eyed monsters.

Butts had mentioned throwing spitballs. It was the sort of thing Pete Melynchuk and his pals might have done.

They had been a different bunch. They still were . . .

Robideau got out of the car.

He found the old-timers just where he expected to, at a back table in the Netley, with an unobstructed view of the nine-foot television screen. Pete Melynchuk, gruff and grizzled; Wilmer Gates, thin and dogged looking; Chuck Lang, brawny elbows on the table; and old silent Wolverton, all arms and legs, with that perpetual and mysterious grin on his horsey face.

These men were a giant step closer to Bulwer Onager than he was.

"Well, well," said Pete, the usual spokesman for the group, "it's the cops. I told you not to bury your landlady in that front flower bed, didn't I, Wove!"

Wolverton's grin widened, his mirthful eyes all but disappearing under his knobby brow.

Chuck Lang snagged a chair from the next table with his foot and dragged it up for Robideau. Wilmer pushed a beer at him.

"I'm not a cop," Robideau said, sitting down. "Not anymore."

"You got that cop look on your face," Pete insisted. "The look that tells me you're here to ask questions and take down names."

"You're right about the questions," Robideau said. "I'm helping out Chief Butts. There's a problem with Bulwer Onager."

"The Bullet!" Pete exclaimed. "Ha! What did he do, murder his landlady?"

"I'm trying to keep his movie house from being knocked down by the town council."

Chuck showed his habitual scowl. "The old Palace? They *should* knock it down. And with him in it too."

"Now, now," Pete grinned, "that ain't neighborly."

"Have you looked at the place lately? Really looked at it? Have you seen his house up there on the hill? Unbelievable!"

"It's 'cause he don't throw nothing away," Wilmer Gates observed.

"I knew a guy once," Pete Melynchuk said, "couldn't throw away

a darn thing. He'd toss an old gum wrapper in the trash, then come back a minute later and take it out again. It's a sickness—"

"OCD," Wilmer said with authority. "Your Compression Repulsive Disorder."

"That would be CRD," Pete replied dryly.

"Whatever. It's when you can't stop doing something even if you want to."

"Like you. You can't stop lecturing."

"I'm not lecturing, I'm discussing. I'm saying Bullet is one of your basic compression repulsives. That's why he can't throw nothing out."

"So it's not his fault."

"No."

"Then how'd he get that way?"

"How do I know? Maybe when he was born the doctor slapped him in the head instead of on the butt."

"Did he do that to you?"

"Do what?"

But Pete was turning back to their visitor, weighing him coolly with his gaze. "So if it ain't Bullet's fault, and it's nobody else's, then maybe he oughta be left alone. Maybe the chief here should go home and forget about it. It's got nothing to do with the police."

"Neither have I," Robideau reminded him again. "I'm retired, remember?"

"Yeah. We all are. We're just a bunch of old retired guys sticking our noses in where we ain't wanted. Ain't needed, for that matter."

Robideau wondered what Pete thought he was retired from, since the man hadn't, as far as the chief knew, worked a pensionable day in his life. He said, "Well, the fact of the matter is there's a problem. It may be that Bullet should be left alone, but something has got to be done about that place of his. For his own good."

Pete leered. Hard-bitten silver bristles stood out defiantly on his chin. "When the authorities tell you something's for your own good, look out for squalls."

"I'm not 'the authorities.'"

"No, Butts is. And you're workin' for him."

"I'm not working for him, I'm representing him." Robideau glanced around at the smirking faces and sighed. "Look, if none of you are willing to help, if you don't think you can get Bullet—I mean Bulwer—to see reason, then fine. I'll try him again myself. I only wanted to get past his suspicious nature, that's all. It'll be a shame to see the Palace expropriated."

He got to his feet.

Pete Melynychuk grinned up at him. "Now you've went an' got your Jockeys twisted. When do you want to go and see the guy?"

"Now the way I'd handle it if it was me," Pete advised, "I'd first of all visit Oddlot Jenkins."

Oddlot. A village character who tooled around in an old van. In the old days he had been the Palace projectionist and at the same time general dogsbody for Prancing Al Evans up at the funeral home. He still worked for Al Evans. Took care of the incinerator. Kept the hearse polished up.

Oddlot was almost as reclusive as Bulwer, but Pete had more than a nodding acquaintance with him.

"He's about the only guy Bullet Onager talks to," Pete Melynychuk explained as they got into Robideau's car. "They've kept in touch, I guess, since the Palace Roxy closed."

Oddlot lived in a tidy little minihome, old and cramped but neat as a pin. A sort of cabana jutted over the entrance, and the wheels were hidden behind plywood panels, primly painted with images of tall green grass and daisies. A decorative plastic bumblebee hovered on a stick outside the door. An old Dodge van stood in the drive.

Robideau, his eyes fixed on the place, didn't notice Oddlot standing behind them until the man spoke out.

"Something I can do for you?"

The men turned. Oddlot was eyeing them suspiciously. He was one of those thin, wiry men and looked as if trouble couldn't lay a glove on him. He had a hoe in his hand, and his face was reflected in the darkened side windows of the van.

"Oddie!" Pete boomed. "You trying to scare us to death?" He indicated Robideau. "This here's—"

"I know who he is," Oddlot answered. "Everybody knows Chief Robideau." His voice softened. "Too bad you retired. Look at what we got for a police chief now."

"Listen," Pete said, "here's the thing. We're tryin' to help out a friend of yours. Bullet Onager."

Oddlot's eyes narrowed. He leaned the hoe against the side of the house. He turned back to his visitors with a mixture of suspicion and inquisitive concern on his face. Robideau set out the problem.

"So you see," Robideau concluded, "if he won't listen to reason, the town's going to take action."

Oddlot deliberated, one hand plucking at his chin. "That wouldn't be right. He's a quiet old guy. And it's terrible what happened to him. The Palace was his whole life, and when he

had to close, it busted him up inside. It's why he lives that way. Hangs onto stuff. He don't want to lose nothing ever again. It's sad."

Robideau agreed. It was kind of sad. A man loses a business he loves because the community stops supporting it; then that same community comes hounding him years later, threatening to knock the place down. Things weren't supposed to work that way.

"I went to see him," Robideau said, "to warn him, but he wouldn't open his door to me. So we thought, you being a friend of his, maybe you could get him to hear what I have to say. We only want what's best for him."

Oddlot studied Robideau's face. He took the hoe in his hand again, leaned on it, and stared at the ground. Then he straightened.

"I suppose I could see what I can do."

The sky was heavy again with the threat of yet more rain. Mountainous flat-bottomed thunderheads loomed above the lake, and far to the south, out over the marshes, little smoke-white rags of cloud darted swiftly before the wind.

At Onager's house, they pulled over and stopped. Oddlot, who had arrived there ahead of them, got out of his van.

"Jeez," Pete Melynychuk breathed, with a sour glance at the house, "would you look at the place!"

"Should we go in with you?" Robideau asked Oddlot, who had sauntered back to stand at the side of the car.

"Nope," Oddlot said, "I'll go in alone. I'll explain things to him and see what he says. If I give you the signal, you can come on in. Otherwise . . ."

They watched his thin, wiry figure proceed up the walk, negotiate the obstacle course on the porch, and bang on the door. The door opened instantly for him, and he disappeared inside.

Then they waited.

"You ever see a place to beat it?" Pete said, staring sideways out the car window. "Place like that'll be alive with squirming vermin. Mice, rats, and roaches. Chuck Lang is right. Knock the movie house down, and knock this dump down too."

Oddlot Jenkins appeared and raised his hand.

"That's our cue," Robideau said.

"Ain't we lucky!"

"I want you to take this," Robideau handed Pete his little digital camera, "and see if you can get a few snapshots inside the place. They might come in handy. And try not to be too obvious."

"James Bond, that's me," Pete said. He held the camera out with one hand and took an experimental shot through the windshield.

If the front porch was bad, the interior was far worse. And the smell! The smell of decay, the smell of mildew, the smell of cats allowed to run wild. "I'll just wait here," Pete said, wrinkling his face and halting in the sty of a kitchen.

Robideau followed Oddlot into a large sitting room, twenty feet on a side. It was piled waist high—in some places shoulder high—with the debris and detritus of life. Looking at the jumble, the muddle, the overwhelming hodgepodge of litter and refuse, it was incomprehensible to Robideau that anyone could amass such a collection of junk. Bulwer Onager sat in a thronelike chair. Once a fine piece of furniture, now the stuffing bulged out where the cats had worried it, and the cushion behind his head was dark with hair oil and perspiration.

He was a big man, round shouldered and bottom heavy. He had flaccid jowls and a dewlapped neck. A tangled gray fringe tumbled over his ears. He looked beaten, worn out, and haunted by his personal demons. He wore slippers, droopy gray sweatpants, and a wrinkled, food-stained T-shirt with the word WIMPY silk-screened across it in large disintegrating letters.

"Now just listen to what the man has to say," Oddlot advised him.

There was no place to sit. They stood like petitioners before the king. Robideau cleared his throat and laid it all out. While he spoke, the old man watched him like a creature cornered in its nest, head canted, eyes fixed. When Robideau had finished speaking, the big man still stared, but his head had sunk visibly lower on his chest.

"So what do you think?" Robideau asked him. "Can you clean up the Palace a little? Have that sagging marquee taken down, with all its broken bulbs? Slap a little paint on the place?"

Onager shrugged.

"And here too." Robideau glanced around. "Can't you get rid of some of this stuff?"

Onager took time to think. His eyes moved slowly, all the way to the left, all the way to the right. Clearly, whatever it was he perceived here was not what other mortals saw.

"Like what?" he muttered.

Robideau nodded at a large, overfilled cardboard box by the door. "Those are cat droppings, Bulwer. Why in the world do you keep something like that around?"

"I don't know."

"You can throw them out, don't you think?"

"I don't know."

"Well, here's the problem. The town doesn't want you to keep that sort of thing. It isn't healthy. And they don't like a lot of that

other stuff outside on the porch, all those worn-out cars in the drive. Why hang onto it all?"

"You never know what you're going to need."

"An old Oreo cookie bag?" Robideau nodded at a carefully flattened and folded package on a mound of trash next to Bulwer's chair.

"You never know." A clutch of at least a dozen garden rakes clawed the air behind the old man's head.

Robideau glanced at Oddlot Jenkins, inviting a little support. Oddlot's blank stare was impassive. He wasn't about to do any heavy lifting.

"It's important you think carefully about this," Robideau said. "There's no use putting it off. The town means business." He stepped back. "I'm going to ask you to sleep on it. Talk to Oddlot here about what can be done. I'll check back with you tomorrow evening, and I'll expect you to have made up your mind about these things."

Glancing back as they walked away, Robideau could see Bulwer's stolid reflection in a cracked mirror leaning against the wall.

"Well, that got us absolutely nowhere," Pete said, as they climbed back in the car and slammed the doors. Oddlot pulled a U-turn in front of them and accelerated on by without a wave or a glance. "We'll see," Robideau replied. "I gave him time to mull it over."

"Tell you what I'd do," Pete said, "I'd nuke the place. The house and the goddamn theater." He gave the camera back. "Got you some pictures, though. Just don't try to flog them to *House Beautiful*."

Robideau dropped Pete off at the Netley, then drove slowly home. The mouth-watering aroma of pot roast struck him as he entered the tidy house, and he realized how much he took this clean and cozy little house for granted. Mrs. Robideau took good care of him. She thrust an inviting glass of sherry into his hand.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Are you going to throw that poor man out in the street?"

She followed him through to the office, where he sat down at his computer, shaking his head. He connected the camera to the USB port. "You amaze me. How do you know these things? I didn't know myself what Butts wanted until he explained it to me there in his office."

"Friends and telephones. Does that answer your question?"

The pictures began to move from the camera's memory to the computer. Robideau smiled and nodded. "I guess it does."

"Fine. Now answer mine. What's going to happen to Mr. Onager if you take his house away?"

"It's his movie house they want to take away, not his home. And I didn't take anything except these photos." He clicked the "view" icon, and the first picture flashed to the screen. It was Pete's practice shot, showing the back window of Oddlot's van. The next one showed the inside of the house.

"Oh, my dear Lord and everything that's holy!" Mrs. Robideau gasped, shrinking back, horrified. "Does he really live like that?"

"He really does."

"Then the poor man needs help."

"I can't help him if he won't let me, and I'm afraid that's going to be the problem."

He flicked through the pictures, an even dozen of them, while Mrs. Robideau emitted little disbelieving gasps and groans.

"Is dinner ready?" Robideau asked her.

She was as pale as the plates on the table. "It's ready. But I don't know if I can eat it now."

Jerry Doyle knew something about old theaters. The detective's uncle had been a projectionist once. Which was a great thing back then for a kid, getting to see all the latest movies for free. He had practically lived in that magical theater, and his knowledge of it would help him here. He had climbed up the old iron fire escape to the roof of the Palace Roxy, and now stood at the door of the little shack that he knew was the emergency exit for the projection booth. The vent chimney from the carbon-arc lamps stuck out the side of it. Every old theater had one of these, dating from the days of hazardous nitrate film stock. Fire regulations had required it.

The front doors of the building were sealed like a vault; the back door, steel clad, was locked up too. But here . . .

He wedged the little pry bar into the crack between the door and the frame, punched it with the heel of his hand, and the door sprang open.

Nothing to it.

If that idiot of a police chief, Butts, wouldn't take some good advice and search the place, then Doyle would just have to do it on his own. It was the only promising lead he had. The girl was crazy about the movies. Especially old movies. Took extra drama

classes at her high school and rented every classic video she could find. Had she spotted this old place? Wondered about it? Had she actually been here?

Maybe not, but he would try to find out.

A short flight of steps, almost a ladder, ended in a cramped, narrow electrical room. He switched on his flashlight. There was a short cluttered bench, a DC generator, a lot of cabling, and a fuse box with an enormous lever on the side. There was also a pail and a string mop, the room doing double duty as a janitors' closet.

He entered the projection booth. Nothing out of place here, but he was surprised to see the original equipment still in place. Well kept too. You could practically eat your lunch off it. Interesting.

He went down some narrow carpeted stairs to the auditorium.

Well! Whoever kept the projection booth tidy certainly didn't expend a lot of effort down here. Place looked like a cross between a storage warehouse and a recycling station. He walked down to the front of the auditorium and stopped at the end of the aisle. He aimed his torch along the front row of seats.

His attacker must have been standing off to one side in the darkness, waiting for him. He had no warning before something came whistling at him through the air. It struck low, careened off his shoulder, and caught him just above the ear, knocking his glasses off. He stumbled sideways, dropped to his left knee, and crouched there, swaying. The next blow struck him above the eyes and knocked him on his back, with one leg crooked under him. He didn't feel the furious rain of blows that fell on him after that.

Supplies were becoming harder to get, and the damn prices kept going up. Take the lamp house, for instance. He was buying the cheapest carbon rods he could find. A new pair only lasted an hour. Carbon savers helped—sleeves for splicing two used stubs together, good for about one reel—but they flared a little when they evaporated. Xenon lamps had been around for decades, but they couldn't be used with this equipment. And in any case, the old ways were best.

Peering through the smoked inspection port, he twisted the knobs that brought the tips of the rods together, touched them briefly, and struck the arc. A flow of white-hot plasma now streamed sun-bright between them.

He double-checked the projectors. The movie, the first reel of it, was cued up in number one. The second reel waited in number two. He gave the lamp another minute for the color to stabilize, and then it was showtime.

He opened the hand douser.

Watching the screen through the observation port, he mused over ways in which he might fill the place with the pungent aroma of freshly made popcorn.

Robideau's cell phone rang the next evening, just as he was leaving the house. It was Butts. Juggling a travel mug filled with after-dinner coffee, phone, and car keys, he took the call as he got into his car.

After relating his progress thus far to Butts, he deliberately turned the tables. "How about you? Have you found the girl?"

"Sherlock bloody Holmes couldn't find that girl. Not with what I got to go on. It's like she fell off the face of the earth. And now I got more trouble."

"What's that?"

"Now the private detective's gone and disappeared too."

"You're kidding me."

"Do I sound like a kidder? I don't know what to think about him. Maybe he got fed up. As far as the girl's concerned, I had Claudia Webb print off some posters, and I been slapping 'em up all over town." He began reading one of them over the phone.

Robideau pulled out onto the street and headed downtown, only half listening. Then something the chief was blathering about caught his attention. "What did you just say?"

"I said the girl had a backpack. Why?"

"Can you describe it?"

"I guess so. Let's see. Army surplus. There's an Alfred Hitchcock patch sewn onto it—that famous drawing, his face in profile. She was an old movie buff apparently."

Robideau fought to recall why that should mean something to him. Then he remembered the photos, the snaps Pete had taken at the Onager house, and an unpleasant feeling began to build in his gut.

"What have you got?" Butts demanded. "You on to something?"

"I'm not sure. I'll get back to you."

Robideau pulled a U-turn, tires chirping, and sped back to his house.

"You already looked at those pictures," Mrs. Robideau chided him. "You know what they show." She hovered in the office doorway.

"I think I know what they show," Robideau answered, "but I just . . . yes. Here."

His big hand hung over the mouse button. The picture showed, in digital detail, a cluttered corner of Bulwer Onager's kitchen. And there at the end of the counter, on top of the milk cartons,

on top of the Christmas cards, on top of the stack of out-of-date calendars, open jam jars, and a spray of knitting needles, was a backpack. But the backpack was blue with a Nike logo on it. Definitely not army surplus.

He sat there. He had been so sure . . .

He slowly searched back through the photos in reverse. The last one to appear was the practice shot Pete had snapped through the windshield of the car. There was a glare across it, the sun striking in across the dash. Behind the glare, and a little washed out by it, was the back of Oddlot's van.

His eyes narrowed. In the rear window of the van was a backpack. It was desert camo. And he could see what looked like an oversized patch of old Hitch staring at something off-screen.

Robideau stood up. "Oh my God!"

Leaning hard on the accelerator, he made it to Oddlot's mini-home in minutes. He pounded the steering wheel. The yard was empty. There was no sign of Oddlot's van around.

"You lookin' for somebody?" a voice asked. He turned and found Pete Melynchuk's sardonic face watching him curiously from the street.

The Palace Roxy's façade extended for one hundred feet along the east side of Burton Street, part of the usual small town brick and mortar continuum of shop fronts. The marquee, which had once blazed with hundreds of tiny incandescent lights, drooped sadly over their heads, dead for years.

"So you figure Oddlot grabbed the girl, do you?"

"No. I'm saying her backpack was in his van."

Pete raised and lowered his eyebrows. He drew some picks out of his jacket pocket and went to work on the door.

"You're not supposed to know how to do that," Robideau observed.

"Good thing I know what I'm not supposed to know, then, isn't it?"

Pete pulled the door open.

There was the old familiar lobby, the concession stand, the chrome-plated stanchions with the velvet rope drooping between them. The velvet rope was now two-toned: red along the bottom and gray on the top with dust. Ramps at each end of the room led to the auditorium.

"Whasamatter?" Pete asked.

Robideau was caught in a sudden rush of nostalgia. He had watched his first low-budget screen-screamer here: *Creature From the Black Lagoon*. It had astonished him. Delighted him. He'd

loved it so darn much he'd hurried back for *Tarantula*, *Monolith Monsters*, and *The Deadly Mantis*, in that order.

"Did you ever see *The Deadly Mantis*?" Robideau asked.

"I seen Wilmer's first wife, does that count?"

"And *The Mysterians*." Robideau's eyes misted over. "I still remember that pointy-nosed robot kicking a jeep out of its way. Pretty silly. But we loved it."

"I seen that *Phantom of the Opera* movie here," Pete said. "The old silent version. Guy with a face like a boiled sheep's stomach and fingernails down to his knees. Coulda been Howard Hughes. They wouldn't have needed makeup." He stopped and glanced around uneasily. "Hope to hell we don't find nothing like that lurching around in here."

Framed posters still hung in the lobby. Probably valued by collectors, Robideau thought to himself. One of Janet Leigh in her underwear. And one of Hitch himself dressed in suit and tie, pointing at his watch, with the caption: NO ONE . . . BUT NO ONE . . . WILL BE ADMITTED TO THE THEATER AFTER THE START OF EACH PERFORMANCE. And another: DON'T GIVE AWAY THE ENDING—IT'S THE ONLY ONE WE HAVE.

Robideau pulled himself out of his reverie. He was here on business. He had come to find Oddlot Jenkins and ask him some tough questions. He followed Pete into the auditorium.

The room was in darkness. Pete switched on the large nine-volt lantern they had brought from Robideau's car.

Robideau felt the back of his neck prickle. The Palace had never been luxurious—not a "picture palace." This was a small town, after all. But it had once boasted a certain grandiosity with its plush-carpeted aisles, Art Deco sconces, pilasters, and not one but two glittering chandeliers, presumably to give the projectors an unobstructed line of shot. Now the chandeliers were clotted with spiderwebs, and dust hung in mats from the sconces.

Pete swept his light out over the seats. Nearly every one was heaped with something: books, paintings, an old typewriter, a large clock, a large number of mounted birds, rolls of carpet, a heap of hard hats, stuffed animals, a huge globe of the moon, boxes of ceramic tile. It was as if a convoy of bulging Salvation Army vans had off-loaded their contents into the place.

"What I think Bullet must've done," Pete said, holding the lantern in his two hands and beaming it around, "is brought stuff from those other Onager businesses when they closed and stashed it here. Wouldn't get rid of it. And over the years he's kept on adding things."

"It looks that way."

"The guy's a psycho."

Heavy industrial furnishings crowded the proscenium. Display cases from the old Onager Department Store, complete with shelving and original merchandise. Stacks of men's shirts behind the dusty glass. And manikins. There were manikins everywhere.

"I don't see Oddlot around," Pete said, stating the obvious.

"No, but someone's been here."

"Yeah?"

"Take a look at the floor."

Pete aimed the light at their feet. There were plenty of footprints in the grime. Trails led off everywhere. Pete planted his own boot down deliberately, and a little mushroom cloud of dust billowed up. "I see what you mean."

"Listen," Robideau said, "I don't dare waste any time. I'm going to take a run over to Bulwer's. Do you think you can hang around here for a while in case Oddlot shows up?"

"Well, now, just a minute, we still haven't . . ."

"Thanks, Pete."

Robideau rushed off. Pete heard the front door to the street bang shut. He sighed. He went back along the ramp to a sort of switchback, meant to keep stray light in the lobby from filtering down into the auditorium. He moved the beam of the lantern over the walls and found what he was looking for. An almost invisible door. This had to be the way up to the projection booth. He lifted the small black latch.

His feet made no sound on the carpet as he slowly mounted the stairs. At the top was a door. He opened it. Before him was the projection both, dominated by two large movie projectors and two smaller ones. There was a slide projector. There were a couple of plastic chairs, a metal stool, and a light table next to some splicing equipment.

And something else. Something weird. The room was practically spotless. No dust, no clutter. "Someone uses the place," he muttered, puzzled. "Someone sweeps up here and takes good care of things."

Then a voice so close behind him that he could feel the breath on his neck said, "Go right in, Pete."

Oddlot Jenkins squeezed past, holding a large cardboard box in his arms, containing reels of film. He flipped a switch with his elbow, and the room was suddenly bathed in light. He set the box down on a small bench. "I keep these in the fridge," he confided.

"Oddie," Pete said evenly, "What're you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? *I've* got a key."

"What do you know about that girl? The one everybody's lookin' for?"

Oddlot stared at him, blinked, then turned away and started tinkering.

"Nothing."

"You've got her backpack. How come?"

He grinned, as if he at last understood. "You mean that one in the van? I found it."

"Found it!"

"That's right."

"You found it, but you didn't go through it, find some identification, and make a call to Butts?"

"It was empty."

"Really."

"Yes, really."

"All right, then where did you find it?"

Oddlot kept working, threading the film through the camera mechanism.

"You're not gonna tell me?" Pete said. "It's a secret?"

"I don't have to tell you anything."

"No. You can answer to Butts and Robideau. She was here, wasn't she? In this theater?"

"Somebody was here. I don't know who exactly." He fed the end of the film into the take-up reel. "You know, people used to come here a lot in the old days. I even gave tours of this room back then." He glanced around, looking a little dejected. "The insurers ended that. They don't let you do it now."

"You're sayin' the girl might've been here? That she wandered in accidentally?"

"I'm saying somebody did, that's all. I only left the back door open a second—I was bringing the car around to move a few items in for Bulwer. It might have been her. People do that, you know. Sneak into movie theaters."

Pete sighed. This guy was living in the past. He tried a different tack. "Does Bullet know you're here? Does he know you're screwin' with his cameras?"

"They're not cameras, they're projectors. And, yes, he knows all about it. He likes this movie too. He's seen it seventy-one times, and I've seen it fifty-four times. In fact—" He extended his arm and looked at his wristwatch. "—he should be here by now. We always start right on time."

"What're you telling me? You guys get together an' watch movies in this dump?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes Bulwer comes here and watches the film all by himself."

Pete shook his head. Weirder and weirder. But he didn't really care about that.

"Are you gonna tell me where you found the backpack?"

"Stick around, Pete," Oddlot said. "The movie's coming right up, and it's special. We're showing the 35mm print tonight. We usually show one of the 16s."

"Oh, you do, huh? So what's the occasion?"

Oddlot finished loading the second projector, closed it up, then turned and looked at him. "Bulwer thinks this might be the last chance we get. He figures they're going to shut him down any day now—for good."

He struck the arc in projector number one, touched a switch, and the booth went dim. The only illumination now was the glow of the lacing bulb, the light in the arc housing, and the glow shining up through the clear plastic top of the splicing bench.

Frustrated, getting nowhere with the guy, Pete stepped to the door.

"Where are you going?" Oddlot glanced up.

"Downstairs."

"I think you should stay up here. Bulwer wouldn't like—"

"I don't care what Bulwer likes or doesn't like."

Leaving Oddlot to his movie machinery, Pete headed back down to the auditorium. Robideau could deal with Oddlot Jenkins, drive splinters under his nails or beat him with a hose. And while he waited for the old cop's return, Pete would make good and sure he hadn't missed anything. He walked slowly down the sloping aisle, beaming the lantern around. The most unnerving thing was the manikins, rescued, like the shirts, from Onager's Department Store, dragged in here and crammed into the seats. They looked like rump-naked androgynous movie fans that had wandered in to catch the final show.

And it seemed they were going to get their wish.

The curtain was rattling open. The movie was starting. Evidently Oddlot wasn't waiting for Bullet. Up on the screen a starry background resolved into a rotating globe with the word UNIVERSAL stretching across it. The logo faded and the music started: a jarring attack of nerve-racking violins. Pete didn't like violins. Fiddles sure, but not violins.

He clumped on down the aisle.

Black bars stabbed across the screen. Then crisp white block letters: ALFRED HITCHCOCK . . .

White bars now, the violins screaming.

"Seventy-one times?" Pete grimaced in disbelief. He scowled up at the projection booth but could make out only the shifting and dancing beam of light from the porthole.

Turning back, he caught the tail end of the credits blinking onto the screen. VERA MILES, JANET LEIGH . . . Black bars, white bars shooting in all directions. Names splitting in half. Jeez! And then finally, thankfully, the opening scene: a cityscape, the camera lens settling birdlike down, down, down over the buildings, and drifting in through a partly raised window.

Reaching the flat area at the front of the theater, he turned and moved slowly along the front row of seats. He could see a heck of a lot better this time with the help of the reflected light from the screen. Here was a seat piled with burlap sacks, probably from the family's market garden. Then two manikins with concavities for eyes, one with an arm outthrust as if making a warning sign. He turned in spite of himself; nothing there.

Here some old plumbing fixtures. A box of curtain rings. And here—

Pete froze.

In the flickering light from the screen behind him, a dead woman sat staring rigidly back at him. She stared with a look of astonishment and dismay on her face. He knew who it was. The young woman in the poster. And there was more. In the seat beside her was another body. Some big guy Pete had never seen before.

"Oddie!" he hollered, getting his breath back. "Oddie, you get your skinny butt down here!"

This time Robideau approached the house from the rear, following the gully and angling up through the trees. He knew he was going to have to sneak into the house, that there was no way Bulwer would let him in voluntarily. Sheet lightning rippled in the sky, backlighting whole sections of swift, driving cloud. Low, rumbling booms of thunder muttered far out over the marsh.

He had to literally push his way through a mound of garbage bags to get near the back stoop.

The rear door was standing open a crack—no need to lock it behind that malodorous barricade—and in a moment Robideau found himself at the back of Bulwer's industrial-sized kitchen. A fluorescent panel buzzed over the stove, revealing the obstacle course that surrounded him. Stuff was piled to the rafters in tall, unstable heaps. It looked as if it might collapse on him at the next shivering boom of thunder.

"I know you're a pack rat, Bulwer," Robideau breathed, "but oh, my dear maiden aunt!"

Chuck was right. Call in Metro Gariuk's backhoes.

The thunder and lightning now was almost continuous. Shadows marched and leaped on the walls. Everywhere were the ubiquitous garbage bags and newspapers, stack upon tottering stack of them. He saw a wall of biscuit tins with jolly labels: MCGARRIGALS FOR A TASTY TREAT! YOU'LL LOVE BECK'S CREAMY CENTERS! MIGHTY FINE MUNCHING—HARVEYS! He thought about the little creeping things—Pete's squirmin' vermin—moving in all this rubbish, and revulsion traced a cold finger from the nape of his neck all the way down to his tailbone.

There was a passageway through the confusion, circumnavigating a central island. He followed it to the door of the dining room. Beyond the wide French doors, a dark-framed dining table was all but invisible under the junk.

A blinding lightning flash pierced the room, followed hard by a crash of thunder. The strike lit up the room like a flashbulb and made Robideau jump.

He licked his lips and went into the sitting room.

Here again were paths carved through the rubbish. The stink of mildew and cat litter was nauseating. Every few seconds a crack of thunder or flash of lightning struck at his nerves. Bulwer's chair loomed before him. Empty. Where was the old guy?

He squeezed past it and stepped into the den.

The storm was raging now, going hammer and tongs. It rippled behind the stained glass windows, shedding an intermittent and sulphurous glow on things. Lengths of pipe, a snakelike garden hose, a dozen dry and empty pet shop fish tanks. Stacks upon stacks of old film canisters, so many of them they took up most of one wall. An electric heater. A large fan-back chair.

And . . .

He caught only an ephemeral glimpse of something. In a flicker of lightning, a shadow closed on his, and something struck him on the back of the head.

When Robideau opened his eyes he found Bulwer Onager looming over him. A floor lamp lit the big man's face. "I'm very sorry about that, Chief Robideau," he said, "but you were sneaking around in my house like a thief."

Robideau's head felt as if someone was drilling into it with a brace and bit. He realized that he was back in the living room, half sprawled on the floor, his shoulders propped against a yellowing stack of newspapers. He must have been dragged here. He was still groggy.

"The back door was . . . was open, so—"

"I leave it open sometimes. For the cats."

"I came here . . . looking for Oddlot. I thought he might be . . . hiding here." Robideau sat up a little straighter, and the room dipped and swayed. He pressed a hand to the back of his head. He saw Bulwer more clearly now, sitting in his raggedy chair, balancing a cricket bat across his knees. He still had his WIMPY shirt on. Haltingly, Robideau explained about the backpack and the missing girl.

"Oddlot isn't here," Bulwer said. "He must be up at the theater."

"I just came from there. The place was closed."

"Closed to the public, yes. Not to Oddlot and me. We're different."

"If Oddlot knows anything about that girl, he needs to speak up," Robideau said, thinking, Yes, you most certainly are different. We can write that down and have it notarized.

The old man sniffed. He had other thoughts on his mind. "They want to tear the Palace down, you know." He seemed not to remember Robideau's appeal to him. "They'll probably open a video store there. I could never agree to that."

Robideau began to rise. Bulwer lifted the bat, shook his head, and the chief sank back down again. What was the old man playing at? And then he remembered that in the other room, he had seen . . . Just what *had* he seen?

"You could reopen your place."

"That's not possible. No money, you see. No credit."

"You could find investors, Bulwer. Modernize. Divide the place up into one of those multiplexes."

"Pooh. Those aren't theaters. They're just screening rooms with the sound turned up too loud."

Robideau thought hard. He had to keep the old man talking.

"I used to love going to the Palace, you know."

Bulwer nodded. His troubled face was suddenly in silhouette as a stab of lightning leaped in the room.

"That's nice. We had some good years there. But then TV came along and changed all that. We couldn't afford the new gimmicks: Cinerama, wide-screen, 3-D with those silly eye-glasses. When I showed *The Tingler* they wanted me to rig buzzers under the seats to give people an extra scare. And then color TV came along. Bigger screens. *Vee-cee-ars*." He said it as if the word tasted bad. "And now there's *digital* television, did you know that?"

"Yes."

"TV screens as thin as your hand and two or three meters across. Sound systems. Not speakers. Sound systems. Even the multiplex theaters are going to go under. Just wait and see if I'm not right."

Bulwer's eyes slowly lowered to look at him.

"Have you got a TV in your house, Chief Robideau?"

Robideau hesitated. He didn't want to provoke the old man. "Well, yes. Everybody does these days."

"I don't."

"Well, you're wise. They're a darn waste of time."

"That's right. That's just what they are. The old movie houses, they were different. They got you out of the house. Brought you downtown. They were an experience." Bulwer's eyes glistened. "On a Saturday night the street was alive out front of the Palace. The marquee was so bright it took your breath away. Go there now, you'd think you were in a ghost town. TV is nothing but a curse."

"No argument here," Robideau said.

"In the Forties, movie attendance was ninety million a week. By the end of the Fifties, forty million. Today, twenty or thirty. See where it's going?"

"Listen," Robideau said, "you better let me up, okay? We'll go somewhere and have a coffee, sit down and talk this out."

"I have to leave soon," the old man said. "I'm missing the show."

"The show?"

"Yes. Oddlot's getting it ready. Mother's favorite film, you know."

"What film is that?"

"They don't make films of that caliber anymore. All blood and gore these days. And special effects. It's like being at a circus."

"What film?"

"A Hitchcock film. He knew how to make movies!"

"Which one?"

Bulwer gazed down at him. Robideau felt like a human sacrifice at the feet of an unbalanced god. "Did you like the old Hitchcock films, Chief Robideau?"

"Sure."

"We had people lining up at the doors when we showed that film."

"Which one are you talking about?"

"Anthony Perkins should have won an Oscar. I, for one, think he was robbed."

Bulwer's chair creaked under his weight. He closed his eyes. His hands relaxed on the cricket bat, big hands, powerful hands, liver spotted and puffy, but strong and capable hands.

"Those were the days. Minnie Scooder there out front in the ticket booth, the Gilmore girl handling the concessions. We called her the glamour girl, did you know that? A little joke we had. And Oddlot and me up in the projection booth. I learned

so much from him. How to trim the arc, how to do a changeover. You do a changeover every twenty minutes on the 35s. On the 16s, every forty-four minutes. That's how long a reel of film lasts."

"I didn't realize that."

"Oh yes. And Oddlot, when I told him how much Mom liked it, had the idea of reporting the movie stolen. The distributor yelled, but what could he do about it? We were going out of business. He had to chase the insurance company."

Bulwer chortled mirthfully. Robideau got slowly to his feet.

"Of course," Bulwer went on, more seriously, "a reel of film doesn't last forever." His head had tilted all the way back; it gave a curious view of him from under the chin. "It gets brittle, scratched. The sprocket holes wear. So we store our 35mm copy in the fridge behind the concession stand—keep it at forty degrees—and most of the time we use 16mm prints. You can still buy those for a few hundred dollars."

Robideau wanted another look in the den. He began to edge in that direction.

"Of course," Bulwer droned on, "the movie's printed on safety film. If it was the old film, that nitrate stuff, it might have turned to powder or exploded by now. Oddlot made me remove all the old nitrate film from the Palace. He thinks it's dangerous. Starts on fire if you look at it. It even burns under water; you can't put it out."

Robideau reached the den and slipped his key chain Mag-Lite from his pocket. There were the fish tanks. And the wicker chair. The electric heater glowing on the floor.

"To understand what a nitrate fire can do, you should go and see *Cinema Paradiso*," Bulwer droned. "Not that I've seen it. But Oddlot recommends it."

Robideau edged forward. The large fan-back chair was pushed up hard against the wall. There was a lot of shadow here, and . . .

Damn!

Robideau had dropped the Mag-Lite. It bounced on the carpet, rolled, and lay at his feet, its tiny light directed under the chair.

He hunkered down and groped for it. Its bisected beam revealed a pair of ankles. Ankles that looked impossibly thin. The nylon tights around them drooped loosely from skinny shanks. Below, a pair of lady's oxfords had a layer of dust on them a quarter of an inch thick.

Taking hold of the Mag-Lite, Robideau stood back up. He felt a tingling and sickly presentiment. As he slowly raised the torch he saw a pleated skirt that seemed to have nothing under it but sticks. A pair of clenched, white-gloved hands in the lap. A once-

satiny blouse between the lapels of a jacket. A tarnished pendent. The face . . .

The face before him was hollowed and shrunken. The brow had an onionskin tautness. The hair, a washed-out blond, stood out from the scalp in hideous clumps. The mouth hung open, slack jawed and fleshless, revealing a bone-white section of dental bridgework in a bank of yellow and twisted teeth.

Robideau tried to move but couldn't. His feet seemed rooted to the floor. He saw that Bulwer Onager had jumped the rails, had swung as far from the tracks of normality as it was possible to go.

"Esta Onager," Robideau whispered. "You ran the flower shop. You're Bulwer's mother."

The light clicked on.

"Noooooo!" Bulwer hollered, and the cricket bat whistled through the air. Robideau saw it coming, but it never connected because he was struck from the side and bowled over, his aching head crashing into one of the fish tanks. He had a sense of two men struggling, and suddenly Pete was hauling him to his feet.

"Come on, Chief. You've outwore your welcome. Don't worry about those two. I gave Butts a call."

Gripping Robideau by the shoulders, Pete rushed him quickly back through the cluttered house. A last glance showed Bulwer trying to shake off Oddlot, who was hanging onto the cricket bat with both hands. The light above the men careened crazily. The stacks of film canisters teetered and then crashed down around their legs. Coils of film and an ugly brown powder spilled out of the cans and across the floor and the heater.

Pete and Robideau burst from the house, struggled over the garbage bags, and stumbled into the yard. There was an ominous *thump* at their backs, and the windows of the den blew out, scattering shards of glass across the lawn. This was followed by a burgeoning flicker, and suddenly the den was shooting flame like a fireworks display. Horrified, Robideau tried to rush back in, but Pete Melynchuk held him back.

Police Chief Butts pulled up with his siren wailing, jumped from his car, and stalked toward them. Heavy, low-hanging, acrid smoke gushed from the shattered windows of the house.

"Damn it, Robideau, I only asked you to talk to the guy. Now I got a murder investigation on my hands and a house on fire. What is it with you?" He squinted. "Did you know your head is bleeding?"

The rain began to fall with such ferocity it drove Butts back into his car at a run.



Oddball had been right. You couldn't put out the fire by pouring water on it. This was confirmed by none other than Chuck Lang, once a member of the End of Main volunteer fire brigade. He polished off a beer and let out a gaseous belch. "What was he thinking, storing old films there?"

Pete and Robideau were at the table in the Netley. Wilmer and Wolverton were just sitting down.

Robideau touched the bandage on his head and winced. "Oddlot made him remove the film from the theater. There must have been quite a stock of them. They found even more in the wing of the house that didn't burn. Silents and old newsreels. Even a pile of ancient Russian films that he scrounged from God knows where."

"He should've known better," Chuck said unsparingly. "Got rid of them. But he wouldn't part with anything, would he? Not even his poor dead mother."

"He couldn't stand to part with food wrappers," Pete said, as if this explained it. "Why wouldn't he keep his mother around?"

Wilmer signaled for more beer. "I seen that young fella works at the video rental store this morning, and he told me that ever since this hit the newspapers they can't keep that *Psycho* movie on the shelves. They're ordering more copies from the city. Bullet would've liked that."

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

"To think of him in that old theater," Wilmer continued, "showing his mom that movie over and over again! It's like I said. OCD. Your Compression Repulsive Disorder."

Pete rolled his eyes.

"So Bullet killed her too?" Chuck said frowning. "His own mother?"

"No." Pete shook his head. "He didn't. Esta died—I think it was lung cancer got her. Smoked like a stove full of sawdust, that old gal."

"But he kept her around," Chuck persisted. "Kept her at the Palace. He kills the girl because he thinks she might've seen something. He kills the detective when he comes looking for the girl. As for Oddlot . . ."

They thought about Oddlot.

Had he played any part in the murders? He'd sworn to Pete he hadn't known anything about them, and Robideau believed that was probably true. On the other hand, Esta Onager had been pretty sly for a dead woman. She hadn't walked from the Palace Roxy to Bulwer's house all by herself. Or walked away from the embalming table, for that matter. And it was a fact that the

Onagers had owned the funeral home before Prancing Al Evans got his hands on it, and a fact that Bulwer's pal Oddlot had done the fetch-and-carry jobs there.

"It's amazing the things you don't notice when they're right under your nose," Robideau said.

Pete nodded. "You got that right."

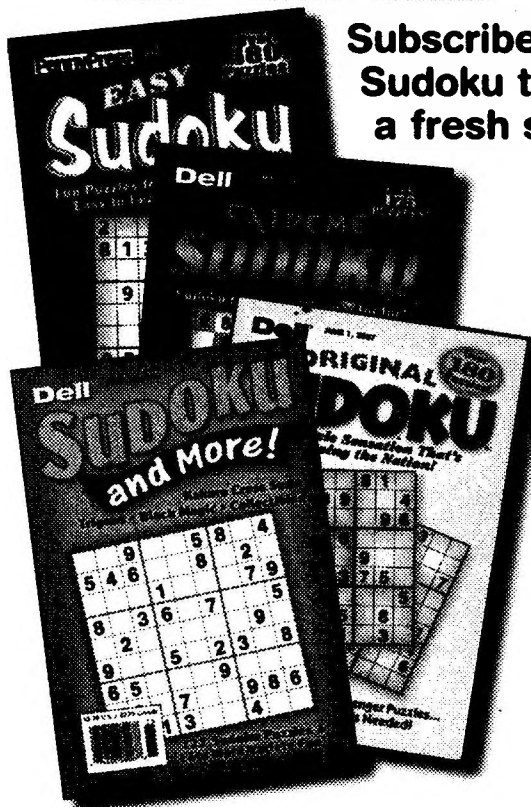
"Things are rarely what they seem."

"You got that right," Pete said. ↗

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 210. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the September issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Paris Hilton, say	187	19	148	59	161	1	198			
B. The second "Bye" in "Bye, Bye Birdie," e.g.	98	76	210	173	110	16	63	130	38	
C. Lattice features	182	152	12	142	92					
D. Suburban implement: 2 wds.	124	204	100	79	36	136	95	169	184	
E. Valentine's Day feeling	115	68	41	126	190	91	53	49	6	
F. Withstands	163	120	74	179	3	116	20			
G. Ted Turner, at times	197	90	107	171	135	118	177	37	52	
H. Splitting apart	133	101	99	7	129	26	22			
I. Break	111	39	175	159	51	82	174			
J. Tony tracts	149	54	44	85	97	164	168			
K. Land on the Adriatic, once	106	35	205	46	134	83	155	57	96	162
L. Deserving	121	176	201	145	34	170	191	75	156	108
M. Daughter of Polonius	66	31	151	73	24	13	206			
N. Contemporary of Kublai Khan: 2 wds.	203	21	137	192	105	160	14	157	146	
O. Significant 1879 German birth	84	188	131	27	47	58	208	15		
P. Central England county seat	70	112	141	128	10	64	80	103	158	196

	1	A	2	Q	3	F	4	T	5	X	6	E	7	H	8	Z		9	Q	10	P	11	V	12	C			
13	M	14	N	15	O		16	B	17	T	18	S	19	A	20	F		21	N	22	H		23	Y	24	M		
25	Z	26	H	27	O	28	T		29	U	30	V	31	M	32	W	33	Y	34	L	35	K	36	D	37	G	38	B
	39	I	40	Q	41	E	42	V	43	X	44	J		45	Z	46	K	47	O		48	W	49	E				
50	V	51	I	52	G	53	E	54	J	55	T		56	R	57	K	58	O	59	A	60	Z	61	T	62	Q	63	B
64	P	65	Y		66	M	67	Q	68	E		69	S	70	P		71	Q	72	U	73	M		74	F			
75	L	76	B	77	S	78	X	79	D	80	P		81	X	82	I		83	K	84	O	85	J	86	Y	87	R	
	88	Z	89	W	90	G	91	E	92	C		93	V	94	T	95	D		96	K	97	J		98	B			
99	H		100	D	101	H	102	W	103	P		104	Z	105	N	106	K	107	G	108	L		109	Q	110	B		
111	I	112	P	113	U		114	R	115	E	116	F	117	V	118	G		119	R	120	F	121	L		122	Y		
123	T	124	D	125	X	126	E	127	R	128	P	129	H	130	B	131	O		132	T	133	H		134	K	135	G	
136	D	137	N	138	R	139	W	140	U		141	P	142	C	143	Y		144	V	145	L	146	N	147	S	148	A	
149	J	150	W		151	M	152	C	153	V	154	X		155	K	156	L	157	N		158	P	159	I	160	N		
161	A	162	K	163	F	164	J	165	X		166	Z	167	R	168	J	169	D	170	L	171	G	172	Q	173	B	174	I
	175	I	176	L	177	G	178	U		179	F	180	R		181	V	182	C	183	Q	184	D	185	W	186	U		
	187	A	188	O	189	T	190	E	191	L	192	N	193	Z	194	S	195	R		196	P	197	G	198	A	199	Q	
	200	U	201	L	202	S		203	N	204	D	205	K	206	M	207	X	208	O	209	Z	210	B					

- Q. Impromptu: 3 wds.
(slang) 71 9 40 199 62 172 109 2 67 183
- R. "Affliction" star: 2 wds. 180 138 127 195 119 114 167 87 56
- S. Sly 77 147 69 194 18 202
- T. Immigration, for
some pols: 2 wds. 55 132 61 4 123 28 17 189 94
- U. Nonstop 178 72 186 113 200 29 140
- V. Deign 153 42 30 11 93 144 181 50 117
- W. Dilettante, perhaps 139 150 102 89 32 48 185
- X. Understood 43 154 81 125 78 207 5 165
- Y. Aglaia, Euphrosyne,
and Thalia 65 33 23 122 143 86
- Z. Fun 166 45 104 193 60 25 8 209 88

UNTYING THE KNOT

BARRY BALDWIN

“**P**risoner at the bar. You have been found guilty of the crime with which you are charged. Have you anything to say before sentence is passed upon you?”

“My Lord, this is one in the eye for Joe Bernstein and Harry Goldberg. I shall die. But shall I hang? Thank you.”

It was hard to tell whose voice had been the flatter, the judge's or the defendant's. Amid the marbles and murals of the Old Bailey, police officers and journalists and court staff winked at each other. They had heard that last kind of thing from the dock before; only its details and delivery varied. But the mention of Joe Bernstein and Harry Goldberg did produce more than a fleeting impression, not weakened by the fact that no one knew who they were. They all looked, some with less sympathy than before, others with more, at the accused with an interest they had rarely felt during his trial. Like most of his kind, he was both in demeanor and as described by others—his own voice had not been heard until now—ordinary to the point of dullness. Seasoned observers recalled those rows of nonentities with funny names at Nuremberg, whose proceedings they had helped to harden in the concrete of history a few years ago. None imagined the man in front of them would be remembered beyond the day three weeks hence when the papers would report his brief encounter with the hangman at eight o'clock in the morning in Pentonville gaol.

Some, not all, thought that if the man shared ideas for which millions had died, it was no bad thing that he should be sent to join them. The trouble was, he was not on trial for those ideas, hadn't killed for them. To die may be accounted the best thing a man ever did. Look at what Dickens wrote about Sydney Carton. This man, though, would only be on the receiving end of death as a result of having been on the giving end of it. Yet others would have done the same, including perhaps the twelve who had just legally placed the noose around his neck, and many would agree that he did not deserve to die for this particular deed.

None of this was a concern to the judge, who was now finger-

ing something on his desk with unfeigned concentration. He was not one of those arbiters who in certain kinds of story or pro-

Some thought that if a man shared ideas for which millions had died, it was no bad thing that he should be sent to join them.

paganda enjoy passing the sentence of death, sometimes to the point of involun-

tary ejaculation into Saville Row-tailored dark trousers. Had there been anybody with whom to share an intimate moment, he might have mentioned that he viewed this present discharge of his duty with regret, even distaste. But only might have. He regularly defined himself in his public speeches and smoking-room conversations—between which there was not all that much difference—as an administrator of the law, an executor in two ways, if you cared for that sort of humor. His study of philosophy at Oxford had left him with a permanent distaste for Socrates and his jawing to the point where he felt a distinct sympathy for those Athenian jurymen who had dispensed the hemlock all the way back in the three hundred and ninety-ninth year before the birth of Christ.

The judge picked up the black cap, perched it upon the wig that covered his fly's skating rink of a head, and again without inflection recited the sentence down to its hallowed conclusion: ". . . to be hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy upon your soul." After a stiff bow, stiffly acknowledged, the prisoner was stood down, taken below, and transported without fuss to the room reserved for him in Pentonville.

There, the senior of the two warders with whom he would be playing happy families until the day of the drop laid out the rules and regulations to their new guest with matter-of-fact courtesy.

"You're more or less going to be stuck with the two of us, so we'd best get on. I daresay we shall. There's not been any bother with our previous gentlemen. That light stays on all the time, mind, just in case. But you can have something to put over your eyes for sleeping. Otherwise, it's all quite civilized. There are games to play. One bloke, I remember, didn't know a king from a pawn when he arrived; he was beating us hollow by the time he had to leave. You can have a newspaper brought in, though that's not always a good idea. The library isn't half bad. Back in 1910, I think it was, when he was in charge of prisons, dear old Winston Churchill insisted there be some good reading. Very keen on Gibbon, he was, though he admitted that might not be ideal for short-term stays. Still, there's lots of other stuff. You are entitled to ten cigarettes a day, or half an ounce of pipe tobacco. Also a daily pint of beer, bottle of stout if you

prefer. I might suggest the stout, it keeps your strength up more. You can send and receive letters and have anyone you like to visit, within reason. Talking of visitors, the governor will pop in twice a day, and the chaplain is on call whenever you want. Any questions?"

"Do you think I stand a chance, sir?"

"You don't have to call me that. It's up to the home secretary. There's always a chance. But I wouldn't dwell on it if I were you. Not considering who was killed."

"Years ago," the second warder contributed, "before the war, one chap got the word in here just as they were pinioning his arms ready to haul him away. Not that it did him much good; he keeled over and died of a heart attack the very next day. Delayed reaction, the medical officer said."

"Anything can happen. My advice is, let's wait and see. How old are you, son?"

"Nineteen."

The prisoner didn't ask why this question should have been tagged on to the admonition. That was a blessing for the warder. It was one of the personal details the hangman needed to know to do his job properly. Something about the relative muscular strength between various ages. For an unexplained bureaucratic reason, he was never given this information in advance. So, when he arrived with his assistant at four in the afternoon on the day before, as per usual, he would discreetly ask questions and watch the prisoner in the exercise yard to calculate his weight. The rope would be stretched overnight by leaving a sandbag dummy on it. Hanging a man is not so easy as it looks in one of those lynching scenes in Wild West films where they just slap a noose round the victim's neck, giddy up the horse they've sat him on, and that's that. Like the judge, the hangman took no pleasure from his job but prided himself on his professionalism. There was never going to be a repetition of 1922 and Mrs. Edith Thompson: Unable to forget what had gone on, the hangman's assistant later attempted suicide. Not to mention the way some of the Nuremberg ones had been bungled. The drop had been too short, it was more strangling than hanging; a reporter who'd been there claimed that Keitel had taken nearly half an hour to die.

The key is the C1 and C2 vertebrae, known in the trade as the Hangman's Drops. When the spinal cord suffers a blow, these are compressed, and if proper force has been applied, fractured. The sheer force of the blow kills some nerves instantly. Then the compression causes electrical impulses traveling through nerve cells in the area to go haywire, and the overload causes many neurons to kill themselves. The dying nerve cells leak calcium, which attracts

enzymes to the area that chew on the tissues. Their by-products are unstable compounds that destroy healthy cells by scavenging their oxygen. These dying cells trigger a secondary wave of destruction that sweeps from the injured area and radiates outward. Blood flow to the nervous system is slowed, immune cells flood the area and chew up damaged and healthy nerves alike. The result is gaping holes in the spinal column, and the long nerve fibers called axons that weave down the spine from the brain are stripped of their protective fatty coat of myelin, without which the nerves cannot function, and unlike the peripheral one, the central nervous system does not regenerate.

This is just some of what a conscientious hangman needs to know. Prison guards do not; and for the hangee, ignorance is bliss. When the warders had got their charge bedded down for the night, they settled themselves, less comfortable than him in their upright wooden chairs, to assess the situation. The senior man was now a good deal less composed than before. His partner reflected that he'd been up and down like this since that never clearly explained injury nearly a year ago.

"Reprieve? Fat chance. They never let you off for killing a police officer. If it hadn't been for that, he'd have got away with manslaughter, no question. Especially as he was only there by accident."

"All that violence on a peace march. It doesn't make sense."

"Nothing has made sense since the war, if you ask me."

The second warder wasn't going to ask him. Not about that, at any rate. "That stuff he came out with in court. Do you reckon he will try to top himself?"

The other laughed knowingly. "Not on your nelly. Half of them say that just to create an impression. It's never happened yet."

"There's always a first time. Hermann the German got away with it at Nuremberg."

"Yes, well, his guards must have been asleep on the job. Yanks! Anyway, Goering had plenty of friends in high places."

"I read in *Titbits* once that he hid his capsule inside the cavity of an old scar on his belly until the night before."

They both glanced across to the apparently sleeping prisoner. "*Titbits*," scoffed the senior warder, "that's a right scholarly journal, I don't think. Still, it wouldn't do any harm to check him over in the shower tomorrow morning. You can look up his backside, since you're such an expert on cavities."

"That gives me something to look forward to. But it's our arses on the line if anything were to go wrong."

"All right, you've made your point, and I agree, we can't be too

careful. But where would sonny boy over there get himself a cyanide capsule? Think about it. You can't just walk into Boots and buy them like a packet of Dispirin. It might happen in one of your magazine stories, but not in real life."

The other still considered raising the possibility of somebody importing a poison, but decided against it. He didn't want to push the senior man over the edge. As it turned out, this was never an issue. The whole time he was there, the prisoner did not have a single visitor.

"Don't you have anyone at all, son?"

"Like it came out in court, my mother and father were killed in the Blitz, and if they had any relations I've never seen them. Everybody reckoned it was a miracle I wasn't blown up as well. The priest was sure it meant God had spared me for some higher purpose."

That was right enough in a way, thought the second warder, gallops in mind.

"Our chaplain's C of E, of course, but he takes on all comers. If you really want a proper priest, I could send word to the governor."

The prisoner said politely that he didn't want any kind of priest, proper or otherwise. Can't be much of a Catholic, the senior warder decided, but then neither could his parents have been, what with them only having the one child. This theological musing led him to another question.

"Not thinking of trying anything silly, are you, son?"

"How do you mean?"

"That business in court about doing yourself in."

"I only meant I might be taken before the day. You never know."

True enough, both warders thought, for different reasons. But neither pursued the point, either with him or each other.

"Mind you," the senior warder said neutrally, "you didn't do yourself any favors coming out with that remark about Joe Bernstein and Harry Goldberg. What with all that's happened in the world, there's no profit to be had from taking that line anymore."

I wouldn't be too sure, the second warder thought.

"I wasn't taking any line. Joe Bernstein and Harry Goldberg were two lads in our class. Nobody liked them. They had more pocket money than we did and made a lot more out of a kind of school newspaper they ran. They once made fun of me in a thing they wrote, said it would be the first and last time I'd ever be in the papers for anything."

Words mean what they say but do not always say what they mean. "The rest of the world thinks he's a suicidal anti-Semite, and only us two know different."

“Though he wasn’t on oath when he said any of that.”

He was a model prisoner. Too much so, for their liking. They were almost glad of the one time he gave them a scare, staying too long in the lavatory, but when they charged in he just looked embarrassed and said he was having trouble going. You’ll not have that problem on the day, the second warder thought. He didn’t take advantage of the drink or tobacco rations. He never asked for a newspaper, or to visit the library. He declined to play any of their games, though did ask to use the pack of cards, with which he played a variety of patience neither of them knew. When he wasn’t doing this, or enduring his exercise periods, he seemed content to lie on his bed, not ever making use of the bandage for his eyes.

Apart from the cards, the only thing he asked for was chocolate. “Slam Bars, those are my favorite.” This was a bit of a poser, chocolate still being in short supply. But the senior warder spared him a few from his own precious rations, though the other one never did, and when he mentioned the prisoner’s sweet tooth to the governor, the latter said he’d see what he could do.

Even though they should have been used to him after three weeks, the two warders were still impressed when on his last night on earth their prisoner said he didn’t want anything special for the traditional last breakfast, just one more Slam Bar would do, turned in early, and went to sleep almost at once.

“Rummet cove we’ve ever had in here, that’s for certain.”

“If anything is.”

“Might have been different if the person being beaten up had testified.”

“Never testified because never found. Wouldn’t have done any good. He killed a constable who right or wrong was only doing his job.”

“That’s what that lot at Nuremberg said.”

Had things gone to plan, the hangman and his assistant would have arrived the next morning at 7:56 precisely, on the customary signal given by the sheriff. Instead, they were already on their way home, cheated of a fee. Inside the cell, one warder was copiously using the lavatory. The other was stolidly fending off icily polite questions from the governor while trying to avoid getting elbowed by the chaplain flapping around the bed on which lay the prisoner, dead as the proverbial doornail. There was no rigor mortis to speak of. It had been a warm night outside, the cell was stuffy, and he was in the regulation heavy pyjamas. According to the medical officer, for whom this was a very different kind of body from his

usual ones, it was a simple case of myocarditis, brought on by the heat of the night and the stress of the occasion, especially a stress that he gathered had been so tightly compressed. No, he told the board of enquiry, there was no trace of any pills or poison in his system, and there was nothing untoward about the state of the bed.

If cell walls could talk, they would not have agreed. At about two in the morning, one of the warders, saying he would have his later, which he never did, had passed to the other a mug of tea from the thermos flask he always brought in, though this was the first time its contents had ever been laced with laxative. When the latter was on the second or third of his sudden dashes to and protracted stays on the bowl, thinking about nothing or nobody else, the other crossed over to the bed, took the chosen object from his pocket, and with it choked the prisoner who, deceptively or not, lay there looking as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

It was the least the warder could do. He, too, had been on that peace demonstration, wearing a balaclava over his face, something not out of place on a bitter January morning, lots of other marchers were wearing them, though not for the same reason. As a servant of the crown he was not allowed to have public opinions. He had received several good whacks from the constable's truncheon, including the one on the head, which still bothered him.

Since the right questions weren't asked, the right answers weren't given. There was some resentment, within and without the prison, that the culprit had escaped the hangman, but since he was dead anyway, this soon evaporated. The home secretary's office announced that no last-minute reprieve had been contemplated. This was not true, but it was thought expedient to say so, to damp down public curiosity and nip in the bud any possible rumors and newspaper headlines about Fate Taking A Strange Twist.

Both warders stayed on the death cell rosters, it was not a responsibility for which there was much competition, until the hangman was put out of a job in 1965. Nothing much changed between them or inside them, except that even after chocolate rationing stopped in 1954, neither of them seemed to bring in Slam Bars to go with their tea anymore. 🐦

INCIDENT AT LONELY ROCKS

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

Winter on the Oregon beaches was unlike winter anywhere else. Winter on the beach meant fifty-degree temperatures and the occasional rain. The surf was high, but the beaches were empty—tourists spent their vacation dollars on Maui or the Virgin Islands, or even Las Vegas in December.

But Oscar loved the beach. And he loved the fact that his route took him there every single week.

Mondays were his beach days. He drove from the warehouse, which was on a side road exactly between Seavy Village and Anchor Bay, and headed north. His first stop was always at the Lonely Rocks Wayside, and he'd always think it was incredibly well named.

Not once had he ever seen a car parked there, not once had he watched a tourist walk along the beach. When he arrived, there was only him, the crumbling parking lot, and the POTS portable toilet, which was as close to the highway as he could get it.

He would pull up alongside the toilet, get out his scrubber and bucket, then put on his gloves. He'd keep the ignition on—he had to; the hose wouldn't work without it—and then he'd get out. He'd open the toilet's door, stick the hose through the hole, and let the machine suck the waste into the large container at the back of his truck.

He also had another portable toilet strapped into the back in case he had to switch one out or he got called to a new job. Usually that toilet remained there for most of the week.

Then, when he finished vacuuming out the waste, he scrubbed the interior and added new chemicals in the portable toilet's storage container. He had become a fast cleaner, and a precise one. His motto was simple: He wanted moms and grandmoms to comfortably use his toilets.

He particularly liked the Lonely Rocks Wayside. It had been built in the 1950s as a large turnout where tourists could watch

the waves. Over the years, it had had slight upgrades: The parking lot was now asphalt instead of flattened dirt, a guardrail had been placed along the cliffside, and state-produced signs told idiots not to climb over the side. POTS got the wayside's first and only portable toilet contract in 1991, and Oscar had been servicing Lonely Rocks ever since.

Oscar figured it was the highway warning signs that kept the casual tourist away. In addition to the BEWARE SUNKEN GRADE signs that dotted every mile of the old road (it wasn't Highway 101 anymore; the state had gotten terrified of the erosion this high up and had moved the highway two miles inland, away from the ocean), there were DO NOT WALK signs posted along the shoulder and CAUTION: UNSTABLE GROUND signs even closer to the wayside itself.

Most out-of-state tourists didn't know Oregon terminology, so the "sunken grade" signs wouldn't bother them. Sunken grade meant the same thing that the unstable ground sign meant with a slight twist: Sunken grade would most easily be translated as "sinking road."

He was a native Oregonian, which was why he always stopped his heavy truck on a turnout on the east side of the highway, just before the sunken grade signs started. Then he'd walk the length—again on the east side, away from the ocean—and inspect the road, just to make sure it was sturdy enough for the one-ton-plus he would drive across it.

So far, he'd been lucky. But a few times, he had come across crumbled asphalt on the far end of the wayside about a hundred yards past his delivery spot. Then he'd turn around and go the ten miles out of his way on the highway, heading to the next wayside. He'd call the deteriorating road into both the State Police and the Oregon Department of Transportation, figuring that he would be the first to discover it, even if the slide had happened in a storm three or four days before.

In the winter, hardly anyone used this road. In the summer, he mostly saw folks he called "environmental tourists," people with PROTECT THE EARTH bumper stickers or bikes or camping gear on the back of their car. The SUVs or the families whose kids had iPods hardly came here.

This morning, the road had seemed stable. There hadn't been serious storms or high surf in the past week, so he gave the road only a cursory inspection. Then he drove up alongside the portable toilet and started his ritual.

He put the truck in park and left it idling. He set the emergency brake and got out. He paused, mostly because he couldn't help it,

and took a big sniff of the fresh ocean air. A touch of salt and a bit of brine all mixed with the chill that suggested the water itself. He loved it.

Just like he loved the view: the Lonely Rocks, all five of them, standing (that's how the brochures described them) in the surf, looking forever like people in a semicircle with their backs to each other. He would've named it the Angry Rocks—he could almost imagine their fronts, the scowling faces, the crossed arms—but he supposed people would want something more dramatic with a name like that, instead of one of those silent stand-offs his ex-wife used to give him in the last few years of their marriage.

Then he squared his shoulders and headed to the portable toilet. POTS toilets were a light green. The company got its start renting toilets to logging companies, and for some reason, some designer thought it would best to have the toilets blend into the scenery.

Here, the light green looked slightly out of place. The trees along this cliff face were scraggly, wind-raved pine, with needles so dark they almost looked black. Against the asphalt, the green seemed festive, and more than once, he'd found one of those see-through Oregon Ducks stickers pasted onto the door. If the company hadn't minded, he would've left the sticker on—he understood team spirit; it had taken him through that glorious season when the football team he'd played for couldn't do anything wrong—but he had to follow regs. Nothing but the company logo on the outside (a big P with a toilet-bowl-shaped O, a T behind that in a way that kinda looked like a toilet, and an S that seemed to brace the entire mess up) and a spotless, pine-fresh interior.

This toilet looked relatively new. It had the new curved door handle that informed someone outside whether the toilet was occupied or not, and it didn't have a lot of scratches or polished-off graffiti marks.

He walked around the toilet first, making sure nothing had happened to the outside. He braced a hand on the side of the toilet and accidentally shoved it, which made it rock.

Something banged inside.

In fact, it banged so hard, he nearly toppled over. Weight had shifted.

Someone had planted something inside his portable toilet.

Then his breath caught. Had he interrupted a customer? A hiker maybe? Someone frightened by the required beep-beep-beep of the truck as it backed up?

He could just imagine some scrawny hiker in his Birkenstocks, huddled inside, waiting for civilization to go away.

“Hey!” he said. “C’mon out. It’s okay.”

He almost banged on the reinforced plastic wall, then thought the better of it. That would probably scare Mr. Birkenstock even more.

So he went around front and stopped as he peered at the door. It wasn’t latched from the inside. The little red sign that changed as the handle latched read VACANT.

He felt a little relief at that. Never once, in all his years as a POTS customer service representative had he ever tried to clean a toilet with someone in it.

Although that didn’t explain the weight shift. He might have to amend his record to never cleaning a toilet with someone *obviously* in it. There was no way to tell this thing was occupied. The parking lot was empty, there was no backpack or camping gear outside (not that there was a place to camp anywhere near Lonely Rocks, although there was a great hiking trail—if you didn’t mind that it could crumble out beneath you at any minute), and the door wasn’t latched.

He couldn’t be blamed for making this kind of mistake.

“Hey!” he said again. “My name’s Rollston. I service these toilets. No need to be scared of me. Are you okay?”

No one answered. And he had the odd feeling that no one would.

Then he frowned. Kids. Kids were the only downside of this job. Not little kids, who actually loved outdoor toilets, seeing them as an exotic novelty. Not even the local high school crowd, which mostly found the toilets gross, if they thought of them at all.

No, the kids that bothered him were the college kids. Old enough to come to the coast unsupervised for the weekend, but young enough to forget that the word “responsibility” applied even here.

Those kids would get drunk, build fires on the beaches, and toddle up to the nearest portable toilet to get rid of the excess beer. Then they’d get the bright idea in their head that they needed to mess with the toilet somehow. Sometimes that messing was just a team sticker. But most often, it manifested in the urge to turn the toilet turtle.

Oscar never understood why. Did the kids think there was a hole underneath it? The toilet just had a receptacle under the seat, a receptacle filled with chemicals to dissolve the waste and get rid of the smell. The things were designed so that they could be turned on their side and not spill (too much) unless they were overfull—and he never let his get overfull. So the irritation was just that he had to right the toilet before he could clean it.

An extra five minutes, which bothered him in the summer and usually didn’t disturb him at all in the winter.

But sometimes the kids were creative. Sometimes they stashed things inside the toilet. The worst was the bearhide wrapped around a wooden frame. The hide still had a head, and damn if that thing didn't look real when he opened the door the first time, and damn if he didn't let out a little scream as he slammed the door shut—not something he'd want his old football buddies to know. But not many of his old football buddies would've opened the door again either.

He had, and he'd been fine. (He'd half expected that bear to lunge out at him, but it hadn't. It hadn't moved at all, which was the thing that tipped him off to its fakeness.)

He expected something like that here. Some kind of prank—a log, maybe, or a mannequin. He'd come across things like that before, things people had intentionally or otherwise left inside the portable toilets, and while they'd given him a start, they'd never scared him.

Not like that fake bear.

He knocked one final time, hoping that someone would open the door. When no one did, he squared his shoulders, put his fingers in the little half-moon handle, and pulled.

The door came open easily enough. That surprised him, and looking back on it, he wasn't sure why. Later, he realized that everything about the toilet had surprised him, and yet the parts registered separately, not as a cohesive whole.

First the door, then the flies—an entire swarm of them, buzzing around him as if it were summer. He tried to wipe them away from his face with his free arm.

Then the darkness. He thought the entire place was in shadow, even though he knew it wasn't: There had been sunlight on the door, after all. But the interior looked dark, and these places only looked dark when they were in shadow.

Only he tried not to leave them in shadow, so no one would be tempted to pull a prank or get hurt using the facilities.

What he saw as darkness was actually blood, great gobs of it, dried black against the molded plastic walls.

And finally, he saw the body, wedged—which was the wrong word because obviously, he'd heard the body flopping around—between the tiny sink and the side wall. The body belonged to a man, a Birkenstock wearer just like Oscar had initially suspected, only this guy had a knife stuck up to the hilt in the left side of his flannel shirt. He had a pair of glasses hanging from one ear, and his face looked naked. It also looked weird, with the blood spatter on one side, but not on the other. It took Oscar a while to figure out that the glasses had been in place when the guy died.

Oscar had probably dislodged the glasses. He'd probably moved the entire body when he shoved the portable toilet.

That made his stomach heave. He backed out of the toilet and ran toward the guardrail, planning to let go of his breakfast over the edge.

He didn't quite make it. He lost a great meal on the side of the asphalt, crouching so that he barely missed his shoes.

He stayed that way for a minute, afraid he'd lose more. He couldn't very well leave the guy here, but he couldn't take him either. That would be tampering with a crime scene, right? Oscar watched a lot of the detective programs on television—from *CSI* to all its spin-offs, and its nonfiction inspiration shows on Discovery and PBS—and he knew that touching stuff was the worst thing he could do.

So was panicking.

He swallowed against the bile still rising in his throat and made himself concentrate. No car, no other people, nothing obvious. He wasn't in any danger, even though his heart was pounding.

He had time to consider his next move.

He stood slowly. His stomach was settling down. He headed to his truck. He had a cell phone in there, mounted on the sunflap. If he called for help, all he had to do was wait for it, here, with his portable toilets, and the poor soul who had died in one.

Obviously not in the act of using it either. The guy had died there, but he hadn't locked the door when he had gone inside. You'd think if some guy was being attacked by a maniac with a knife, he'd go into the nearest building—even if it was made of plastic and had thin walls—and lock the door.

Maybe the guy didn't have time. Maybe he had run inside, the killer had grabbed the door and stabbed him, and then left while the poor victim flailed about inside, trying to pull the knife free and failing.

Although, shouldn't a knife hold the blood in? Hadn't Oscar read somewhere that a stabbing victim should never remove a knife, that the knife would keep him from bleeding to death?

Oscar was breathing hard. He flipped open his cell and stared at the reception bar.

Nothing. He should've remembered that. One reason he loved this route was that his boss couldn't call him and make him veer off it, not without exquisite timing and a lot of luck.

"Damn," Oscar whispered. But he slipped the phone onto his belt clip and walked back to the scene.

He was already thinking of it as a crime scene. How TV of him. He wasn't any kind of detective, and he couldn't figure things out.

He had just stumbled on something awful, and now, it seemed, his brain wasn't working quite right.

He had to get calm before he took the next step, whatever that would be. He walked away from the truck and headed toward the guard rail. Maybe the Lonely Rocks would know. Maybe they would help him remember where the cell reception started again or where the nearest police station was.

Or ranger station. Or some kind of coast guard unit. Any place with someone official.

The ocean was bright blue with a topping of snow-white foam near the rocks. In the distance, the horizon blended with the ocean, looking like the kind of smudge an artist would deliberately make with chalk by rubbing his finger along a firm line.

Oscar made himself concentrate on that smudge as he crossed the parking lot, trying to remind himself that this was just a blip in his day, a bad event, one that he could cope with if he only tried hard enough.

He just didn't want to be alone with it, nor, for some reason he didn't fully understand, did he want to leave the poor victim alone. The guy had been alone long enough already.

The far edge of the guard rail was battered, and a section was missing. Oscar frowned. He hadn't noticed that before, but it meant nothing. He hardly ever came this far down the parking lot, both because he never needed to—you could see the ocean from the road—and because the sliding earth made him nervous. The asphalt already had big cracks in it, and he, with his oversize footballer's frame, didn't want to be the guy to send another section tumbling toward the sea.

He stopped, his heart pounding. He needed to leave this all for the experts.

But he couldn't. He needed to go forward, to see if the break in the rail had something to do with the poor slob in the portable toilet.

Cautiously, he took the next few steps, putting a foot down, then easing his weight onto it, then taking the next step. The ground felt stable enough. There hadn't been a lot of rain, so the ground shouldn't have been saturated. And there hadn't been a lot of wind or high surf, so nothing should have been eroded from underneath.

In other words, he had nothing to fear.

Except that hole in the guard rail and that body in the toilet.

He squared his shoulders again—a trick, he realized, he'd learned from his old coach—and continued forward, reaching the middle of the still-intact guard rail and peering over.

The upside-down station wagon didn't surprise him. Its undercarriage was scratched and dented, probably from going end over end as it headed toward the water.

It got hung up on one of the larger lava rocks near the edge of the surf. The car's front end pointed toward the sky, the wheels looking oddly vulnerable in the morning light.

An expensive bicycle had been thrown clear, its frame twisted and flattened, probably by the weight of the car.

To the car's right, he saw camping equipment scattered on the cliffside, and one of those pointed cyclist's helmets hanging from a bush.

It took him another minute to realize that what he thought was a pile of blankets was actually another human being.

The bile rose in his throat again. Two dead? How could that happen out here?

"Hey!" he shouted down, mostly out of hope rather than any thought that someone would be alive after that crash. "Hey! You okay down there?"

His voice sounded faint and ineffective against the surf pounding against the rocks below. On this side of the parking lot, he would have trouble hearing cars as they passed. He doubted anyone could have heard him talking to the poor dead guy in the can, or the *beep-beep-beep* of his truck as he'd parked.

"Hey!" he shouted again. "You okay?"

The person—a woman?—raised her head. He took two steps backward in surprise. He really hadn't thought that person was alive at all.

But, he realized as he went back to the edge, she couldn't have gotten there by falling out of the tumbling car. She had to have slipped down the side, or pulled her way up from the bottom. She was resting on a rock ledge, and the reason he'd thought she was all blankets was because she had made a nest of her clothing.

She had been there a while, and judging by the claw marks in the loose dirt above her, she'd tried to climb up more than once.

"Hello!" he shouted. "You all right?"

She nodded but held up hands scraped and filthy, just in case he didn't get the point. She shouted something at him.

"I didn't get that," he yelled back.

She shouted again, only slower. He read her lips more than heard her. She said, "The ledge is crumbling."

Great. Now if he went away and she died, it would be his fault. He had to get her out of there, without hurting her or him, or killing them both.

He didn't have rope, but he did have the thick cords, which his

colleagues incorrectly called bungees, that he wrapped around the new portable toilet in the back. He had extra cords just in case he had to do a pick-up or seal a door on a malfunctioning toilet until he could come back to it.

"I'll be back in a minute," he yelled to the woman, hoping she could hear him over the surf. He ran—he hadn't run since college; his knees ached, and he suddenly realized how out of shape he had let himself become—and reached the side of the truck in what seemed like forever. He could imagine the crumbling ledge in his mind, the way that the rock shifted, the unsteadiness of it; a slight movement would make it fall away altogether.

First, breathe. Thank God for Coach Stevens. The man's instructions were in his head—they were about football, but they'd have to do. Oscar had never been in another situation like this.

He breathed. Then he realized he had to test the cords to see if he could hook them together in a way that would hold. The older ones had frayed hooks and pulls. He tossed those in the truck bed and removed the newer ones from the new toilet. If someone drove up on this deserted road and stole the damn thing, so be it. His employers would have to understand.

It took him a minute to hook the cords together, but they seemed stable enough to get a small woman up a crumbling hillside. Not that he had any way of measuring this.

Still, he wasn't sure his back could take the weight. He unhooked the bungees at the back of the truck, then he lowered the gate. He eased the new portable off, using his back and knees like he always did when he put a new toilet in place.

It looked kinda funny next to the old toilet, but he couldn't worry about that.

He raised the gate, then hooked it in place. He got in the truck and backed toward the guard rail.

He tried not to think about the cracking asphalt. He told himself that the broken guard rail had happened when the station wagon went through it, not when the ground fell away, but he didn't lie that well, not even to himself.

He stopped the truck several yards from the guard rail. He couldn't quite bring himself to get as close as possible: The last thing he wanted to do was save her and then have the entire cliffside crumble beneath her, him, and the truck.

He didn't want to hook the cords to the back gate—it was too unstable—so he found a thick piece of metal near one of the wheel wells. Then he unspooled the cords and hurried to the guard rail.

As he looked over, he prayed that she was still there. The

movement of the truck could shake earth this unstable, and that would be the last straw for that ledge.

But she *was* still there, crouched against the side, the blue ocean beneath her, crashing into the rocks and spraying foam up the grass and sand hillside.

He held up the cord, but before he tossed it, he mimed tying it around his stomach.

"Knot yourself in," he shouted. "You got that? Tie this around you. Don't rely on your hands to hold it."

He wasn't sure how much she got of that, but she nodded. He swallowed hard and tossed the cords, listening to them clang as the metal hooks hit rock on the way down.

The cords curved over the guard rail because he couldn't think of any other way to do it. She reached up, missed, then reached again. He kept feeding cord to her. As he did, he studied the guard rail.

This part looked safe enough. The base was embedded into the earth, and the ground looked solid—not that he could tell, really, but he had to trust something.

He'd try to pull her up himself first, and if that didn't work, then he'd use the truck. If he just used the truck by itself, he was afraid he'd use too much speed, or it wouldn't work and she'd fall and he wouldn't know until the cord came up empty, bouncing on the asphalt.

He almost wrapped the loose back end of the cord around himself before it tightened in the woman's hands, but at the last minute, he decided not to. What if she was heavier than he expected? What if she pulled him over the edge?

Then they'd both be screwed.

He wiped his hands on his pants, then gripped the cord tightly. She was balanced precariously on that ledge, trying to make a half hitch with the cord and her own body. She seemed to have some kind of wilderness experience, or maybe she was just one of those really competent people who knew how to do things like hitch a rope to themselves.

He watched her, his mouth dry.

Then she gripped the cord, much like he was, and tugged just a little. He started to pull, but as he did, she placed her feet on the cliffside wall and climbed like she'd done this before.

She was using his strength and his balance to give her a foundation, but she was pulling herself up. One hand over the other, one step at a time, she was coming up that hillside.

He kept the cord taut, praying it wouldn't separate, praying he had the right ones—the ones that wouldn't fray.

What if they frayed whenever pressure was applied to them?

God, he had to make that voice in his head shut up. He hadn't realized how very annoying it was until now.

The woman stopped halfway and shook one of her hands like it hurt. He bit his lower lip, tasting blood.

C'mon, honey, he thought. Just a little more.

He didn't want to pull and dislodge her.

She put her hand back on the cord and continued, shaking that hand whenever it wasn't the dominant one.

As she got closer, he realized she wasn't as young as he thought. Her face had that unnatural thinness that middle-aged smokers or those weird vegetarians who didn't eat anything good or people with cancer had. Her skin was tan and sallow at the same time, but he figured that might be because she had been on the ledge. Her hair was tangled with leaves and brush and dirt.

He could hear her breathe, which reminded him to do it. He breathed, feeling the strain in his back as she got closer.

Finally she was within his reach. He bent over the guard rail—metal poking into his stomach—and offered her his hand. He had as firm a grip as he could on the cord with his other hand.

She looked at it, like she was unwilling to let go of the cord. Then she let go with her bad hand and reached toward his, missing his fingers entirely and clamping onto his wrist.

He had no choice but to take her wrist. Considering how wet her hand felt against his skin, this was a better choice. No sliding apart—no bad movie moment when their hands touch and then separate, followed by a scream as she fell to her death.

He tugged, the muscles in his back pulling as he yanked her from an odd angle. She scrambled up the side, collapsed against the guard rail, and let him pull her over it.

He had to grab onto her belt to do it. They fell backward. He took the brunt of the fall, landing on asphalt and still-wrapped cord. Pain shuddered through him, the familiar pain of a bad tackle, and his eyes watered.

She lay on top of him, and for a minute, he wondered if he'd hurt her. Then she rolled off and let out a huge sigh.

"Oh God," she said in a curiously flat tone. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," he lied. He wanted to stay on his back, but he didn't dare. As Coach Stevens used to say, only babies rested.

He sat up. She was peering at him as if she didn't quite recognize him, as if she didn't remember what he had done.

He smiled reassuringly, but she didn't smile back. Instead, she wiped at her face with the back of one hand. The dirt flaked off her cheek, and that was when he realized that she wasn't covered in dirt; she was covered in dried blood.

“What happened to you?” he asked, thinking he could mask his growing panic, but something of it must have shown in his face or in his voice because her eyes widened.

“I fell,” she said in that flat tone. Emotionless, almost cold. Was she talking like that because she was in shock?

“I can see that,” he said. “Were you in the car? Is anyone else in the car?”

She wiped at her face again, then licked her chapped lips. Her hands were the worst. They were covered in real dirt and dried blood. On her right hand, her fingernails were gone.

“I don’t remember,” she said, but this time her voice warbled.

“You don’t remember if anyone else is in the car?”

She shook her head. “What happened?”

He frowned. She was wearing black leather shoes with some kind of heel. Scuffed and ruined now, they had the look of shoes that cost money.

They weren’t Birkenstocks.

“Was that your car?” he asked, sure it had to be. Two accidents and a murder couldn’t have taken place at the same site, could they? Not in the same week.

She swallowed, then glanced at the portable toilet. The look sent a chill through him. He was about to reach for her when she took off.

She ran for the truck. He lumbered to his feet and hurried after her, but she would reach the door long before he’d get close. She dragged the bungee cords behind her, and he stomped on the nearest one.

It held and she kept running. He bent over and grabbed the end, then yanking on it so hard that he had to take three steps backward.

She flew backward, and landed, hitting her head on the asphalt. She didn’t move.

He prayed she was all right—he didn’t need another body here, not one wrapped in his bungee cords—and he hurried to her side. Her eyes were rolling, but she was conscious, and when she saw him, she started to scramble up.

“If you tell me what happened,” he said, “I can help you.”

She kicked him, hitting his left knee. He gasped at the shuddery sensation that went through him; he knew, suddenly, that she had shattered something.

She was reaching for the metal edge of one of the bungee cords. He growled like the linebacker he used to be and lunged for her, ignoring the pain, dragging his malfunctioning leg. He slammed her into the back end of the truck and held her in place as he

wrapped the bungee cords around her until she looked like a tied-up character in a Warner Brothers cartoon.

He hoisted her into the back of the truck but knew he couldn't keep her there. She'd free herself. He was shaking. He limped to the driver's side, got in, and drove to the two portable toilets. Then he got out again, went to the back of the truck, and picked her up as if she weighed no more than a child.

It was hard to carry her when he couldn't brace his leg, but he did anyway. He used a fireman's hold, making sure her feet were on his backside. She wriggled and kicked and called him names; he wasn't sure if she was in her right mind. He'd been trying to help her, for heaven's sake, and now she was trying to hurt him.

She must have figured he'd seen the cuts on her hands. The missing fingernails—those came from trying to climb free. But the cuts were the kind that could only come from a knife blade. He'd seen a few knife fights in his day; he knew what offensive wounds looked like. Defensive wounds were on the palms. Offensive were on the backs and sides of the hand.

Like hers.

He shoved her wrapped body inside the clean portable toilet and closed the door. Then he took one of the old bungee cords and wrapped it around the door, pulling it tight.

She'd be okay in there for a little while. But he couldn't risk leaving her here, not even for the short time it would take to drive to where he could get reception on his cell phone.

So he got in the truck again, drove it to the edge of the highway, and backed it up. He kept the keys in the ignition, got out, and lowered the gate.

Reloading would be hard. His leg felt like it was on fire. He could scarcely move his entire left side. But he'd have to, one last time.

Getting portable toilets back on the truck took some doing. Normally, he would brace his legs, rock the thing, and move it just enough that it would sit on the lip of the truck gate. He'd have to do that now with only one leg and a lot of determination.

Coach Stevens still spoke in his head. Their only bowl game—not the Rose Bowl, but so damn close that it mattered to them—was his last game. Coach pulled him aside and said, "Give it everything. This is your last chance for glory. Don't worry about how it hurts. Just see how superhuman you can be."

Oscar dragged himself behind the portable toilet and grabbed it on both sides. Then he shoved with the shoulder opposite his good leg and rocked the thing.

The woman screamed, the sound muffled through the plastic.

The damn toilet was heavier because of her. He wasn't sure he could move it even with two good legs.

Then she slammed herself against the door, and that was enough to loosen it. He rocked it just a little, and it came to rest on the lip. He shoved, and the toilet slid into place.

He leaned for a minute, sweat rolling down his face, his breathing harsh. But he didn't have a lot of time to rest. She was still screaming and rocking, and if he didn't move fast, she might knock the entire toilet over.

He closed the gate, then slammed the button with his fist. The lift rose and she screamed louder. At least he didn't have to worry that she couldn't breathe. With those lungs, it was clear she was doing just fine.

He used the three remaining bungees to strap the portable toilet in place. Then, bracing one hand on the side of the truck, he hobbled to the driver's seat. He got in, closed his eyes, and tried to breathe away the throbbing in his knee.

It didn't work.

At least it was his left knee and the truck was an automatic. He could drive away from here. His hands were shaking. It took two tries to get the truck in gear. He wasn't thinking clearly, he could feel it. He felt like he was underwater.

He'd felt this way before, after the big game. He'd cracked two ribs and had a concussion and had been going into shock. But they'd won. Coach had praised him. The papers had praised him.

He still had them framed on the wall of his apartment. Not even his greedy ex-wife had gotten those.

Shock. He didn't have a concussion now, but he wouldn't be making good decisions. He couldn't be on the road long. He got out his cell phone and propped it on the dash, waiting for the reception bar. Nothing.

He made himself breathe, then put the truck into drive. He rolled onto the highway and turned back the way he'd come. Behind him, he could hear the portable toilet thumping on the back gate. He hoped she didn't damage anything; it would probably come out of his salary.

The trees loomed over him like the living trees in the *Wizard of Oz*. It was dark here and the road twisty. He had to focus on the asphalt, driving so slow that he felt like he wasn't moving at all.

He kept glancing at the phone's reception bar, and when it finally jumped to full, he pulled over, put on his flashers, and dialed 911. He gave the dispatch the mile marker, asked for an ambulance and the sheriff, and then closed his eyes.

They had to shake him awake when they finally showed up.



He got the story in bits and pieces, some of it from the cops in the hospital, some of it from the TV news, the rest from the papers. The station wagon belonged to Mr. Birkenstock, a hiker named Jorry Kling. He was single and unmarried. Near as the cops could figure, he'd picked her up. She'd been hitchhiking.

Her ruined clothes were expensive, but she had no luggage. Later, her defense attorney would claim she'd been ambushed in Astoria, raped and beaten and had managed to escape, hitchhiking south. Then Kling had picked her up and somewhere along the way, she'd forgotten he was her rescuer. When they stopped at the wayside, she'd tried to take the car.

But that didn't explain his body's position or the fact that the car had gone through the guard rail. She hadn't come back up the cliff to fight Kling and stuff him into a portable toilet.

Oscar had to testify at the trial, saying that she seemed okay until he asked her about the car, and then she'd attacked him too. Turned out that she had a history of attacking people—stabbing her mother in Longview, Washington; trying to shove another driver out of his car when he'd picked her up (and he'd shoved her out and drove away). She had had some kind of psychotic break, and the real victim of it had been Kling.

No one knew for certain what happened at that wayside. Only that Kling had ended up dead, and she'd ended up on the ledge, probably after losing control of the car she'd killed Kling to steal.

Oscar, though, had become something of a local hero, trying to save a girl only to have her turn on him.

And in those weeks of interviews—some even for big magazines in the East (Port-A-Potty Man Saves Psycho! read one headline, which really offended him because he worked for POTS, not Port-A-Potty), he kept getting the question he hated—How come you do this job?

No one liked his answer, about the pride in his work and the chance to drive to remote parts of the best state in the lower 48. So he finally had to give them an answer they understood: It paid well.

It did too. Commission on each toilet he delivered plus his weekly salary. He made more than some of the bozos who asked him questions.

Money they understood. The rest they didn't. Like how antsy he got during the rehab, how much he wanted to be in his truck again.

The first day back, a Monday, he had to drive with his boss in the truck, just to make sure he could handle the work. He did just

fine, reveling in the narrow highway, the crouching trees, the ocean peaking through the spring leaves.

He stopped, like he always did, and checked out the asphalt before going to the Lonely Rocks Wayside. His boss bleated at him, worried that Oscar was scared to return to the scene of the crime.

But Oscar ignored him and followed the routine.

The rest of the winter, the part he had missed, had come with heavy rains and high tides. The road looked even more unstable than it had before. But he could stand on it, and when he returned to the truck, he didn't say anything, just drove forward.

The guy who'd replaced him had put the new portable toilet in the wrong place. It was hard to get to.

But Oscar didn't complain. Instead, he got out of the truck and stopped, just like he had dozens of times in the past, taking a deep breath of the fresh ocean air.

He loved this place. It didn't matter that some psycho woman had committed murder here. It didn't matter that he'd have a permanent limp because of her.

She'd given him a second chance to go the distance, and he had. Twenty years and one hundred pounds after the last time, he found he still had the strength to push himself to the very edge.

It wasn't about being a hero.

It wasn't even about being more than a portable toilet serviceman, like the magazines had claimed.

It was about delivering at the right point in the game.

It was about being a winner.

Which he was—and always would be. ♀

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
the g l o c n d a s m l p q r u v w x y z b f j k

From "The Gioconda Smile" (1922) by Aldous Huxley

—Aldous Huxley

plant.

It was now, quite suddenly, that he saw it: There was a case against him. Fascinated, he watched it growing, growing, like some monstrous tropical

THE STORY THAT WON

The January/February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas. Honorable mentions go to Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Barbara Blanks of Garland, Texas; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Jim Knoop of Clay, Michigan; Chris Laing of Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Stephen D. Rogers of Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts; James E. Spitzer of Rochester Hills, Michigan; Terry L. Tanner of Tucson, Arizona; and Doug Turnbull of Kingston, Ontario, Canada.



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ONE WAY

J. F. PEIRCE

Something seemed different. Had he fallen asleep? He glanced at the speedometer. One-twenty. Who'd have thought the old heap could go that fast? Oh hell, what highway was this? It was so smooth and straight with nothing to distract him on either side. He'd traveled to Bless a dozen times on this highway, yet he couldn't remember this stretch of road. Had he taken a wrong turn?

He remembered playing chicken with a car. He'd cut into its lane and was cutting back into his own when the fool driver of the other car pulled into it at the same time. He'd cut left and clipped the other car's rear fender, sending it into the ditch. "Sorry about that," he'd said, half meaning it. It wouldn't do to stop. He'd had four beers for lunch, and he'd been ticketed twice before for DWI.

An eighteen-wheeler approached him. What would it be like to play chicken with it? Was that when he fell asleep, or was it after he saw the cluster of warning signs: ROAD NARROWS, ONE LANE ROAD 1000 FT, BE PREPARED TO STOP, and the silhouette of a flagman?

In the distance a fire stretched across the horizon. A flagman waved him on, but he stopped.

"This highway's so incredibly smooth, who paved it?" he asked.

"You, sir, with your good intentions. You always intended to drive slower, not drink-and-drive, and stop playing chicken, but the devil in you always took over. Hell's just ahead awaiting you."

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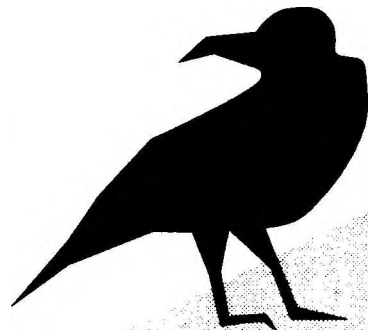
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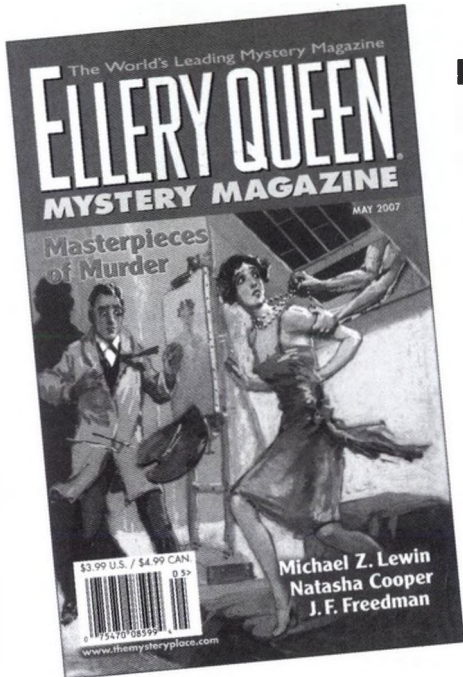
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