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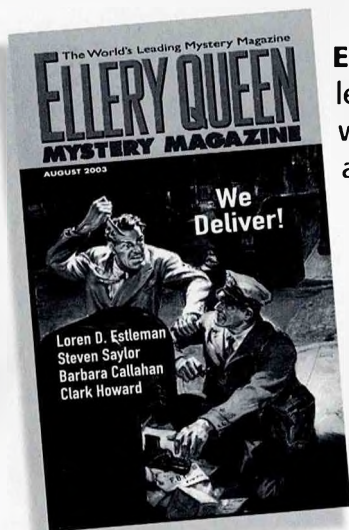


ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH 2004

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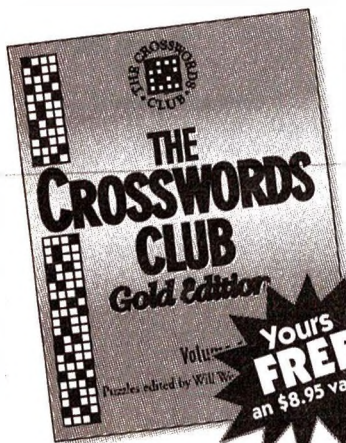
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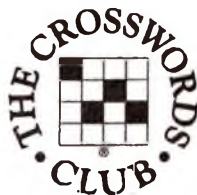


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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

C CLASSIC PLOTS, NEW TWISTS

The notion of investigation, whether carried out by a professional or by an amateur, is a cornerstone of mystery fiction. This month's issue features investigations in a variety of settings and time periods.

Athenian Sophist Kleides is Pericles' unofficial detective in this historical series by Marianne Wilski Strong; "Death at the Festival" takes place at the Panathenaic festival, but underlying the athletic competition is a creeping political upheaval that threatens all of ancient Greece. Miami-based P.I. Joe Standard returns in Dan A. Sproul's story, "Hunch," to thwart a possible "hit," but investigating a crime that hasn't happened yet leads to some of the seedier aspects of horse racing. Sheriff Deputy Hector Moody must navigate among various federal agencies, each with their own agendas, and with scant and cryptic information when scattered bones are found on public land on the Absaroka mountain range in "Winter Kill." This story begins a new series by the author of the popular Placido Geist mysteries, David Edgerley Gates. And with "Inquest," a story dealing with some of the darker realities of rural life, we introduce Michael A. Black to these pages. In addition to mystery short stories in EQMM and other venues, Mr. Black published his first novel, *A Killing Frost*, featuring P.I. Ron Shade, with Five Star in 2002; his second in the series, *Windy City Knights*, comes out in April 2004.

In keeping with this theme, our book reviewer this month, Robert C. Hahn, looks at some recent police procedurals that we think are well worth taking note of.

But of course, not all of our stories feature the traditional investigatory paradigm. This issue also features two examples of the Plans-Gone-Awry story, Steve Ritchie's delightful "Dig the Hole First" and our Mystery Classic, "The Stolen Blenkinsop" by Arthur Morrison; and two stories that turn on a bit of misdirection, "Settling Mr. Erdy" by Neil A. Schofield and "Jane and Dick" by Gary Alexander.

INQUEST

MICHAEL A. BLACK

I was staring at my reflection in the mirror, trying to decide whether or not to shave on my first day of vacation, when my dad called to tell me that the Redman had died. The Redman was one of his old buddies from the Marine Corps. Around half a century ago they'd shivered together in the frozen cold of Korea to defend the Changjin Reservoir.

"Sorry to hear that, Dad," I said. "Anything I can do?"

"Well, yeah, Tom," he said. I could hear the hesitancy in his voice.

"What?" I asked.

"It's kind of strange. A few weeks ago I got this registered letter from Red naming me executor of his will, along with a note asking me to take care of old Feller if anything happened to him."

Feller was the Redman's dog. A big half boxer-half shepherd.

"We can take my truck," I said. "How soon you want to leave?"

Within forty minutes we were on the interstate heading south. I'd only met the Redman a handful of times. The first was right after I'd gotten back from Operation Desert Storm, and my dad and I drove down there to relax a little before I started my new job as a cop. Red, a bantam rooster-sized man who'd gotten his name from a wiry crop of reddish hair when he was younger, had opened the hospitality of his house trailer to us, and we'd spent an idyllic week swapping stories about the marines, fishing in the Ohio River, and drinking a whole lot more beer than we should have. The pace of things was a lot different down there, and I'd even briefly thought about maybe making it permanent. If my academy date hadn't already been set, I might have seriously considered it. We'd taken a few more trips down there in the intervening years, and knew a few of the people in the town, Elizabethtown, including Dale Marshall, who worked for the Massac County Sheriff's Department.

My dad had been silent, just looking out the window at the rows of green crops in the ubiquitous farmland that ran adjacent to the interstate.



"So what happened to the Redman?" I asked finally.

He sighed and shook his head.

"Don't know. Dale called me early this morning. Seems a neighbor found Red in the woods near his trailer. Looks like maybe a heart attack."

"He have a heart condition?"

"Not that I know of," my dad said with a shrug. "Guess none of us are getting any younger though." He smiled slightly. "We had a reunion planned for next month, too. Old Red, he sure loved that dog of his. Used to bring him with wherever he went."

There were just enough unanswered questions about this whole thing to give me an uneasy feeling. Call it cop instinct, but I was doubly glad that my Glock 21 and pancake holster were stashed in the glove compartment. "Where's Feller at now?"

"The neighbor's watching him, I think," he said. "You remember that guy named Doc Weems? Came up on a visit with Red last year."

I nodded as memories of Weems, a short, squat man with an unshaven look and a boozy redolence, floated through my mind's eye. My dad had told me that according to the Redman, Weems had once been a very smart and successful chemist.

We stopped for gas midway between Champaign and Mattoon, which was around the halfway point. Elizabethville was all the way downstate, near the Illinois-Kentucky border, and my previous trips had reminded me that it was a lot closer to Paducah than Chicago. A couple of hours later we passed Marion, where the notorious federal prison was, and by the time we were going through the Shawnee National Forest the late September sky was showing signs of dusk.

Elizabethville sprang up off of Highway 45 about forty minutes later. The town consisted of one main street, with clusters of houses on either side. There was a big farming equipment store, several smaller stores, a few restaurants, and a VFW Post. Most of the industry down here centered on agrarian concerns, and the town had grown in population to around two thousand. The Massac County sheriff's office was located down the street from the funeral parlor.

"Let's stop in there first," Dad said, pointing to the metal sign hanging from a solid-looking wooden crossbeam in front of a large two-story wooden house. It said, BLOOD'S FUNERAL HOME. "I talked to that guy on the phone this morning."

I pulled up to the curb and got out to stretch. The ride down had been long and tedious, and I was less than thrilled to be at our destination. It wasn't the way I'd intended to spend my vacation. We

walked up the steps to the house, which was painted a flat white color with black trim. The front porch area was screened in, and the interior door stood open. I could hear the sounds of a television from somewhere inside. My father rang the bell. Someone stirred. Presently, a tall, solemn-looking man in his forties with slicked back dark hair came to the door. He looked at us questioningly.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'm Andrew Case. This is my son, Tom," my dad said. "We're here about Red Bannon. We came down from Chicago."

The man opened the screen door, smiled, and said, "Come in. I'm Howard Blood, the mortician."

The three of us went down a narrow hallway with Blood in the lead. He moved like a big bear, plodding along on long legs that seemed incongruously attached to a short upper body. Framed eight-by-ten pictures hung along the paneled walls depicted the same house at various times in the past, ranging from the grainy black and whites with Model T Fords in front to a few color pictures from the seventies and eighties. I didn't notice anything more current.

"I have Red in my morgue," Blood said over his shoulder. "Of course, I'm going to need a down payment of at least half the funeral expenses before I can begin preparation." He turned into an office at the end of the hall and went behind a large wooden desk. More pictures and certificates decorated the walls and a large window, with the shade drawn, was on the right. The dark paneling went from floor to ceiling, giving the place an almost claustrophobic ambiance. Blood pulled out a file envelope and withdrew a paper. "We'll also have to decide on the type of coffin and services you want."

Dad gave Mr. Blood a check, and after making the preliminary decisions, we told him we'd be back in the next day.

"It was a long drive down," my father said.

Blood nodded in commiserating fashion. "Everything should be in order by tomorrow. I'll have the death certificate ready in the morning."

"Death certificate?" I said. "Doesn't the medical examiner take care of that?"

Blood's dark eyes peered at me.

"Down here we have a coroner," he said. "I did an examination, and consider it a natural death."

"You did the examination?" I asked. "Wasn't there an autopsy?"

Blood shook his head. "There was nothing suspicious about his passing. No signs of trauma whatsoever."

"I see," I said. "Who is the coroner for Massac County anyway?"

"I am," he said. "And I saw no need for an inquest."

"I thought you were the undertaker?"

"Actually, I'm both," he said, smiling. "Do you have any further concerns?" We shook hands and headed toward the door.

"You want me to drop you at the bed-and-breakfast place, Dad? I'm going to run over to see if Dale is on duty yet."

Blood's head perked up.

"Oh, you know the sheriff?" he asked.

"He's a friend of ours," I said. "I'm a cop up in Chicago. Just wanted to touch base with him. Case on the case."

Blood nodded thoughtfully, his expression still dour. But I figured he didn't need an outgoing personality since he wasn't about to run out of potential customers and appeared to be the only game in town.

"Very good," he said. "He has the keys to Red's trailer. I assume, since Red had no immediate family, that you'll be handling his estate?"

"Right," my dad said.

Besides getting a quick hug from Joyce, the dispatcher, my stop at the sheriff's office was uneventful. Dale, who was working a six-to-two shift, had already hit the street and had a call waiting for him.

"An ammon-nitrate theft at one of the farms," Joyce told me.

"What the hell's that?"

She grinned. "Ammonium nitrate," she said, her southern Illinois accent drawing out the diphthong. "They steal it all the time down here to make methamphetamine."

I raised my eyebrows. "We deal mostly with crack and heroin up where I'm at. Not much meth."

"It's a-coming," Joyce said. A unit called her for a license check and I discreetly waved a goodbye after telling her to have Dale call us at the place we were staying. I rode back to the bed-and-breakfast, which was really just a big house with a lot of extra rooms, and found my dad sitting alone upstairs.

"What's up?" I asked as I walked in.

He shook his head. "Just thinking about the Redman. Did I ever tell you about the time . . ."

I sat on the edge of the bed and listened to him recount a few of the stories from their Marine Corps days that I'd actually heard more times than I could count. After a while Dad began to yawn and I realized the long drive down had taken a lot more out of him than it had out of me. But I was used to riding around and working nights.

"I was going to ask you if you wanted to hit that bar for a cold one, but you look bushed," I said.

"You're going to go out drinking on a weeknight?" he asked skeptically.

"Yeah, well, it is my vacation, Dad."

He smiled. "Yeah, I suppose it is. You go ahead, Tom. I'm going to get some sleep."

The Do Drop Inn was within walking distance, but I decided to drive anyway. Hell, everything was within walking distance in this town. I parked in the expansive gravel lot and strolled over to the door. The weather was still so mild that only the screen door was shut. Inside I could see a television flickering amongst the colorful lights of twisted neon and the haze of cigarette smoke. The place was divided into two separate rooms. One had the bar, a few tables, and a big old-fashioned jukebox. A couple of pinball games were by the windows. To the left a chest-high divider and an adjacent doorway led into the second room with a pool table. A few guys, biker types, were engaged in a game. I went to the bar and took a stool near the TV. The Cardinals were playing the Cubs, and after getting a cold beer I settled in to watch.

I quickly began to realize that everybody was rooting for the Cards, which meant that more than just accents separated me from them. But it was logical since they lived a lot closer to St. Louis than Chicago. I kept my mouth shut, except to order a refill and some chips. I noticed one of the waitresses giving me the eye. She was darkhaired and looked to be in her early twenties. Her blouse was tied Shania Twain-style exposing a tight midriff. She delivered a couple of drinks to the guys playing pool, then stopped and parked herself on the stool next to me.

"You're here about Old Red, aren't you?" she asked. "Your accent gave you away."

I nodded, and added, "Did you know him?"

She smiled. It was a very nice smile. "Everybody knows everybody down these parts. You don't remember me, do you?"

Being a cop, I get asked that question often, so I was ready for her.

"Of course I do. I arrested you, right?" I smiled back.

"You came down here right after you got out of the army. After the Gulf War, right?"

"Yeah, the first one. But I was in the Marines." I tried to think of who she was. She must have seen my uncertainty.

"I'm Lisa Miller. We were over at Red's that time you came down with your daddy."

She made it sound so natural that I couldn't believe I'd missed it.

But then again, she'd matured considerably in the intervening years.

"Hey, girl," the bartender said, sidling over. "I ain't paying you to sit and talk."

Lisa heaved a theatrical sigh and stood up. "I'll try to make it to the service," she said as she moved away. I let my eyes follow her movement and that's when I noticed one of the good-sized motorcycle dudes staring at me from in the pool room. He looked about twenty-five with the slicked back hair, solid arms, and facial sneer of a farm-town bully. Probably was the star quarterback on the high school football team. Who knows, maybe he was still the star of the high school team. I figured it was time to drink up and leave. The Cardinals were winning anyway.

I left a tip on the bar and began heading for the door. Just as I got there, the sneering biker guy sort of bumped into me.

"Hey, why don't you watch where you're going?" he said. "You see that, Elmer?" Over his shoulder I could see a leering, scaled-down version wearing an identical dirty Levi's jacket with the sleeves cut off and the same motorcycle gang colors. Sort of like a hillbilly Mini-Me.

"Sorry," I said, remembering that I was still a stranger in a strange land, and my Glock was locked in my truck.

His hand gripped my shoulder.

"What's your problem, city boy?" he said. I could smell the heavy scent of booze on his breath.

"Hey, Willard," the bartender called out behind us. "I don't want no trouble in here."

"Me either," I said, pushing his hand away and going out the screen door.

Willard and Elmer piled out the door behind me. I stopped and let them get in front so I could keep my back to the wall. Elmer grinned, showing a conspicuous gap between his front teeth, which I hoped was a testament to his fighting ability.

"Now," Willard said, "suppose you tell me what you was talking to my girl about in there?" He had a thick chain belt around his waist.

"I ain't *your* girl anymore," I heard Lisa say over my shoulder. She was coming out of the bar, as were several of the other locals. I guess the possibility of seeing me get knocked around took precedence over the shellacking that the Cards were giving the Cubs.

"Go on, git back inside," Willard said to her.

I was debating my chances of making it to the truck to get the Glock so I could end this farce with just a show of force. But the chances of unlocking it, then unlocking the glove box before they did the bum's rush were slim and none. And slim had left town.

But suddenly I didn't need to worry about making the attempt as their heads quickly turned at the crunching sound of tires over gravel. The white Ford pulled up, MASSAC COUNTY SHERIFF in bold blue letters outlined in tan across the front fender. The driver's door opened and I watched Dale Marshall, all six feet four of him, step out, drop his nightstick through the metal ring on his pistol belt, square his dark cowboy hat on his head, grab his big metal flashlight, and amble over to us. The crowd began to evaporate quicker than steam from a teakettle.

"Willard, Elmer," Dale said. "What did I tell you two about causing trouble?"

"He started it," Willard said, his voice taking on a high whine. He must have sensed that it was over because he cocked his head toward Elmer, and they both strode over and got on two shiny Harleys parked on the other side of the lot.

"Where do a couple of home-grown idiots like that get the money for those kind of machines?" I asked as they roared away, spewing gravel.

"I'm real sorry about this, mister," Lisa said.

I told her it was no problem, and that she could call me Tom. She smiled and went back inside.

"I went by to drop these off," Dale said, holding up a ring of keys. "Your dad was sleeping, but they told me you'd most likely be over here."

"Thanks. These are the keys to Red's trailer?"

"Yep. Got time for coffee? You can tell me all about what's happening up in the big city."

We went over to a truck stop diner near the interstate and sat in a booth next to a window. After the waitress brought our coffee Dale took a quick sip, and said he was sorry to hear about the Redman.

"We lost us a good one," he said.

"That's for sure. Can you tell me what happened?"

Dale held his coffee cup in both hands, blowing at the vapor cloud. After another careful sip, he set it down.

"Well, Doc Weems has been living at the old Parnell farm that butts up against Red's property. From what I gather, Feller came drifting over, and Doc thought it kinda strange, since Red and Feller were practically inseparable." He paused to lick his lips. "Not much else to tell, really. Doc went a-looking for Red to check up on him, and found him lying by the trailer. He loaded him into Red's car and brung him into town, to Mr. Blood's place, but there was nothing that could be done. He'd passed."

"Blood's place? Why did he take Red there? Why not the hospital?"

And where did he get off moving the body at all? Shouldn't he have called the police?"

Dale chuckled softly. "This ain't the big city down here, Tom," he said. "The clinic wasn't open, and Mr. Blood's place sort of doubles as a makeshift hospital anyway. He's a very intelligent man."

"Yeah, he mentioned that he was also the coroner."

"Actually," Dale said, picking up his cup again, "that ain't too uncommon 'round here. Remember," he smiled and took a long sip, "we're just down-home folks."

I smirked. "Yeah, like those two dirtbags on the hogs?"

Dale shook his head. "Bad seeds, both of 'em. I'm next to certain that they're the ones doing all these ammon-nitrate thefts, but I just can't prove it."

"Joyce was telling me about those. They use it to cook up crystal meth, or something?"

"Right. 'Cept I gotta wonder how those two ain't blowed themselves up yet."

"They looked like a couple of brain surgeons all right," I said. "You still short-staffed on the sheriff's department?"

"Yeah, but all that might be changing soon." He leaned over the table and said, "We're in line to get one of those riverboat casinos pretty soon." I raised my eyebrows.

"Not like it's any big secret or anything, but being a county employee," he said, "I'm privy to information that everybody else is just speculating about."

"Great. When's this supposed to happen?"

"Next year's Gaming Commission should be approving it. They're just looking at a few of the final details, from what I understand. Area around Red's place might turn out to be worth a pretty penny."

Poor Red, I thought. Too bad he wouldn't be here to see it.

Our conversation began jumping around after that, and before we knew it, Dale got assigned to check on a traffic accident. We agreed to meet again, and I told him that my dad and I would probably be out at Red's place in the morning.

"Okay," he said, getting up and shaking my hand. "Doc Weems is a-watching Feller for you all. You know what you're gonna do with him?"

"With Weems or the dog?" I said with a grin.

The next morning came earlier than I'd wanted, but my dad shook me awake and said he'd be down getting breakfast and if I wanted any I'd better shake a leg. The clock on the nightstand said it was 7:05.

"I can tell you were in the old Marine Corps," I said, dragging myself out of bed. An hour later we pulled onto the gravel road that met the highway and led into the labyrinth of old farmhouses, fields of tall corn, and patches of dense woods. Red's place, which was almost at the road's end, lay close to the river. Luckily, we had visited down there frequently enough that we knew the way. I slowed as I passed the perpendicular dirt road of the old Parnell place.

"Want to check on Feller first?" I asked.

"Nah, that Weems probably ain't even rolled over in bed yet."

I smiled and kept driving. The road to Red's trailer was perhaps two hundred yards ahead. I saw the crimson mailbox with BANNON painted in black letters across the side.

"We should probably check the box," I said.

Dad rolled down the window and reached out and pulled open the metal door. Several letters were inside and he removed them.

"It's funny," Dad said, "Red was using a post office box in town, too. He sent me the number with that registered letter."

"Maybe he was having trouble with the mail out here and wanted to make sure he got it all."

The truck bounced and jerked over the bumpy gravel drive. Large trees and a thicket of smaller bushes lined each side as we proceeded. After about fifty yards the grove thinned out into a clearing with Red's white house trailer set along the far edge. The gravel continued around to form a loop, and when I got even with the trailer I saw the door slightly ajar. I pulled past it and stopped.

"What're you doing?" Dad asked as I reached across and opened the glove box, taking out my Glock.

"Front door's been jimmed," I said, slipping the gun from the pancake holster and getting out. "Stay here until I have a look."

The front door to the trailer was slightly buckled and showed the indentation of some sort of pry tool. Holding the Glock out in front of me, I went up the three concrete steps and used the tips of my fingers on the edge to ease the door open. Inside, papers were scattered all over the floor, dishes were smashed, and cabinets had been pulled off the walls. Red's substantial collection of books had been dumped also. I moved quickly but cautiously through the tight spaces, checking each room and closet. The burglars had spared nothing. After satisfying myself that the trailer was clear, I used my cell phone and dialed the Massac County Sheriff's Department.

The deputy who arrived about fifteen minutes later felt worse than we did. "I knew old Red," he said. "I was trying to keep an extra watch on this place, too."

I knew how he felt, having been there myself taking burglary

reports. I threaded the pancake holster through my belt and snapped the Glock in place while we waited for another copper to come and process the scene. My sweatshirt was long enough to cover the weapon.

"Maybe I'll go over and check on Feller," I said to my dad. "If you don't mind waiting here alone."

He nodded, looking at a large book called *Birds of America* that had been left on the floor with some pages ripped out. I took the leash from a peg near the door and went to the truck. That was when I noticed a pair of parallel skid marks cut deeply into the gravel surface of the drive. The tires looked too thin for a truck.

I went back out to the main road and drove down to the dirt road. It was full of deep ruts and the truck scraped bottom a couple of times on the short road. The same overgrown woods that separated Red's place from the road ran alongside. The big white house came into view with the dilapidated barn behind it. Feller was fastened to a long chain up near the porch, a pair of bowls next to him. Weems had obviously been less than fastidious about cleaning up after the dog. I tapped the horn and got out. Feller seemed to recognize me because he immediately got to his feet and began wagging his tail. When he saw the leash his ears perked up and he began barking.

"What the hell you barking at, boy?" Weems said, coming out of the front door. He stopped quickly when he saw me and squinted. Then he smiled and pulled up his suspenders over each shoulder of a dirty undershirt.

"Oh, howdy-do. Didn't recognize you at first." He sauntered down the sagging wooden steps and held his hand out. Weems was about like I'd remembered him: pot-bellied and seedy. He looked like he hadn't shaved in a week, and smelled like the beer he'd had for breakfast was hoping for an early lunch.

"I came to check on Feller," I said, extending my hand, palm first for the dog to lick. He grabbed the leash and tugged on it, almost pulling it from my hand. "Want to play tug-of-war, boy?" Feller shook and twisted his head, never giving up his grip on the leather leash.

"I been meaning to clean up 'round here," Weems said, scratching his gut. "Been kinda busy though."

We exchanged small talk for a few minutes and I told him I wanted to take Feller for a walk. He nodded.

"You gonna be taking the dog back up north with you?"

"I expect we will. You mind watching him for a few more days?"

Weems licked his lips and shook his head.

"Here," I said, reaching in my wallet and taking out a twenty.

"This should cover the expense of the food and all."

Weems flashed a smile that gave me a glimpse of his bad teeth and managed to stuff the twenty into his front pants pocket beneath the hanging dollop of belly. I walked Feller up toward the main road, accessing the ruts and grooves in the dirt driveway. On the main road I turned and headed back toward Red's place. Feller paused to smell everything in sight. We were about a hundred yards from the dirt drive when I heard the twin roars of the unmuffled drag pipes. Feller growled and his ears flattened. I drew up on the leash and stepped to the side of the road as Willard and Elmer slowed their big Harleys to a stop.

"Well, well. Lookie, lookie here," Willard said, his lips curling over his feral-looking teeth. "Far from town, ain't you, city boy?" His scaled-down buddy smiled also.

"Far, but not alone," I said.

Willard spat. "You think some old hound dog's gonna scare me?"

"No," I said, pulling up my sweatshirt and exposing the handle of the Glock. "But my other buddy from Austria should."

Willard looked down at the gun and spat again, closer to me this time. Feller growled and barked some more.

"You'd best get back up north where you come from," Willard said. He slammed the Harley into gear and let his fingers pop the clutch. Elmer did the same, spitting a gust of gravel and leaving Feller and me standing in the resulting dust cloud. As I watched them disappear down the road, I noticed the parallel skid marks they'd left. Too thin for a truck, I remembered. Hopefully the cops would lift some good latent fingerprints from the burglary scene, and Dale would be paying Willard and Elmer a little visit.

When I took Feller back I quizzed Weems if he'd seen the two motorcycle idiots hanging around the area.

He shook his head. "Can't say that I have." He looked like he was working on a real good drunk. I told him to keep a good eye on Feller and said I'd be back later on, leaving a hint of possibly more money. It was against my better judgment to leave Feller there, but I had no real alternative. At least not right away.

After cleaning up the trailer as best we could, we headed back into town for lunch. It was closer to dinner by that time. At the diner I went over my suspicions with my dad about the burglary. He shook his head in disgust as he went through a stack of mail we'd recovered from Red's post office box in town. "Maybe Dale will be able to nail 'em."

"Looks like quite a few letters from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," I said. "What kind of work did Red do before he retired?"

"He was a geologist. Always said he had an affinity for the earth after digging so many foxholes in Korea." Dad smiled fleetingly as he looked through the letters. "These seem to be about some kind of endangered bird. A red-cockaded woodpecker."

I left him at our rented room going over the rest of Red's papers and went to see if Dale was working. When I learned he wasn't, I mulled over what to do next. Call it my cop instinct, but a lot of the little things were starting to gnaw at me. First there was Red's letter to my dad asking him to look after Feller if anything happened. Then Red's unexpected death, coupled with the burglary of his trailer. Coincidence? Maybe. But I still had that uneasy feeling. Maybe Red had found out something about Willard and Elmer . . . Dale had mentioned them as suspects in those ammonium nitrate thefts. But it was still unclear, like having pieces of a jigsaw puzzle without knowing what the overall picture was supposed to look like. I decided to head down to Howard Blood's and have another talk with him. He was standing in front of his house watering some flowers with a garden hose.

"Mr. Case," he said, "I have prepared a temporary death certificate for your father, but I'm afraid I haven't gotten things totally ready as of yet for the service tomorrow."

"That's okay," I said. "I wanted to talk to you anyway."

He raised an eyebrow and shut off the hose. "Certainly. You want to come inside?"

He ushered me into the same claustrophobic office and sat behind his desk. "Now, what can I do for you?"

I told him about the burglary and my run-ins with Willard and Elmer. I finished with, "I'm starting to wonder if everything happened the way it seems."

Blood ran his tongue over his teeth. "Well, I'm certainly upset that anyone would be so unscrupulous as to burglarize a house of a deceased. But this being a small community, word of someone's demise gets around fairly quickly. Everyone knew that Red didn't have any immediate family in the area. Still, it does not speak well of us here."

"You mentioned that Red's body didn't have any outward signs of trauma?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"What if I requested an autopsy?" I said, trying to gauge his reaction. "I'll pay for it. Just to be thorough and all."

Blood seemed to consider this for a moment, then said, "That won't be necessary, Mr. Case. I'll tell you what I'll do. If it'll ease your mind, I'll do another examination. Have one of the doctors

from the county hospital come down and assist me. If we find anything suspicious, I'll order a coroner's inquest."

"That sounds good to me. I appreciate it."

He nodded. "Red was my friend, too. I want to be clear in my own mind as well. But I'm afraid it may delay things another day or so. Have you talked to your father about this?"

"No. Red's death was pretty hard on him."

He nodded again, in a commiserating fashion, and stood. As he came around the desk he laid a hand on my shoulder. "I'll call Dr. Gleason immediately. Hopefully he'll be able to come over tonight. I'll contact you in the morning."

"Fine," I said, and gave him my cell phone number.

I didn't want to burden Dad with a lot of suspicions, so I kept the conversation generic as we ate dinner. I did mention that I'd stopped to see Blood and things had been delayed another day.

"Hell of a way to spend your vacation," he said.

I grinned. "I've had worse."

By nine o'clock the combination of our early start and the country air had him dozing in a chair. I woke him and he stretched and decided to hit the sack. I was debating as to whether I should give the Do Drop Inn another try, or maybe track down Dale to discuss things with him, when the old guy who ran the place told me I had a message to call Doc Weems right away.

"Tom? It's Doc," the voice on the phone said with a compelling urgency. "It's Feller. He's real sick."

"Sick? What happened?"

"Don't know. Found him outside there where I been keeping him. Think maybe somebody mighta poisoned him."

Willard and Elmer, I thought. "Is there a vet around?"

"There is," he said. "But I ain't got no car. Can you come out and we'll put him in your truck?"

I told him I'd be right there and hung up. I made the trip a lot faster than I should have, cursing myself for leaving the dog out there in an idiot's care, especially after my minor run-in with the motorcycle jerks. I made a mental promise that if anything happened to Feller, I'd track down Willard and Elmer and beat the truth out of them. The truck fishtailed on the gravel as I made the turn at the dirt road. My headlights bounced over the rut-filled road and I slowed, knowing it would do no good to wreck the truck at this point. But I felt that every second counted. As I pulled up to the house the lights centered on Feller, who was standing by the porch just like he had been earlier today. I got out, leaving the

lights on, and went over to him. He wagged his tail and licked my hand, seeming fine. Weems shuffled out the door holding a bottle, his face slack and sweaty looking.

"He doesn't seem too sick," I said. Suddenly Feller started to growl.

"Not as sick as you gonna be," I heard a voice say from the corner of the house. Willard walked into the open holding a shotgun on me. His shadow followed, displaying a wide, gap-toothed grin. "Elmer, go get his gun. Try anything, city boy, and I'll shoot you and the dog."

I raised my hands, staring at Weems who was still holding a bottle of Jack Daniels. He looked away quickly and took a slug.

Elmer's hand swept over me in a cursory search, but my gun was easily found. Willard approached and took the Glock, handing Elmer the shotgun.

"Whooie," Willard said, holding my pistol up and marveling at the tritium night sights. "Will you look at this? I can line up the sights with these three little glowing dots." He stuck the Glock into his belt and told Weems to get some rope.

"If you can set your bottle down long enough," I said.

Feller continued growling and barking. Willard kicked at him and missed, then took out the Glock.

"I oughta blow that damn dog away," he said.

"No, don't. Please," Weems said, shuffling down the stairs. He reached out and stroked Feller's head, then deftly undid the clasp on the chain. "Git, Feller!" he yelled and swatted the dog hard. I saw Feller scamper into the woods, looking back briefly.

Elmer grabbed my hands and lashed them behind my back, pulling the rope so tight my hands began to feel numb. Willard leaned close to me and spit in my face.

"You think you're better than us, city boy? We'll see who's better than who." Before I could do or say anything he hit me on the top of the head. From the sound and feel of the impact, he had some kind of sap. He brought it down again and I sagged to my knees, a bright spot of light exploding behind my eyes with the blow. Another bright light exploded and this time I felt myself drifting away, the light suddenly more distant.

The disembodied voices drifted through my consciousness, seeming far off at first, then coinciding with the steady ringing in my ears. Something wet swept over my face.

"But the boss said he wants it to look like a car accident. You keep beating him over the head like that—"

"Shut up. We'll make sure it looks good. And what does it

matter? He can cover it up if'n' it ain't."

"Just like with Red," a third voice chimed in. I recognized it as Elmer's.

"Go make us some more of that cyanide stuff, Weems." The voices were becoming clearer. That one was Willard.

"Dammit, I shouldn't never got into this with y'all."

I heard the sound of a hand slapping flesh and tried to gaze up through my lashes. I was on the ground near a corner of the barn. Inside the partially open door I could see electric lights. The odor was pungent. Like rotten eggs and something else. Ammonia. I felt wetness on my cheek again, and shook my head. Feller was there licking me. I blinked several times, trying to clear my head. The dog began sniffing at my arms. I rolled onto my side and held my hands out as best I could.

"Come on, Feller," I said in a husky whisper. "Tug-of-war."

Oblivious to the danger, Feller barked once, then started wagging his tail. I shushed him and wiggled my fingers. He hesitated, then grabbed at the ropes with a playful fervor, dragging me nearly a foot. I could feel his big jaws trying for purchase. We struggled there in the darkness, me trying to squirm away, and the big dog gnawing at my bonds. Swell game, I thought.

Suddenly the ropes began to give. I worked my hands frantically. Feller growled and continued to pull, raising a big paw to push me away. With two more tugs my hands were free. I sat up and began to untie my feet. The coils were around my ankles, so I pulled off my shoes and was able to work my stocking feet through. I ran for the woods just as Willard and Elmer came around the corner.

"Hey!" I heard one of them yell, and a round from the Glock whistled by me. Feller yelped in pain, but I couldn't stop. He'd been running beside me. I crashed into the brush, getting scratched by tree branches and bushes, their voices trailing behind me.

"Did I get him? Which way did he go?"

"He can't go far. He left his shoes."

I worked through the underbrush as quietly as I could and crouched behind a large tree, letting my night vision develop. I was perhaps a hundred feet in and could still hear them talking.

"Weems, go get us some flashlights," Willard said. "We'll track him down, and I'll get him with his own gun."

"I thought we weren't supposed to shoot him?"

"I don't give a damn what he said. Now move it. We'll bury him in the woods here and take the rest of the stuff you got cooked up. We'll all be in Mexico living like three kings by the time they even think to find him."

Three kings, I thought. A tough hand to beat.

"But Mr. Blood said—"

Willard swore at Weems and slapped him. Blood, I thought. Was he mixed up in this?

"Come on, Elmer, spread out. He can't of gone far. He's just a city boy lost in the woods."

I looked around. The forest here was a mixture of various sized trees that formed an uneven maze ranging from partial clearings to dense overgrowth. Running would be fruitless. I was unarmed and on unfamiliar ground. They'd track me down and shoot me. A city boy lost in the woods . . . I could hear them coming with impunity, making more noise than a whole regiment of Saddam's Republican Guards. I smeared some dirt over my face and tracked their movements. Maybe the woods wasn't such a bad place for a marine to make his stand.

Elmer was edging left, toward me, and Willard was off to the right. The beams of their flashlights bounced on the hanging branches. Elmer kept bringing up his shotgun, ready to fire at every dancing shadow. He was holding the gun in one hand.

"Watch it with that thing, stupid," Willard said. "You were pointing it at me." Perhaps thirty feet separated them.

Elmer grunted and pushed through the brush. I did a low crawl, leaving my jacket draped over a small bush. With the rope tied to it, I jiggled it slightly, hoping he'd key on to the movement. I tugged the rope again, and felt the blast of the shotgun go by seconds before the thundering roar. Elmer yelled and ran forward, moving right past me. I sprang up and grabbed the barrel and stock of the shotgun. The little creep was stronger than he looked, but in Saudi my platoon had spent endless hours practicing disarming techniques. I swung the stock of the rifle at his face, striking it a glancing blow. He went down, but was up just as fast, running and yelling, "Wiiilllllaaarrrd!"

Willard responded with the Glock, perhaps seeing the movement and thinking it was me. The blast from the barrel was lighting him up like a Roman candle. I shouldered the gun and waited a split second for the next shot, then fired at the flash.

Feller found me as I worked my way back, and we walked up toward the house together. Except for a bloody scrape along his left leg and lots of brambles, he seemed okay. Weems sat on the porch watching us approach, the bottle of booze more than half gone now.

"I was a-wondering which of y'all was gonna come out of them woods," he said, bringing the bottle up to his lips. Feller moved for-

ward and licked his hand, and he patted the dog's big head.

"Well now that you know," I said, "you can tell me the rest of it." I went to my truck and used my cell phone to call the sheriff's office, then went back to the porch. "How's Blood involved in this?"

Weems let out a slow breath, glanced away, and began talking.

"Blood owns this place," he said. "Bought it all up for back taxes for a song and a dance. He got some kind of tip that they were gonna put that riverboat casino down here. Figured he'd be rich." Weems started to raise the bottle again but I knocked it away from him. The fear registered on his face as he continued. "Like I said, Blood owns this place so he found out about us using the barn to cook up the meth. But he came in on it with us, even letting Willard use the hearse to transport the stuff over to Paducah and St. Louis. Figured he'd be rich anyway when that riverboat came."

"How did Red fit into this?"

Weems sighed and looked down at the bottle on the ground.

"Red got wind of the plans to change all this into a parking lot. He was dead set against it. Found some kind of bird that migrated through here. Some kind of endangered species."

"The red-cockaded woodpecker," I said.

Weems shrugged. "Red was gonna contact the government about it. Mentioned it to me, and I . . . I told Blood." Twin tears wound their way down his cheeks. "He figured that would be the end of his plan to get rich. You know most of the rest." Weems wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Thing is, Red was real good to me. I shouldn't have done what I done."

I let him think about that and we sat and waited. Presently, I saw the headlights from the three squads from the Sheriff's Department bouncing down the road toward us. The first one screeched to a halt, and Dale got out and ran over.

"What happened, Tom? I got the dispatch that somebody'd been shot out here."

"They're in the woods," I said. "But before you call the coroner, get out your Miranda card and read it to Doc here. He's got something he wants to tell you."

Dale squinted at Weems, pushed his cowboy hat back on his head, and reached into his pocket. "You have the right to remain silent . . ." he read. Weems leaned over, his breath coming in rapid sobs now, as he listened to the litany.

Feller heaved a sigh, set his big head on top of my thigh, and watched. 🦋

DEATH AT THE FESTIVAL

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

It was the year of the Panathenaic festival, the beginning of a new year, and the tension in and around Athens was palpable. It seemed to throb out of the limestone rocks and wash ashore from the waves of the Saronic Gulf.

Athletes, dancers, rhapsodes were practicing for the festival's competitions; torch runners were limbering their bodies; Athenian men and women were going over and over their positions and roles in the great procession in honor of the goddess Athena.

I was walking disconsolately home to Athens from a visit in the countryside to my half brother, Lamicus, and his wife, Cleodice. I usually inflict them with my presence when I am too stupid and depressed to tolerate myself.

I had just about reached the Outer Ceramicus, the city's cemetery, as the late summer sun sank low enough to elongate the shadows of the stelae, the tombstones that lined the street. I suspect my face was about as long as those shadows. Here I was, Kleides, the clever sophist, in love with Aspasia, the wife of my good friend Pericles, the great general and head of state of Athens, brilliant orator, "the Olympian," as the people of Athens called him.

"Empty storage jar," they might well call me. I was dusty, hot, hungry, and thirsty. I'd worn a hole in my right sandal and gotten a blister. On top of all this, I'd had a mighty quarrel with Selkine, my mistress. Two nights ago, right after we'd made love, she put on those damned gold earrings she got from Cimonides, a wealthy lover.

What bothered me was not that she has other lovers. Zeus knows, I'm no handsome, naïve youth. Besides, I can't blame her. She knows I'm really in love with Aspasia and that I stay with her because she resembles Aspasia, though of course, I also appreciate Selkine's intelligence and her high and round breasts. But Cimonides. That greedy fish-swiller! Besides, he not only

countered my arguments in the assembly for revising some of our homicide laws, he'd won.

I cursed, bent down, dug a stone out of my sandal, and flung it across the field.

"Kleides," someone called from behind me. "Kleides."

I turned to see my young friend Diocles, an aspiring sophist. Seeing Diocles

The tension in and around Athens was palpable.

cheered me up just a little. Diocles admires me.

"Where are you headed?" Diocles asked. "To Socrates' place?"

"No," I said. I gestured ahead. "I'm headed to a tavern at the end of the street." It was the Street of Tombs, appropriately enough.

Diocles looked a little shocked. "To drink?"

"Well, I thought I would, yes."

"But you are an official for the great festival. Don't you have duties tonight?"

"Tomorrow. I'll be officiating at the parade route near the entranceway to the Acropolis. I'll try to sober up by then. And get a better pair of sandals," I added, lifting my right foot.

Diocles' mouth opened and stayed open.

I decided I'd better get hold of myself before I lost the last person who still thought I didn't deserve being run over by a four-horse chariot. "I really just want to join in on the festive mood of the city," I lied.

"But that's just it, Kleides. It's the oddest thing."

I rolled my eyes. Diocles couldn't break his habit of speaking in hyperbole. "Odd, perhaps, Diocles. A cow with two heads or, perhaps, a sandal that lasted more than two months would be the oddest."

Diocles looked down at my sandals.

"What's odd, Diocles?" I asked.

"Well, five soothsayers in the agora said that the omens point to bloodshed at the festival."

"And quite right they are. Athens always sacrifices one hundred oxen at the end of the festival. Creates a lot of blood." I grimaced and shifted my weight to my left foot.

Diocles shook his head. "No, no. I mean they say human blood will be shed. They say Athens will be made to suffer. I do not like the sound of it."

I didn't either. I forgot about my blistered foot.

"Of course," Diocles said, "as you always say, soothsayers depend on the flight of birds and the entrails of animals to read the future, and those are not the most reliable predictors."

"Exactly. But, Diocles, you do remember what else Socrates and I say about soothsayers."

"Indeed, I do. That they listen carefully to the talk about them and learn from it."

"Right again. And if the soothsayers are talking about Athens being made to suffer, then they've heard talk about town. There are a good many strangers in town, perhaps not all of them here for innocent participation in the games of the festival."

"Indeed, there are Naxians and Thasians, and even some Corinthians. And, by all the gods, we know that the Corinthians would like to see us crushed."

For once, Diocles' hyperbole was correct. "As would the Naxians and Thasians," I said. "They envy our power, resent our military garrisons on their territory, and fear our democracy." I thought for a moment. "Diocles, the soothsayers may have heard some rumors of disruption of the festival. This could be serious. Go back to the agora and keep your eyes and ears alert. Let me know what else you hear. And alert Pericles if you hear anything particularly alarming."

"Where will I find you?"

"Right up the street. At the tavern just before the Sacred Gate."

Diocles' eyebrows rose and his big brown eyes got a bit rounder. "That's about the roughest place in Athens. All sorts of foreigners hang out . . ." His eyebrows came down. "Oh, I see."

When we approached the Sacred Gate to the city, Diocles marched off into the agora, a man on a mission. After about only fifteen footlengths, he swung around to me. "Kleides," he shouted, "be very cautious at that tavern."

I waved and watched Diocles march off again, thinking about how much I liked that boy. Then I headed for the tavern.

The place was crowded. I stepped over the leg of a man sprawled out near the door, just avoided bumping into a burly Thracian, and skirted past four men arguing about the statue of Zeus that Phidias had completed at Olympia a year ago. One of them was proclaiming loudly that the statue was out of proportion to the temple and that, indeed, if Zeus stood up, his head would burst right through the ceiling. I wanted to tell him that, in my experience, few statues stood up, and that my friend Phidias had created a magnificent work of art whose awesome majesty was apparently well above the head of someone that fussy about proportion. But I refrained. I had more important things on my mind.

I sidled up to the wine table and greeted Callita.

Callita smiled her hearty, toothless smile. "Well, if it isn't

Kleides, my old friend." She turned to two men nearby. "He's a philosopher, you know."

I grimaced. I'd once proven Callita innocent of theft charges by one of her customers, and she's never forgotten. Loud, rude, and very opinionated she is, but dishonest and ungrateful she isn't.

The two men ignored her.

She banged one on the shoulder. "I said this is my friend. He's a philosopher, and he's a friend of Pericles."

About a dozen men turned around. Several locals who knew Callita nodded. Callita had been known to heave four men at a time out of the bar if they annoyed her.

"Friend of Pericles, eh?" A broad-shouldered man with a face dented by smallpox scars glared at me, took a swig of his wine, and spat some out.

Callita's black eyes popped out. "What's the matter, you son of a centaur? Don't you like the wine?"

"I like the wine just fine," Smallpox said. He glared at me again, then turned away.

Since I wanted to stay around without getting my nose, my best feature, broken, I ignored Smallpox. I asked Callita for three half pints. She doesn't serve fine Chian wine, but she serves a drinkable local wine. And if you are an Athenian, you can pay on tick, unless, of course, you just once didn't pay your bill on time. In that case, you avoided Callita.

She dipped some wine from one of the amphorae embedded in the table, mixed the wine with water, and poured it into a black glazed cup that had a crack running down the side, about the size Smallpox looked capable of inflicting on my nose.

I leaned over the table and gestured back with my head. "Not an Athenian, right, Callita?"

"Naw. He's a Naxian. Just up from the port. He comes in here when he ships in. Has a lover here. Guess she likes Naxians with pocked faces and nasty attitudes." She grinned. "He came in here ~~one damn hot day without a hat. Rumor has it he and his lover had a quarrel, and she ripped the brim off the straw hat he usually wore. Pretty weak way to get back at somebody. Now me, I can toss him out like a rotten fish. Want me to?~~"

"No, no. Let him be."

"Okay," Callita said, "but if he gives you any trouble, just stun him with some of that fast talk you sophists do so well until I can get close enough to break his collarbone."

I took my wine cup and wandered over to a corner where five

men were drinking. Three leaned against the wall and two squatted on the floor.

Considering the composition of the floor, part dirt, part spit, part fish heads, and part unidentifiable substances, I chose the wall.

The men nodded to me. They were Athenians, likely democratic supporters of Pericles. Two were trireme rowers, with the pride of the Athenian navy in their squared shoulders and muscled arms.

"Too many foreigners in the city," one of the navy men said.

"Well, the Panathenaic festival is for all Greeks, at least those from the Delian League, isn't it?"

I recognized the second speaker as a potter, not at all a bad artist.

"Yeah," the other rower said. "They all send a bull for the sacrifice, so I guess they have a right to compete in the games and the music events."

"Half the Delian League would as soon send vats of boiling oil to pour on us as bulls for us to eat," the first rower said.

"That's right," another of the men said. "And Corinth does its best to keep them all riled up against us."

"Jealous, that's what," the first rower said. "They'd all be Athenians if they could. Half the foreigners who come here stay long enough to register as resident metics. Metics! They get to live and work here even though one or both of their parents aren't Athenians. Half the trireme rowers are metics. Ought to be kicked out."

"Rather difficult to row with half a crew, wouldn't you think?" I said.

The rower looked at me, then turned to the other men. "Who's this herring?" he asked.

I made a mental note to work out more at the gymnasium.

"His name's Kleides," the potter said. "He's all right. He's a friend of Callita's."

The rower gave what I took to be his best effort at a smile. "Well, anyway," he went on, "there's too many foreigners pouring into the city. What do they all have to come here for anyway?"

"Athens has work, thanks to Pericles," the potter said. "They just want to share in the general prosperity."

"Well, they take our jobs," the rower grumbled. "Ought to be tossed out."

"Merchants, too?" I asked. My half brother is a merchant and a metic.

"Yeah," the rower said. "Them, too."

I nodded. "I guess they're just trouble. You rowers of the triremes even have to give them protection on the sea, right?"

"Damn right," the rower said.

"What do the merchants bring to Athens, anyway?" I asked.

The potter smiled. "Wheat, spices, and linen from Egypt; dates from Phoenicia; pork and cheese from Syracuse; woolens from Miletus."

"Oh, I see," I said. "Well, we could do without all that junk."

The rower glowered. "Well, it would be okay if they stayed in their place. But they all want to be full citizens."

"Well, they can't be," one of the other men said. "Pericles has seen to that."

I winced. I knew only too well how my half brother resented Pericles' law to restrict the applications for citizenship. Lamicus could not be an Athenian because his mother was not. No matter that our father had fought for Athens against the Persians at Marathon.

"More cause for resentment of Athens," the potter said. "We'll be at war soon. I wouldn't be surprised if trouble broke out here tomorrow. The city is tense."

A man behind me spoke. "Your ruler Hipparchos was assassinated at festival time many years ago. And that was because he wouldn't let one of the assassins' daughters take part in the festival."

I turned and found myself looking at Smallpox.

He snarled and moved on.

"Well, despite our citizenship law, Pericles lets the damned metics take part," the second rower said. "At least, in some of the activities."

I smiled. "Can I get you more wine from Callita?" I asked, pointing to the rower's nearly empty cup. "You know, for a metic, she serves pretty tasty wine."

The rower glanced toward Callita and turned a little white.

I was about to suggest that we ask Callita's opinion about our discussion when a man with a long tunic and long hair, pre-democracy fashion, flew backwards against a wall. His felt hat fell forward over his eyes. He shoved it back, jumped up with alacrity, and hurled himself against another man whose short chiton, tied at the waist with a sash, announced him to be a laborer.

I thought the first man to be rather poor in judgment for launching the counterattack. I knew the laborer. He was Palesto, a coppersmith whose reddish black hair matched his temper, and at the gymnasium during wrestling exercises, he'd rolled most of us up into balls.

The man with the long tunic hit the wall again and slid down it

rather gracefully. Then I heard a loud thud. A third man bounced off Palesto and into another man, whose cup of wine flew into the face of yet a fourth man.

I watched a blurred mix of tunics, arms, legs, and heads scramble together on the dirt floor.

A rather slight man scurried to our side of the tavern, taking a position up behind me.

"What started it?" I asked.

"The Syracusan in the felt hat said something about Pericles being a cracked jar full of fish guts and decking out Athens like a prostitute with all that painting on the Parthenon. Palesto took offense."

So did I. Hugging the mud wall, I slid over to the fray, moving, rather nimbly I thought, when a man hit the wall about one footlength away from me. I heard his breath come out in a rush.

About two body lengths away from the fray, I looked over the combatants, spotted the felt hat hanging down the back of the offensive man, and waited for my chance.

When he flew back toward me from one of Palesto's blows, I caught him by the shoulders, swung him around, and smashed my fist into his chin.

I was rubbing my bruised knuckles when a metal discus hit the side of my face. At least, it felt like a discus. I toppled onto Felt Hat who was lying quite motionlessly, worked my jaw to see if any teeth were on their way out, and looked up. Smallpox was going out the door. I couldn't tell if he'd been my assailant or not.

I disentangled myself from Felt Hat's tunic, but stayed down until I could see how the battle was going. It seemed to be abating. I saw why. Callita had finished rescuing what wine cups she could and was dispatching some of the combatants. She had one in either hand and was hauling them toward the door.

~~I thought it wise to throw in with her. "Here's one," I said, standing up and pointing down to Felt Hat. "Need help? Or would I just be in the way?"~~

She tossed out her two victims and turned back to me. "Want the feet or the head?" she asked.

I took the feet. With admirable force, Callita yanked up Felt Hat by the shoulders. I had to hang on to the feet and lean backwards so as not to topple forward.

We slung Felt Hat outside.

"Garbage gone." Callita grinned her toothless grin and disappeared back inside.

I rubbed my jaw again, then yelped and jumped when I felt a

hand on my shoulder. I swung round, fully expecting to see Smallpox.

It was Diocles. "What's going on?" he asked. "Has the war started?"

"A mere skirmish," I said. "But it would take less than a golden apple tossed in the midst of us all to start a war. You could do it with a . . . a felt hat."

"A felt hat? Start a war with a felt hat?"

"Never mind, Diocles. What are you doing back here anyway?"

"I did what you told me. I strolled around the agora, but I heard nothing alarming. I was about to go home when one of Pericles' servants asked if I knew where you were. I said I did, and he said to tell you that Pericles wants to see you. Now."

I nodded. I was pretty shabby looking, what with the dust of the road, matted hair, and what I suspected was a now purplish jaw. I considered stopping at the bathhouse for travelers, but I knew that if Pericles wanted me now, something serious was afoot. Ignoring the hole in my sandal, I headed into the city and down the street of the Panathenea to Pericles' home, southwest of the agora, toward the Areopagus.

Once there, I was ushered through the courtyard and into the reception room. The servant motioned to a chair on whose webbed seat was a red pillow with a delicate black key border design. The other chairs were similarly pillowed. I sat down and waited. I had only enough time to admire, as I always did, the black baseboard with incised lines and the russet walls on which hung two ivory lyres and several intricately woven baskets of red and black straw. I had just picked up a piece of poppy seed bread laid out on a three-legged table when Pericles and Aspasia entered. I put the bread down and rose.

Pericles motioned me to sit. "Enjoy the bread," he said, taking a piece for himself.

Aspasia asked if I wanted some wine, but I regrettably had to refuse the fine Chian wine they served. I'd had enough.

Pericles, as usual, was direct, though polite. "I am glad that Diocles sent you to us with speed, Kleides. We need your help."

"Of course," I said, glancing at Aspasia. I could see that she had noticed my purple jaw.

"Is there anything I can get for you, Kleides?" she asked.

Pericles smiled. "Some white lead, perhaps. Aspasia uses it only occasionally on her skin. I'm sure she has some to spare."

"My dear Pericles," Aspasia said, "I think Kleides might prefer a cloth of cool water." She walked to a chest, opened a door, pulled out a white cloth, and dipped it into a vase of water.

I watched the soft flow of her white pleated linen chiton as she approached me, the blue hemlines round her arms throwing off flashes of gold to match the gold ribbon wound through her dark curls. As always, I envied Pericles. The gods had blessed him, indeed.

I took the cloth, reminding myself that it would not do to kiss Aspasia's arm.

She took the chair next to Pericles. "A woman of aristocratic Athenian birth has been murdered," she said. "Stabbed. The mother of one of the virgins chosen to carry one of the baskets of grain and knives for the sacrifice of the bulls tomorrow."

"Stabbed with one of the knives?" I asked.

"It would seem so," Pericles said. "A knife is missing from one of the baskets. The one belonging to the daughter of the dead woman."

"Where was the woman killed?" I asked. "And when?"

"Just outside her house and just after dusk. Her sister found her body on the staircase to the second floor women's quarters and called in two Scythian guards. The guards reported the death to us."

"Where is the body?"

"Her body has been brought here," Aspasia said. "I have had the proper care taken for her. We notified her husband, and he is providing a proper burial to take place tomorrow. For now, I know you will want to see the body. I'll have one of my servants take you."

"Many of our citizens would see the murder as a curse on the festival and on Athens," Pericles said. "So I know that you understand the importance of keeping this matter quiet. But we must serve justice."

"I understand," I said. "I must find her murderer, soon and with discretion."

Aspasia nodded. She rose, came to me, and put her hand on my shoulder. "Dear Kleides, we have looked to you so many times, and now again."

Pericles also rose and came to me. "You must take great care for your own safety," he said. "I will give you what you need, including guards."

I shook my head. "Better if I work alone."

"Then try to avoid any more damage to yourself," he said. "Purple is not your best color. How did you come by that shade?"

"A brawl," I said. "At Callita's tavern."

Aspasia laughed. "You, brawling? Did someone speak poorly of Socrates?"

"Well, no. Not Socrates." I avoided looking at Pericles.

"Ah, Selkine, perhaps? Or Pericles?"

"And what did your opponent have to say about me?" Pericles asked.

I could hear the thread of amusement running in his deep voice.

"Well, that you were full of fish guts."

Aspasia smiled. "Perhaps we should eat more wild boar and less mullet."

"Well," Pericles said, "it is a democracy. Everyone is entitled to an opinion. As long as I am not exiled for eating fish guts."

I got the necessary information about the woman's family, saw the body which told me little, and decided to talk to the dead woman's husband. Husbands are usually my first suspects in the deaths of women.

I debated where I might find the husband. He was scheduled to serve as a judge at the musical contests Pericles had instituted at the Odeon. But he might have stayed home, mourning his wife. I made a quick trip to my home, poured olive oil onto my arms and legs, used a strigil to scrape off the dirt and oil, changed into my better tunic, then made my way to the south side of the Acropolis. There I entered the great Odeon hall, whose roof was built, some said, to resemble the tents of the Persian kings, and inquired of one of the festival officials about the judges. I was told that Polias was indeed present, despite the death of his wife. The official pointed him out to me, praising Polias' devotion to the city.

I resisted commenting that he seemed to have little devotion to his wife. After all, maybe he was dealing with his sorrow by performing his duties. When I saw him, I doubted that. The torches that burned brightly around the judges' benches illuminated his handsome face. He was properly sober for his task of judging the flutists and the choruses each tribe of the city had entered in the competition, but he was clearly enjoying his task. He stood easily, listening to the competitors in a final practice, his weight on his right foot; he was well groomed, his thick wavy hair bound with a narrow gold band. Curls had been combed forward round his temples, emphasizing his pronounced cheekbones.

I stood watching him, taking his measure. A proud man, I thought, and a vain one, too.

I worked my way through the spectators and the groups of rhapsodes and flutists, edging my way up behind the judges' benches.

I tapped Polias on the shoulder. He turned and looked me over, his expression of inquiry turning to one of annoyance.

I knew that I had to use authority. "Pericles sent me," I said. "I must talk to you about your wife."

Polias' face went blank. He stood silently for a moment, then motioned toward one of the doors. "Outside," he said. I followed him out between two of the great columns, emerging on a grassy space near the theater of Dionysus. The air was still buzzing with the talk of spectators, and the dusk was dispelled by the many torches lit around the theater and up on the Acropolis. Athens was ablaze with its glory. Talk of a murder seemed blasphemous.

There was only one way to do it. Directly. "Where were you when your wife was stabbed?" I asked.

Polias shook his head and sighed. "I had left home to come here to the Odeon. I left early because I wanted to make an offering at Athena's temple for wisdom in judging." He sighed again. "My leaving my wife was not very wise. It is a tragedy. My daughter is most upset. She and her mother were so proud of her place in the procession."

He was smooth.

"Had your wife been home all day?"

"No, no. She and my daughter had gone with the servants to the stoa to be sure they knew their rightful place in the procession tomorrow."

"I see. Has your wife any relatives?"

"A brother. He is in Megara. An Athenian representative there."

"No others?"

"Well, the half sister, of course. A metic. A Syracusan. Apparently, she found my wife's body."

"Where does she live?"

"Street of Tombs. Beyond the Outer Cerimacus somewhere."

"She and your wife were friendly?"

"Friendly? No. Since my wife's half sister is a metic, my wife had little social relations with her. Naturally. But my dear wife did tolerate some contact. In fact, the daughter of my wife's half sister was to carry the sunshade to protect my daughter in the procession tomorrow."

"Have you any idea of who might have killed your wife?" I asked.

Polias shook his head, then adjusted one of the curls at his right temple. "You understand that my wife and I are aristocrats. She is from one of Athens' oldest families. There were enemies from many generations. You see, there were those who knew my wife well. But I did not know all who knew her." He looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"You are implying?"

His eyes widened. He lifted his hands, palms up. "Only that I cannot say who might have had reason to kill my wife. Jealousy, perhaps. As I say, she was an aristocrat of prestige, married to me." He shook his head. "It is a tragedy."

Smooth, very smooth. He would make a better sophist than myself, planting his nasty idea with a fine pretense of sorrow. "Do you think the sister killed your wife?"

"Perhaps. Truly a disgrace if my wife has been killed by a metic. But I doubt the sister would dare commit such a crime."

His pride sickened me. "You'll pardon me, then," I said, "if like Achilles I speak directly. You mentioned jealousy. Are you saying that your wife had a lover who might have killed her?"

He took a step back and drew in his breath as if he just realized that I was a seller of rotten fish. "I said nothing about her having a lover."

Actually, I thought it likely that Polias would have killed his wife himself if she had had a lover. Athenian law would not punish him for such a killing. But it was gratifying to annoy him. "I see; my mistake then," I said. "Perhaps you were saying that your lover, male or female, jealous of your wife, might have killed her?"

His fists closed and for a moment I thought that the elegant aristocrat would haul off and bruise the other side of my jaw. He managed to get control, looked at me as if I were the rotten fish, turned, and headed off, his fine leather boots kicking up pebbles.

I turned the other way and headed back through the torchlit city for Polias' house, the murder scene. I knew that servants were usually a good source of household information.

The house was as handsome as its owner: a two-story mud brick-plastered house with polished wooden doors, window frames, and a roof of terracotta pantiles, all on a foundation of finely fitted stones. Handsome, indeed. A staircase led from the street to the back of the house, undoubtedly to the women's quarters. That, Aspasia had said, is where the sister found the woman's body, or, I thought, where the sister stabbed the woman. After all, ~~the sister, whose daughter was also in the procession, would have~~ had opportunity to take and use the knife. But why? Jealousy, as Polias had proposed, of a half sister, a prosperous mother of a lovely daughter, a full citizen of Athens? I remembered the resentment both of and by metics and foreigners at the tavern.

From up on the Acropolis, solemn holy chants sung by the men's and women's choruses drifted over the city. The dead woman's sister would not be up there. Metics were not allowed on the Acropolis. Tomorrow I would be one of the officials, seeing to

it that no metic, including my half brother and my nephew, entered the sacred summit. I wondered if my half brother harbored any resentment of me.

The great wooden door in the front of Polias' house opened. I was in luck. A male servant emerged, carrying a woolen cloak, a brown perfumed chlamys, probably intended for Polias as the night grew cool with sea breezes from Cape Sounion.

"Excuse me," I said, "I have come from Pericles. I have a question from him about the death of the mistress of the house."

The servant drew back. He looked down at the chlamys.

"I know that she was found on the stairs," I said. "Can you tell me anything about why she had come outside?"

"I don't know anything."

"You don't know anything yourself, but you would have heard talk among the other servants. Tell me what you have heard."

The servant glanced around. "Only that she came out to talk to someone. I don't know who." He glanced up toward the Acropolis. "I must go." He stepped around me and hurried up the dusty street.

I figured he had told me as much as he knew, or, at least, as much as I was likely to find out from the household. I headed for the sister's house. I had to ask several people, on their way toward the Acropolis for the night's religious ceremonies, before I located the house. It was quite a contrast to Polias' home. A one-story house, with peeling plaster and two slim holes for windows.

I banged on the door. A servant answered, a woman of about forty years, with a face that was wrinkled and spotted with brown marks by years of tough living. She took me into a small room whose white walls had blotches of brown rather like those on her face, gestured to a stool with a rope seat, and said she would summon her mistress, Cleasta. I knew then that Cleasta was a widow. There was no husband whose permission had to be gained before his wife could see a man in the house.

A few minutes later, Cleasta entered, the servant behind her. Both she and the servant pulled stools in front of me. Cleasta's face was pinched, her pale lips tight. With her golden brown hair and deep-set brown eyes, she still had beauty, but it had been marred by lines of wear and fatigue about her eyes and mouth. I decided that a gentle approach might work with Cleasta, at least to begin with. I explained that my mission was simply to try to determine whether she would cooperate if the husband or brother of her sister brought charges against anyone before our homicide court. I expressed my sorrow for her over the death of her sister.

She nodded.

"I understand that you found your sister on the stairway outside her house."

Cleasta nodded again. The servant kept glancing from her mistress to me.

"Had you been visiting your sister in her quarters?" I asked.

Cleasta nodded again.

I choose next a question that required more than a nod of the head. "Why had you gone to visit your sister?"

Cleasta cleared her throat. "My daughter was to wear . . . she was to wear a tunic of my half sister's. I went to my half sister's home to get the tunic."

"Tell me, if you had been visiting your sister, how is it that you found her later on the outside stairs?"

Cleasta looked down at her hands, then back up at me. "I took the tunic and left. But I had to go back because I had forgotten to confirm the time we were to arrive at my half sister's house in the morning to go to the Sacred Gate together."

I could not see why she hadn't determined sooner the appointed time to meet at her sister's. I noticed that the servant was watching me with glittering black eyes. "Why hadn't you set a time sooner? At the stoa when the officials were explaining what your daughters were to do?"

Cleasta stiffened her thin shoulders. "We did talk about the time at the stoa, but I had forgotten what we had set." She kneaded her hands. It was a poor excuse and she knew it.

"And when you found the body, you sought out two Scythian police?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you alarm the household?"

"I . . . My half sister's husband was not at home. I thought it best to tell someone in authority who could remove her body." She lifted a hand to her forehead and dropped it into her lap. "I could not move her, and I could not stand the thought of her body lying there while the servants sent for her husband."

It was a plausible explanation. "And then you left and went home?"

Cleasta nodded.

I thought that she was going to offer no explanation, but she cleared her throat and spoke again. "I wanted to get home to my daughter."

"I see. Tell me, was your servant with you?" I asked, nodding at the woman who was watching me sharply.

Cleasta glanced at her servant. "She was. For part of my walk.

Before we reached my half sister's house, I sent Apará to the agora for honey and bread."

I looked at the servant. She gave a curt nod. "And you walked the rest of the way yourself?" I asked Cleasta.

"Yes. It is not far."

I was skeptical. Athenian noblewomen do not walk alone. But, of course, Cleasta was not noble and not a full Athenian. Still, it did seem a bit odd not to have sent her servant to the agora earlier in the day or to have gone to the agora herself, accompanied by the servant.

"Have you any idea who might have killed your sister?" I asked. I slid my eyes to the servant.

"No," Cleasta said. Apará's eyes were opened wide, unblinking.

"Might her husband have had reason?" I hadn't completely dismissed Polias as a suspect. I wanted to see Cleasta's reaction.

She dropped her head and looked down at her hands again. "Perhaps," she said. "Maybe . . ." She shook her head. "I don't know." Her hands were trembling.

I had begun to hope that she was not guilty. I leaned forward. "Cleasta," I said, "do you know if your sister had a lover?"

She did not answer immediately. "Perhaps," she said, finally. "I don't know. I did not see my half sister very much. She and Polias were very proud people."

The whole of her story left me skeptical. A half sister she seldom saw. A tunic the half sister was to give to Cleasta's daughter. A time unclarified when it should have been. I had to challenge her.

"I would like to see the tunic that you received from your sister."

"I . . . I do not have it."

"You said that your sister gave it to you."

"After I found her, dead, stabbed, I could not bear to use it. I . . . I gave it away. To a poor woman in the streets." Cleasta lifted her head and for the first time in our interview, looked directly at me with spirit. "My daughter will not be in the procession now."

"I see." I rose. I knew that Cleasta was lying, but I could prove nothing. I did not know what she was hiding. Could she be Polias' lover? I doubted that. If Cleasta had killed her half sister, she had done so out of some other motive. Surely she resented her sister's and niece's superior positions in Athens over her daughter's and her own positions as metics.

But I also detected another emotion in Cleasta. Almost regret. If she had killed her half sister, she had done so reluctantly.

I looked at Apará. The servant had kept her black eyes on me.

She opened her mouth and moved her chin back and forth. A signal, perhaps? But I knew she would not talk in front of her mistress. That might be dangerous. I decided to seek her out tomorrow after the procession.

I left the house in the Street of Tombs and headed through the Sacred Gate and into the agora. I looked up and stood breathless. The marble columns of the Parthenon and the great entranceway, the Propylea, glowed rose-gold in the torchlight. The Parthenon seemed to hover above the city in the late summer air, in proportions so perfect I could believe that Athena had guided the hands of its architects. My heart swelled with pride for my city. I understood why Socrates refused to go beyond its limits. Athens was the glory of Greece.

A group of young men, singing at full voice, approached. I watched them, wondering forebodingly how many of them would die soon if we went to war with Corinth and Sparta.

I decided to return home to collect some things I would need tomorrow and then to go to Selkine for the night. With her, I could let my spirit rest. Tomorrow I would seek out Aparas and perhaps identify the murderer.

Selkine and I managed to patch up our quarrel, in large part because I wanted Selkine enough to swallow my pride, and she wanted me enough to dismiss her rich lover, Cimonides, which considerably sweetened the pride I swallowed. I did somewhat resent that she still wore to bed the pair of gold earrings Cimonides had given her, but I had to admit that the golden shields looked lovely against her dark hair and golden skin. She did, indeed, resemble Aspasias. And she was, if more temperamental and less insightful, almost as intelligent.

It was a good night. But I had to leave before the sun rose to get to the Acropolis in time to take my official position. I put on my good linen tunic with the purple trim and my official's ivy wreath and went over to the bed on which a naked Selkine still lay. A few embraces later, I decided that I'd better leave or look like a satyr for the rest of the day. Selkine, who did not savor early mornings, said that she would come later and was rather glad that she was not an official part of the procession, not surprising since she was hardly a virgin, and glad that she did not have to worry about things like knowing the proper ways to hold a basket and replace missing sunshades.

"Missing sunshades?" I said.

"Hmm," she said, distracted by her image in the silver disc she was using to arrange her hair.

"The sunshades carried by the metic women to protect the Athenian women?"

"Hmm, I guess," she said.

"How many are missing?"

She put the disc down, looked at me, and laughed. "The festival will not be ruined. One sunshade, according to my friend Lais. She said that someone apparently cut up one of the sunshades."

"How does she know?"

"Lais is one of the officials helping the young women carrying the knife baskets."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, she found the sunshade outside of the stoa."

"Does Lais know whose sunshade was cut up?"

Selkine shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. I didn't ask." She slid down on the bed, pulled a linen sheet over herself, yawned, then sat up again. "Why? What is important about this sunshade?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe nothing. But if you talk to Lais ask whose sunshade is missing and tell me as soon as you can get to me." I was pretty sure I knew whose sunshade was cut up, who cut it, and why, but I wanted confirmation.

Selkine sat up straighter. "Is this one of your investigations? What has happened?"

I shook my head. "I can't tell you now."

"But you will later," she said. It was a statement, not a request. "I'll find out what I can."

I left, wishing that Selkine were a little less quick.

The Dog Star was still visible in the night sky, and the moon, though not full, was bright. I made my way to the Sacred Gate where Athens' population was gathering for the start of the procession up to Athena's sacred site on the Acropolis.

I could see, even from a distance, the city's gift to Athena, the large peplos, a cloth woven by professional weavers with battle scenes of the gods defeating the race of giants. Mounted on a ship, a trireme that had distinguished itself in our great war against the Persians, and pulled on a wheeled undercarriage, the white peplos symbolized our Athenian victory over the empire of Persia.

At dawn, the runners with their torches raced through the agora, competing to be the first at the altar of Athena. After some time had passed, and we officials had managed to get everyone in order, I took my place. In the early sunlight, the great procession began. First came the young girls carrying a small peplos, a new

dress for the sacred and ancient olive wood statue of Athena. There followed the long train of women with the baskets; then the sacrificial oxen, swaying their huge heads; then the metics of Athens in purple cloaks, among them my half brother. I looked up at the Acropolis, the summit where my half brother could not go. I wondered where Cleasta was.

Behind the metics came the musicians, the old men with olive branches, the armed warriors in chariots, the cavalry, and finally the mass population of Athens, carrying gold and silver and ivory gifts for Athena. Then came the foreigners. As we officials struggled to keep everyone moving, I searched the faces. I started when I thought I spotted Smallpox from the tavern. But I couldn't be sure it was him.

The procession wound through the agora, past the altar of the twelve gods. Under a deep blue sky, we moved up the slope of the Acropolis and through the entranceway to the top, threading through the Propylaea's six great lines of columns, past the great paintings of the Trojan War. When we came out from the deep shade of its coffered roof, the sun burst full in front of us, gilding the Parthenon and Phidias' great bronze statue of Athena, the height of four tall men. From her great spear, rays of sunlight shot off, visible, I knew, to ships as far away as Cape Sounion. It was as if the whole procession had been taken into the realm of the gods. Except, I remembered, for the metics and the foreigners.

I looked at Pericles, standing like an Olympian near the altar of Athena, his great helmet round his noble head. I felt that I had let him down. The sacrifices to the gods had begun, and I had not yet found the murderer. I am a sophist. I did not believe that the gods would reject the sacrifices because of a murder. But the guilty one had to be found, the taint removed from the city.

The young girls handed the new peplos to the priestess, and the priests began to slaughter the rest of the animals. The sharp pungent smell of blood and bile clogged the air. The bellowing of the animals and the ritual screams of the women echoed off the surrounding hills.

~~Finally, we began to move down to the Ceramicus to the great pots where the meat would be cooked and given to the people.~~

Just below the Acropolis, Selkine came up to me. "I thought I'd let you know that the sunshade belonged to the young metic who was to protect the daughter of the murdered woman." She looked rather smug. "Does that help?"

"I suspected as much."

She wrinkled her nose at me and moved on.

I moved forward slowly, trying to imagine some way Cleasta could not be guilty. But I kept remembering Callita's story of a torn straw hat. Were Smallpox's lover and the killer one and the same? A woman whose anger drove her to take a knife and cut up the belongings of the one she hated? The connection was unmistakable, but I could not see Cleasta's almost childlike release of anger turning into a deadly stabbing.

In the Ceramicus, we officials distributed bread and cakes to those selected from each tribe to begin the eating of the meat, a symbol of the privileged status of Athenian citizens.

I was handing bread to a young man when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see Callita's wide toothless grin.

"Damn meat," she said. "Someone always gives me some, metic though I am, but what good is the tough stuff if you haven't got any teeth."

I handed her some bread and honey cake.

"You're a prince, Kleides," she said. She glanced around, then pulled me by the tunic toward a twisted olive tree where a woman stood holding a wailing child.

"Good cover," Callita said. "I have something for only you to hear. I am to tell you something from someone named Apará, the slave woman of Cleasta. Apará said you would know who Cleasta is."

I nodded.

"Mind you," Callita said, "I didn't much like this Apará, but I thought you'd want to know what she said. She said to tell you that Cleasta was lying about some tunic. She had the tunic a long time ago, but the sister wanted it back. And Cleasta also had a knife, a knife she stole. Apará said she found the knife behind a tomb in the Ceramicus where her mistress had thrown it." Callita paused. "Let's see, what else. By Zeus, my memory . . . oh, that's it. The important part. Apará said she was sent to the agora, just as Cleasta said, but she came back and followed her mistress and her mistress's companion home. Said she saw where they threw the knife. Said, let's see now . . . she said the knife was worth a lot to somebody else, but if you wanted it, she'd sell it to you first. Whew."

Callita wiped the sweat from her forehead and upper lip. "She said you probably had more money than the other fellow." Callita chuckled and hit me on the shoulder. "I set her straight on that one. Told her you could hardly afford a decent haircut."

"The other fellow?" I asked. "Callita, where is Apará? It's important. The fool might be in danger."

"Holy Hera," she said. "You mean she might get it?" She made a stabbing motion toward her ample chest.

"Yes. Where is she?"

"I left her at the tavern."

I turned and hurried toward the tavern. I knew that Callita was following, but she could not keep up. I raced down the Street of Tombs toward Cleasta's house.

I stopped when I saw two Scythian police carrying a draped figure between them. Too late. The woman had tried a bit of blackmail. Foolish. But then, I was a privileged Athenian. Perhaps if I were a slave wanting to buy freedom, I would have done the same.

I greeted the Scythians. They knew me, knew that I often operated in the name of Pericles. I ordered them to turn back the top of the shroud. They did.

I looked down at the brown spotted face of Apará. It was frozen in a grimace of pain.

"How did she die?" I asked. "Could you tell?"

One of the Scythians nodded. "Yeah. Not a plague case, thanks be to Zeus. Someone bashed in the back of her head. We found her lying off the road, among the tombs. We are taking her for burial."

I looked again at Apará and pulled an obol from the pouch under my tunic. I knew these Scythians and knew they would leave the coin where I placed it, between Apará's lips. She'd be able to pay Charon the ferryman to take her across the river Styx into Hades. I didn't believe the hoary old myth, but maybe she had. I waved the Scythians forward and headed farther down the Street of Tombs for Cleasta's house.

I was just abreast of the travelers' bathhouse when I saw them. They had two boxes piled on top of a cart and an amphora, probably full of water from the spring near the bathhouse. From somewhere, they had secured a horse, probably stealing it. Smallpox was at the reins. They were about to turn back onto the road, heading, I surmised, to Piraeus, and from there to Naxos or Syracuse.

"Get out of the way, you Athenian fish gobbler, you stinking son of a race of damnable oathbreakers."

"Fish gobbler, maybe, oathbreaker, no, and not a murderer," I said. "Which of you stabbed the sister?"

Cleasta clung to the arm of her lover. Behind them, a young woman cowered. Cleasta's daughter, I surmised.

"I did," Smallpox said. "She didn't want her daughter's old tunic worn by a metic. She demanded it back, so I thought it best to give her the daughter's knife at the same time. I threw it to her." He grinned horribly. "She caught it in the stomach." He shrugged. "I saw she had no more need for it, so I took it back and threw it

away. Anything else you want to know, you godless sophist?"

"Yes, one more thing. Did you kill Apara, too?"

He waved an arm. "She is better off dead than a slave in this cistern of a city."

I looked at Cleasta, wondering what had corrupted her enough to steal the knife for her lover's plot: envy of her supercilious sister, years of living as a poor metic, the violent nature of her Naxian lover? I felt sorrow for her and her daughter and a tinge of anger with my city for its own supercilious power.

Smallpox leaned toward me. "You smell the blood in the air from those slaughtered oxen? Soon, you Athenians will smell your own blood."

I saw Smallpox lift the reins. The cart came rattling toward me. I threw myself out of the way, rolling on the ground. I felt the thud of the horse's hoofs and the rumbling of the cart wheels just near my head. I rolled down a ditch and heard a ripping sound.

I got up, rather slowly, watching the cart jolting away. My official tunic had ripped, Cleasta and Smallpox's final revenge on an Athenian.

The next day, I met with Pericles at the boat races at Piraeus. I told him about Cleasta and Smallpox.

He listened solemnly. "Kleides," he said, "I must thank you again. I am always putting you in danger. But I fear that all of Athens may soon be in danger. Corinth and Sparta are encouraging the breakup of our Delian League. I must, in assembly, encourage the city to embrace war."

He moved forward to greet the crew of the victorious trireme, among them the rower I had seen at Callita's tavern.

I could almost see a palpable burden settle on Pericles' shoulders. From behind, someone tapped my shoulder. It was Diocles.

"Kleides," he said, "the most interesting news. One of the soothsayers says that in his dreams he saw a man with smallpox shedding the blood of Athenian warriors. What do you think of that?"

"Does this soothsayer frequent Callita's tavern?"

Diocles looked puzzled. "I believe so, but what is the importance of that?"

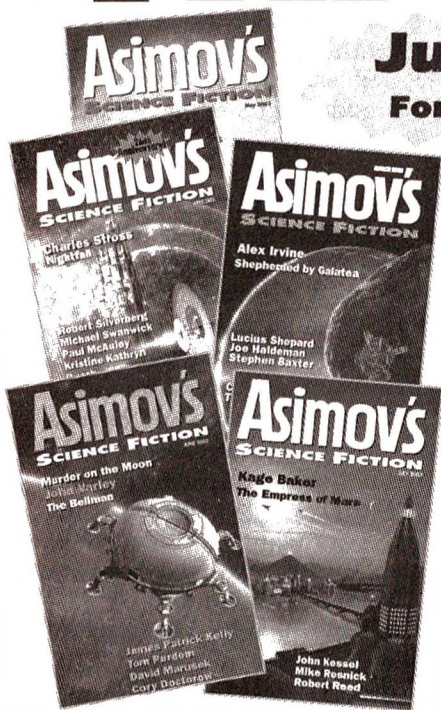
I sighed and looked at Pericles again. "Nothing. But I believe that your soothsayer may be right."

I turned to seek out Selkine. 🐦

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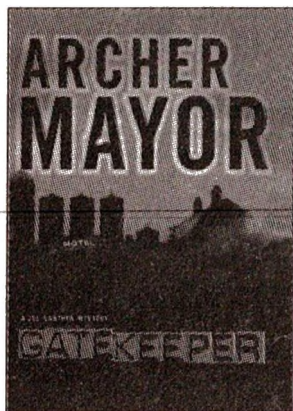
BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

The police procedural has long been a staple of mystery fiction, with Ed McBain's long-running 87th Precinct serving as both prototype and exemplar for the ensemble version of the genre. But American authors Archer Mayor and Steven Havill and British author Stephen Booth have added interesting wrinkles with procedurals that cross jurisdictional lines and borders and even national boundaries as well.

Archer Mayor's novels are billed as Joe Gunther mysteries, but in fact, the fourteen novels in the series are true ensemble pieces that feature numerous well-developed characters with several capable of taking the lead in a given book. Gunther is based in Brattleboro, Vermont, and while the central location remains the same, Gunther's position has evolved from that of lieutenant on the Brattleboro Police Department to second in command of the Vermont Bureau of Investigation, an unusual state-wide bureau designed to augment better defined and established law services.

Keeping the series fresh is easy when Mayor is able to shift the geographic focus as he did in *The Dark Root* (1995) when much of the action took place in Canada, or when Gunther's skills at unraveling a fifty-year-old killing are tested in *The Marble Mask* (2000). And in 2002's *The Sniper's Wife*, Mayor found another approach by featuring Willy Kunkel, Gunther's most unusual detective, who returns to New York City to investigate the death of his ex-wife.



In his latest novel, *Gatekeeper* (Mysterious Press, \$23.95), the hard-won goodwill the Vermont Bureau of Investigation has established is threatened when the governor wants them to take the lead in shutting down the heroin traffic flowing from Holyoke, Massachusetts into Rutland (the scene of two recent murders) and other Vermont cities. The agents of the VBI work in a political minefield that comprises the authority of local police departments, the Vermont State Police, and the Southern Vermont Drug Task Force, and Gunther's

efforts to negotiate a path that will both satisfy the governor's aims and preserve a healthy working relationship with other agencies serves to set the plate for the primary action of the novel, but Mayor doesn't neglect other members of the cast.

Gunther's girlfriend, Gail, is distressed to discover that her niece is a dual victim of drugs and the means of acquiring them. Gail's efforts to deal with the situation, though, endanger her and threaten her relationship with Joe. Likewise, Lester Spinney's teenage son, angst-ridden David, is heading into dangerous territory that may force Lester to choose between his son and his career. But *Gatekeeper* belongs to Special Agent Sammie Martens, whose impulsive decision to go undercover may be the key that will provide the leverage VBI is seeking.

Mayor skillfully sketches the logistical problems of trying to cut off the flow of drugs, including issues of manpower and jurisdiction, but keeps the narrative flow intact as Sammie's initiative spawns an ambitious, dangerous plan to penetrate an emerging power in the Holyoke drug trade.

Among Mayor's impressive strengths are realistic dialogue and subtle characterizations that humanize even the drug dealers. A cast that continues to grow and develop in ways both convincing and entertaining and a kaleidoscopic focus also help keep the series fresh and inventive and compelling.

While Mayor's New England series spills over into neighboring states and Canada, Steven F. Havill's underrated series takes in sprawling Posadas County, New Mexico, and frequently crosses the border into Mexico. Multi-jurisdictional from the get-go with Posadas Village police and the Posadas County sheriff's department sharing some jurisdiction, Havill is not averse to adding other complications.

Havill's primary character when the series began with 1991's *Heartshot* was Undersheriff Bill Gastner; in fact, the novels were billed as Bill Gastner mysteries. Nonetheless, Havill's series has never been a one-man show, and Gastner, already moving toward retirement as the series began, has gradually passed the torch without disappearing entirely. In the nine books that compose the Bill Gastner titles, the aging lawman whose intimate knowledge of Posadas county and its residents makes him an invaluable resource, moves from undersheriff to sheriff to retiree. In *Prolonged Exposure* (1998), Gastner's heart surgery and enforced recuperation help set the stage for his replacement.

In *Out of Season* (1999), Gastner and his staff deal not only with witnessed murder, but also with investigations by outside agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board. Beginning with *Scavengers* (1992),

Detective Estelle Reyes-Guzman becomes the new undersheriff and the series becomes known as Posadas County Mysteries. Gastner remains a powerful figure, but Estelle, Sheriff Robert Torrez, and others move into more prominent roles.

In his newest installment, *A Discount for Death* (St. Martin's, \$23.95), Estelle faces a difficult situation when her personal knowledge appears to implicate a village policeman as the culprit in a fatal accident. At the same time, popular insurance salesman George Enriquez faces a grand jury indictment for fraud and Estelle finds an investigation of criminal activity striking too close to her own family. The dual investigations stretch Posadas's resources to the brink as they reach out of the county in one direction and into Mexico in another and provide Estelle with a severe test of her new responsibilities.

Havill makes excellent use of the Southwestern landscape in his books, and his shrewd understanding of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural makeup of its inhabitants lifts this series to the top rank of regional mysteries.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Stephen Booth is capturing attention with an excellent series that is set in the Peak District and encompasses villages and farms as well as more urban settings.

Booth's first novel, *Black Dog* (2000), introduced detectives Diane Fry and Ben Cooper and won the Barry Award for Best British Crime Novel. That was followed by *Dancing With the Virgins* (2001), which also won the Barry Award, *Blood on the Tongue* (2002), and the latest, *Blind to the Bones* (Scribner, \$25).

In each novel, Booth has demonstrated a talent for detailing the rugged independence and the stubborn cohesiveness of the rural folk of the Peak District and the struggle to uncover the complicated roots of the crimes committed in its far-flung reaches. Fry and Cooper are wonderfully complex characters. Fry is ambitious, driven, haunted by a rape that almost ended her career and a rough childhood that includes the unexplained disappearance of her older sister. She is both attracted and repelled by the rustic Cooper. Cooper, son of a slain policeman who was widely known and respected, left home late and reluctantly and is still unused to being on his own.

The intuitive Cooper and methodical Fry have a decidedly uneasy relationship. In *Blind to the Bones*, Cooper goes on loan to the Rural Crime Team and must penetrate the defenses of the Oxleys, a close-knit clan inhabiting the village of Withens. Fry meanwhile is stuck with a frustrating unsolved disappearance that echoes her sister's case. And while Cooper and Fry pursue their separate cases, Cooper becomes the unwilling recipient of information about Fry's sister.

Booth's intricately plotted series is filled with superbly imagined minor characters and a terrific sense of time and place. Cooper and Fry are as good a combination as you will find in a procedural series.

Ilda Swearingen's debut novel, *Owl of the Desert* (New Victoria, \$12.95), is a dark, heartbreaking thriller set in a shadowy Texas underworld of politics, religion, and revolution. Kate Porter and her younger brother Dwight grew up inside the American Patriotic Front, a right-wing militia founded by their father, Bud, who financed his group with a series of bank robberies. Kate escaped this life of violence and hate by enrolling in college, but when her father shows up on campus to recruit her for another heist, she can't summon the courage to say no. The robbery claims the life of a bystander and a devastated and disillusioned Kate is caught and sentenced to twelve years. When Kate is released, she and Ray Gruber of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation track Bud, who cut and ran from the botched bank job, to Corpus Christi. Kate's anguish grows with the discovery that Dwight, never an APF loyalist and now a television evangelist, as well as her lost jailhouse lover, Lissa McEvoy, are connected to the gun trade she hopes to infiltrate. *Owl of the Desert* is a gripping and engaging read, with no words wasted on plot padding and superfluous emotion. Kate is a sympathetic character, but Swearingen deftly balances the reader's natural compassion with Kate's internal struggle. Her torment over the bank killing and the pain of hunting her own father overwhelms her desire for revenge, and even her love for Lissa, and casts a poignant shadow over the novel. The reader experiences Kate through her own grief, a self-discipline of penitence stronger than her will to survive.

—Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

DIG THE HOLE FIRST

STEVE RITCHIE

The first decision I made—aside from that of murdering Helen and Dale—was that I would dig their graves first.

Murdering someone is, by itself, relatively easy. Getting away with it is harder, which is why so many murderers end up in jail. Too often you hear of a wronged husband rushing into a murder unprepared, spraying bullets and evidence all over the crime scene. No, a properly executed murder takes preparation.

The site I picked as the final resting place of my ex-wife and ex-best friend was in a small clearing in the woods outside of Whitewater, conveniently located less than an hour's drive away. My plan was to arrive shortly after sunset and dig their graves using the light of the full moon.

Then, after a few hours rest, I'd bring them to the clearing for the murder itself. By sunrise their bodies would be buried deeply enough they would never be found.

One of the advantages of the location was that it was a short drive from a Home Contractor megastore, which specialized in home improvement tools and supplies. It was open twenty-four hours a day.

I wanted to keep any potential evidence to a minimum, so my plan was to buy a shovel there. Then I would simply toss it into a small nearby lake when I was done.

And a rake. I needed a rake for the leaves.

The drive to Whitewater is a pleasant one, with only two speed traps along the way. I parked at the far end of the lot and walked through the automatic doors.

"Welcome to Home Contractor, may I help you?"

I stopped, momentarily startled. An attractive young lady in a blue apron stood in front of me. I believe she was what they call a Greeter, an annoying concept introduced by corporate executives

who don't have to do their own shopping.

"Um, yes, you can," I said. "I'm doing a little gardening and I need a shovel. And a rake."

The young lady pointed to the far end of the store. "Garden Tools are in aisle twenty-seven, just past Tools and Hardware."

"Thanks," I said, as I walked past her.

"If you need any help, my name is Cindy," she called out behind me. "Thank you for shopping Home Contractor."

She was so cheerful and sincere I suspected she hadn't had the job very long.

Like many chain stores, the corporate owners of Home Contractor put all the useful items in the back. This ensures that you'll walk past as many sales and special displays as possible. I marched through twenty-six aisles of merchandise, resenting the wasted time.

When I finally reached the Garden Tools section I was faced with another annoying problem. Home Contractor didn't just sell shovels—they sold trenching shovels, ground shovels, coal shovels, grain shovels, and spades. Past the shovels were lawn rakes, leaf rakes, hay rakes, and garden rakes. Digging forks and sod cutters only added to the confusion.

There were no signs to explain what the different tools were designed for, and I didn't think it would be wise to ask if there was a grave-digging section.

So after some dithering, I chose a garden rake and one of the spades. The digging fork sounded like it might be useful, but I passed on the sod cutter.

On the way back to the registers at the front of the store I checked my watch. The stop at Home Contractor had taken longer than I planned. I was twenty minutes past my schedule, not counting the time I spent looking over a barbecue grill in aisle sixteen.

Fortunately I didn't have to wait long in line. Soon I was back in my truck and on the way to the clearing in the woods I had picked out earlier.

Originally my plan was to wait half an hour before starting the graves, just to make sure no curious bystanders had seen me drive into the woods. But as the sun had already set and the full moon risen, I decided to start immediately.

Raking the spot clear was much more difficult than I had thought it would be. Not at all like raking leaves on a lawn. Ferns and other low growth tangled with the leaves, clogging up the rake. I spent most of the time tearing the rake free and pulling clumps of vegetation off it.

I dumped the leaves and assorted undergrowth into a pile to one side. They would later be used as the final cover over the graves.

The new shovel cut easily into the soil. I smiled as I calculated how long it would take to finish the graves. Two, maybe three hours. Adding travel time and a few hours sleep brought it up to about nine hours. By sunrise it would be over.

On the second shovelfull I hit a tree root. Not a large one; I was able to stand on the shovel and chop through it. Then I hit another, slightly larger root, which took more effort.

I moved over a few feet and tried again.

The shovel stopped abruptly as it hit another root.

I poked the ground at several spots across the gravesite. The entire area was riddled with roots. There seemed to be a solid layer of them a few inches under the surface.

I smoked a cigarette while I considered the problem. I was in the middle of a good-sized clearing, with the nearest trees over thirty feet away. Could I have picked a spot where a tree used to be? If so, what happened to the stump?

I suddenly realized my mistake. The trees around the clearing were oaks. Somewhere I had picked up the fact that oak trees have, in addition to a main taproot, a large system of branching roots that extend far from the tree itself. The roots I was trying to dig through belonged to trees thirty or more feet away.

Fully three-quarters of the trees in the woods were oaks. I'd run into the same problem wherever I dug.

It was unfortunate that I hadn't realized it sooner. But it was too late to look for another spot—any change in the plan could have unforeseen consequences.

A double murder is no time for improvisation.

The only solution I could think of was to continue digging. It would take longer than planned, but I could make up the time by getting less sleep before the murders. I did, however, need something better than a shovel to chop through the roots.

Fifteen minutes later I walked through the automatic doors of Home Contractor a second time.

Cindy was there to greet me again. "Welcome to Home Contractor, may I help you?"

"Sure," I said. "I, um, have to cut through the sod for my garden."

Cindy frowned. "But it's dark outside."

"It's not very dark, there's a full moon," I said quickly. "Besides,

once I get gardening there's just no stopping me. Do you have any axes?"

"We have a variety of sod cutters in aisle twenty-seven," she said.

"That's okay," I said. "But I think I'd rather have an axe."

"They have wheels on them," she said cheerfully. "And adjustable blades. They're a Home Contractor special, and make a hard job easy!"

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I'm afraid I have my heart set on an axe."

Her smile faded slightly. "Aisle twenty-three, next to the tree trimmers. Thank you for shopping Home Contractor."

I picked out a double-headed model with a fiberglass handle. It was actually quite a nice axe. I thought it was a shame that at the end of the night I'd have to throw it in the lake.

As I drove the familiar route back to the woods I noticed a thin scattering of clouds blowing in from the west. I hoped they wouldn't interfere with my work.

The axe chopped fairly easily through the roots I had uncovered. But I found that while I could chop through an uncovered root without difficulty, one packed tightly into the soil was an entirely different matter. I was forced to dig around each root as much as possible before chopping through it.

The clouds above were just passing in front of the moon when I stopped for a smoke and to think things over.

At the rate I was going, it would take me all night to dig the graves. Even if I didn't get any sleep at all, I wouldn't have time to murder Dale and Helen. Much less bury them and dispose of the tools.

Burying two people in the middle of the woods was turning out to be much more work than I thought it would be.

I took a long pull from my cigarette.

In a way it was unfortunate that both of them had to die. If I were burying just one person, I'd have plenty of time.

I discarded the thought. I was killing the both of them because ~~they betrayed my trust~~—not because it was convenient.

Though I had to admit that we had been irrevocably separated before Helen started seeing Dale. If one of them were more responsible for the situation than the other, it was Dale.

I stubbed out the cigarette on the ground. Dale definitely had betrayed my friendship. There was no question about it. One could make a convincing argument that Helen had also betrayed me, but since our marriage was over by then there was room for reasonable doubt.

One shouldn't kill unless one is certain. I decided that one grave would do.

Even so, I was concerned about the time it was taking. Certainly shoveling dirt into a hole would be faster than shoveling it out, but there would still be a lot of shoveling involved.

To be on the safe side, I needed a way to speed up the process. It occurred to me that I could pile the dirt on a large piece of cardboard or canvas. Then burying Dale would be simply a matter of tipping the entire pile into the hole at once.

I looked up at the full moon. The thin layer of clouds was now thickening, dimming the moonlight. I realized it would soon be too dark to work. I needed a good flashlight and some batteries.

Cindy was still standing inside the Home Contractor entrance. She obviously was working the late shift.

Her smile was gone now, replaced with a bored expression. "Welcome to Home Contractor, may I help you?" she asked listlessly.

"I need a flashlight," I said, ready with a new variation of my cover story, "and some canvas. You see, my garden—"

"Aisles fourteen and seventeen," she said curtly. "ThankyouforshoppingHomeContractor."

I felt as if I was making some kind of progress; this time I was in the teens. I smiled weakly and went to find the flashlight and canvas.

The last time I bought a flashlight had been over ten years ago. There were three models, and one of them was only a three-battery version of the standard flashlight. Things had changed.

In Home Contractor, flashlights took up an entire aisle by themselves. They came in every size, from twenty-four-inch night watchman models to LED keychain lights. Some were battery-powered, others hand-cranked. They had swivel-heads, flexible necks, colored lenses. One even had a built-in radio.

I chose two flashlights. One had a split handle and strap that allowed you to wear it on your head, similar to a miner's light. The second one was a waterproof stainless steel model with a halogen bulb and a two-level switch.

I didn't need it for the digging. I just thought it would be handy to have around the house.

Getting the canvas was easy. Home Contractor sold it in a dozen different patterns, intended for awnings. All I had to do was to find an employee to cut a few yards off the roll, then wait as he called a manager to find out how to write up a purchase slip for the cashier.

I spent the time taking a second look at the barbecue grill.

By the time I returned to my future crime scene the sky had become completely overcast, obscuring the moonlight. I quickly adjusted the flashlight's headband to fit and rolled out the canvas. It took only a few minutes to transfer the small pile of dirt I had already dug up. I checked my watch.

It was two o'clock in the morning. By the original plan I should have finished the digging and been taking a pre-murder nap. Instead, the grave was hardly started and I still had to bring Dale to the woods, kill him, and bury his body.

Not to mention having to dispose of my growing collection of tools and supplies from Home Contractor.

I figured I had about two hours to finish the grave. Any later and I'd end up throwing away the evidence and driving home in the morning hours. Undoubtedly, there would be witnesses.

With a sigh, I got back to work.

I concentrated on chopping through the roots along the perimeter of the grave. Or rather, a slightly smaller grave than I had originally planned. After all, the goal was to bury Dale, not make him comfortable.

This allowed me to pry the roots up as a single mat, cutting away the smaller roots underneath as I went. A half hour's frantic chopping and cutting later, I dragged the dirty mess to one side.

The tree roots finally disposed of, I could return to the main business of digging the grave. I picked up my new Home Contractor shovel and thrust it into the ground.

I was rewarded with a dull thud, and the shovel slipped out of my hands.

I tried again. This time as the shovel was forced from my hands a sharp corner on the handle cut my palm. Something was not right.

I got down on my hands and knees and scraped away the top layer of dirt. Clay. I had hit a layer of clay.

Damn, damn, damn.

At least it explained why the tree roots had formed such a convenient layer for me. I was becoming much more sympathetic toward murderers who buried their victims in shallow graves.

The shovel would not be able to dig through clay. I needed something better, like a pickaxe. I rubbed the cut on my hand. A pair of work gloves, too.

Driving back to Home Contractor, I had another idea. If I were to tie a rope between the canvas and my bumper, I could use the truck to pull the dirt back into the hole. A little tamping with the

shovel and a scattering of leaves on top would finish it. Once Dale was dead it would take less than five minutes to bury him.

It was about three in the morning when I parked next the Home Contractor entrance. There were only five cars left in the parking lot, probably all owned by employees.

Not surprisingly, Cindy was still there. I frowned. Her shift must have started just before I bought the shovel.

I tried to avoid her by going around a tall display of storage containers. Unfortunately, she must have seen me coming and tried to do the same. We avoided each other until we were face to face.

Covered in dirt and with a bleeding hand, I set my jaw and stared her in the eye. "Gloves, rope, and a pickaxe," I said firmly.

Cindy stared back. "Nine, six, and twenty-seven," she said just as firmly.

I noticed she didn't thank me for shopping at Home Contractor.

Twenty minutes later I was back in the woods, having found a shortcut that shaved five minutes off the trip.

The pickaxe dug easily into the clay. A quick swing, a yank, and a good-sized chunk of clay popped out of the bottom of the hole. Another swing, another clump. And another.

After a few minutes I calculated that a three-by-six-foot hole, three feet deep, contained about seven hundred similarly sized chunks of clay. I was glad I bought the gloves.

Still, I was making clear progress. By settling for a hole a little smaller and not quite as deep as I had planned, I had a good chance of finishing in time.

It was hard work. I had to take a short break every fifteen minutes.

Finally, after approximately the three-hundredth lump of clay was tossed aside, I decided the grave was big enough. Two feet wide, five feet long, and two and a half feet deep, most of it in clay. I was done.

Well, not done—the grave was ready, but I still had to drive to Dale's house, somehow bring him back, kill him, bury his body, and dispose of the tools.

It seemed like there was an awful lot of work left to do.

I yawned deeply as I checked my watch. It was nearly four thirty in the morning.

I climbed out of the hole and sat on the truck bumper. I stared at the grave. About five hours of solid work, not counting all the extra trips for tools.

Perhaps I was overreacting a little.

Certainly I had good reason to hate Dale. At least it had seemed like a good reason the night before. That is, how much of an offense is it to marry a divorced woman without discussing it with her ex-husband?

Maybe there was a more appropriate action I could take. Like scratching the paint on his new sports car.

And it didn't escape my attention that if I wasn't going to kill anyone I could keep the tools.

I sighed heavily.

The shovel and pickaxe went in the back of the truck. Along with the rake, digging fork, axe, flashlights, extra batteries, and gloves. I hadn't used the digging fork.

Then with the rope tied to my bumper, I used the truck to pull the dirt and clay back into the hole. It worked perfectly.

On the way home I made one last stop at Home Contractor to buy the barbecue grill. I ran into Cindy in the parking lot, just getting off her shift. It turned out that we had a lot in common; we ended up going out for an early morning coffee.

If things work out, maybe sometime I'll invite Helen and Dale over to meet her. 🐦

We'd like to know what your favorite AHMM stories are

In anticipation of our fiftieth anniversary in 2006, we are asking our readers, especially our long-time subscribers, to tell us what stories over the years were the most memorable, captivating, enjoyable, or otherwise remarkable. We also invite you to contribute your comments about the stories you've particularly liked.

We'll print some of the stories from your suggestions as Mystery Classics during our anniversary year. We'll also run a selected list in the magazine, including some of your comments.

Please write to: The Editors
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
475 Park Avenue South
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WINTER KILL

DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

Spring came late that year to the Absarokas. There was still heavy snow in the high peaks when lupine and mountain laurel began to bloom in the alpine meadows and it came time to move the stock off winter pasture. A couple of Tumble Mountain hands had horsebacked up from a trailer base camp along the Gallatin Trace and were working their way down the watershed when they happened on some scattered bones, which they took at first to be a stranded calf brought down by wolves. But the proportions were wrong, and it didn't take them long to realize they'd found human remains.

Hector Moody took the call. Stillwater County had the local jurisdiction, and Hector was the deputy on duty at the sheriff's substation in Limestone. The foreman at Tumble Mountain was laconic. Could be a lost hiker, maybe an Indian, he said. Hector didn't comment. He was Crow on his mother's side. Had to of been there a while, the foreman said. Still, figured you'd want to know. Hector thanked him and hung up. He thought about it for a minute, and then he picked up the phone again and called Katie Faraday. Katie was a G.P. at the local public health clinic; she also filled in as a rural medical examiner, paid expenses and per diem by the state for the occasional unattended death.

"Old bones or new?" she asked.

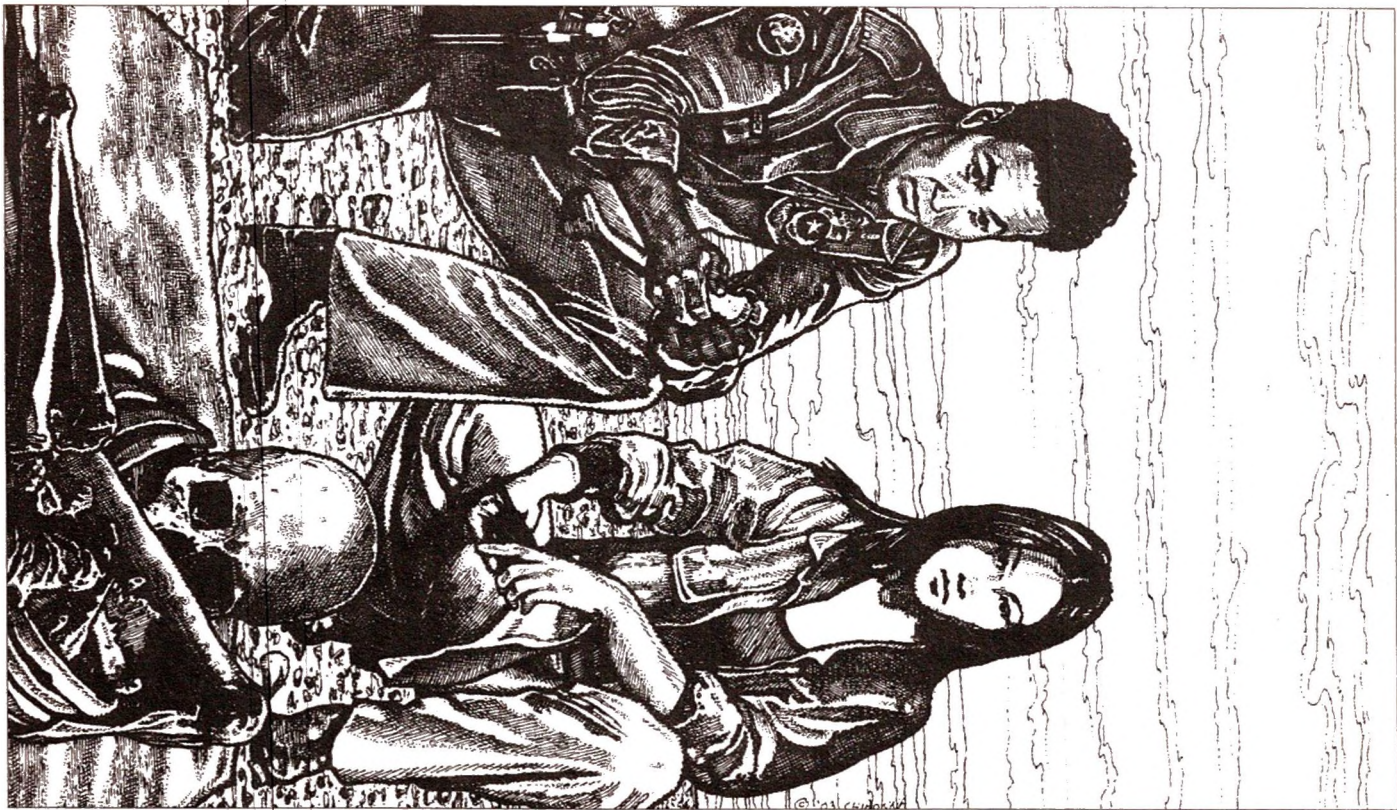
"Couldn't say," Hector told her.

"You think the NPS would spring for a helicopter?"

Most ranchers in the valley leased grazing rights from the government, and odds were that the bones were on federal land. Hector hadn't bothered to call the Park Service. He knew he was putting himself in an awkward position.

Katie could read between the lines. "Pick me up in half an hour," she said.

Hector thanked her and put the phone down. If the bones were Indian, they could be reburied without fuss. Deputy Moody knew



a few elder tribesmen, Crow, Cheyenne, Arapahoe. They'd know what to do to make things right without dragging in the whole ragtag-and-bobtail of federal agencies, or archeologists and paleo-ethnographers from the university over in Missoula. Too many Indian burial sites had already been treated with disrespect. On the other hand, if the bones turned out to be something different, Hector could notify the FBI, or whichever agency wanted to stake a claim, and let them take it from there.

They went up to the timberline in a four-wheel drive, the horse trailer making it harder to negotiate the switchbacks in the fire road as the grade got steeper. They came out on a ridge looking

If the bones were Indian, they could be reburied without a fuss . . .

south across the Beartooths, the shoulders of the Absarokas shrugging up higher to the west. They

clambered down and coaxed their mounts out of the trailer. The horses were skittish and hard to handle, rolling their eyes and tugging at the bits, sidestepping as Hector and Katie saddled them.

"What is it?" Katie asked him.

Hector shrugged. "Bear, maybe," he said.

Katie tied her mare off to the bumper and went back to take a .30-.30 lever action off the gun rack in the cab of the pickup. She checked that it was loaded, lowered the hammer to half-cock, and slid it into her saddle scabbard. "How about you, cowboy?" she asked Hector. The other gun was a Ruger .44 carbine. There wasn't any sense leaving it behind.

Hector was wearing a service auto, too, under his tunic, a .40 Smith double-action-only. He felt a little absurd, packing all this firepower into the mountains on what looked basically to be a picnic. He'd brought lunch, in fact. But he wasn't kidding about bears. For all the tourists, the country north of the Yellowstone was pretty wild, still.

They mounted and pushed up across the ridge, angling down the other side to the base, the horses picking their way carefully in the loose talus at the bottom. The meadow was half a mile wide, sloping up against a hogback at the edge. Scoured out by erosion, the shallow basin had slowly filled with soil, and the soil had seeded over time, with sedge and mountain grasses, some borne on the wind, some left in animal droppings. Fed by glacial runoff, the earth was well watered and nutrient rich. White and

blue lupine flowered in the short grass, but the hardier grasses were filling in quickly, crowding out the flowers.

Hector and Katie let the horses crop the new growth. It wasn't quite noon, and the sun was warm. They had plenty of daylight left. Hector was feeling pretty good about this adventure. It had a careless flavor to it, like playing hooky. He liked the idea of being off the clock. His relationship with Katie was edgy a large part of the time, and maybe this was a chance to mend things. Of course, he'd never made a move on her, and it would have been news to him that the relationship was edgy for more or less that reason. Hector was too courtly by nature. Katie was getting impatient with him.

Katie's mare stopped and stiffened, raising her head. Hector felt his own mount jitter and freeze. At the far end of the meadow below them, the slope made a funnel between the ridge and the line of trees. There was a slight breeze blowing in their direction.

Hector eased his weight forward in the saddle and patted the gelding's withers, speaking quietly. The horse's ears quivered a little, hearing his voice, but then twitched forward again. Hector gathered the reins together but didn't jerk the bit. The horse was wound as tight as a watchspring, ready to bolt. Hector glanced over at Katie. She had the mare under control, but her own nostrils flared, and then Hector caught the same scent the horses had, strong as a skunk or a badger, earthy and acrid.

Just at the treeline, no more than two hundred yards away, a black bear rose up, like a wrestler in a crouch, her arms down at her sides, moving her shaggy head back and forth, not alarmed, but watchful all the same. They were close enough to notice the pink tint of her eyes and ant larvae squirming around her muzzle.

"Her eyesight's not that hot, and the wind's in our favor," Hector said to Katie, barely moving his lips.

"She's got young," Katie said, just as softly.

They sat on the fidgety horses and watched the bear as she dropped down out of sight again, ~~tearing the rotten log apart with her claws. They heard one of the cubs, too, a sound halfway to a whimper, but harsher, like a forty-pound kitten. It was hidden in the grass near its mother.~~

"You ever think about having children?" Katie asked him, keeping an eye on the bear.

It seemed like a weird time to bring it up. He couldn't figure out what she was getting at.

"Seems like she's moving off," Katie reported.

They could see the bear's shoulders as she heaved away through

the brush. The sun caught her fur, and it looked red in the light, not black. The cubs scrambled along behind, still not visible, but making the scrub rustle, like ungainly furniture being dragged across a carpet.

Once the sow trailed into the trees and out of sight, the horses quieted down, and Katie and Hector urged them forward again. The particulars Hector had been given were sketchy, and it took them a while to scout the location. It was Katie who spotted something in the grass. She dismounted and squatted on the ground, holding the reins loosely. Hector eased the gelding over. Katie stood up and held out a bone about two inches thick and fourteen inches long. Hector leaned down and took it from her.

"Human?" he asked, turning it in his hands. It was dull and discolored.

She nodded. "Femur," she told him. "I'm surprised it's still in such decent shape."

"Any idea of its age?"

She shook her head. "No way of telling," she said.

Hector climbed down out of the saddle and unlimbered a tarp. The two of them quartered the area, back and forth. Inside of three-quarters of an hour, they'd assembled something resembling a human skeleton, missing a good many pieces, but arranged on the tarp top to bottom. They had two tibia, the one femur, a section of pelvis, somewhat gnawed by scavengers, half a dozen ribs, the bones of the upper arms, and a collarbone. The small bones of the hands and feet were nowhere to be found.

Katie located the skull some distance off. The lower jaw was gone, but she showed Hector the fillings in the back molars.

"Recent dental work?" he inquired.

"Probably amalgam," she said, "which would date it sometime this century, at least."

He smiled. "That's a beginning," he said.

"What do you make of this?" she asked, tipping the skull between her hands, front to back.

There was a clean puncture at the base of the occipital, a hole the size of a penny, with hairline radial fissures.

Hector's heart sank. "Damn," he muttered.

It was an entry wound from a small-caliber bullet, probably fired at close range, a deliberate kill shot.

According to the state lab in Billings, the skeletal remains were those of a Caucasian woman of childbearing age, between twenty and fifty. It was estimated that she'd died sometime in the previ-

ous six months, but the lab cautioned that all the numbers were approximate, with an error probability of close to thirty percent. None of this was any comfort to Hector. The investigation had been taken over by federal agencies, although they shared nominal jurisdiction with local law enforcement, and he was effectively out of the loop. He counted himself lucky not to have been called on the carpet for playing fast and loose with approved reporting procedure, but it still irked him to be at the bottom of the food chain.

The FBI field agent was a Northern Cheyenne named Andy Lame Deer, an older man, and near the end of his tenure, Hector suspected, without much in the way of further career prospects. Perhaps for that reason, his attitude was more forgiving than Hector's usual experience of Bureau personnel.

"I'd have done the same, in your position," Lame Deer told him. "Things would have been a lot easier all around if it had turned out to be a Native American grave site."

"You guys have anything on it?"

"Zip-oh," Lame Deer said cheerfully. "It's got all the earmarks of a mob hit, of course, but your average wise guy sticks with what he knows, and why take her up into the mountains when you could stuff her into a fifty-gallon oil drum, top it up with concrete, and toss her off a pier?"

"My guess is that it was somebody she knew, and she got there on her own," Hector said.

"Doesn't get you any forwarder," Lame Deer said. "We still haven't identified the victim. Hell, she might not even be reported missing, not if the killer was close to her, a husband or a boyfriend, maybe, like you say."

"What if you turn it around?" Hector suggested. "Start with the assumption of a crime. I don't mean the murder, I mean before that. Maybe she was an informer, or a witness who was ready to rat somebody out to a grand jury. If you don't have a name, then try and reconstruct her profile."

Lame Deer looked skeptical.

"You've got the resources," Hector said. "I don't."

"I doubt if I could justify the man-hours on an open-ended computer search," Lame Deer said. "It's not the Unabomber we're talking about here."

"Somebody took that woman up there with the express purpose of shooting her in the back of the head," Hector said.

"Cut yourself some slack, Deputy," the FBI agent told him. "You can't take it personally."

"It happened on my watch," Hector pointed out.

Lame Deer heaved himself to his feet. "Keep me posted," he said.

"One hand washes the other," Hector remarked.

Lame Deer smiled, lazily. "No problem," he said.

~~Hector knew the other man was only being polite. The FBI was notoriously proprietary when it came to sharing information.~~

Hikers and recreational climbers had to register, and Hector went back over the previous year's sign-up sheets. Everybody was accounted for, he found. That didn't mean somebody hadn't gone up a seldom-used trail on their own, but Hector figured to cover the bases. He knew it was a duplication of effort, and he didn't really think he'd turn anything up.

"Misery love company?" Katie asked him, sliding into the booth on the opposite side. She put a fresh beer in front of him. Hector glanced up, startled. He'd been woolgathering. Rolling an empty longneck between his hands, he'd peeled most of the damp label off with his thumbnails.

Katie sat back and took a swig of her Coors. "Some days it's peanuts, some days it's shells," she remarked.

Hector didn't give her any argument.

Katie gazed up at the ceiling fans. Cigarette smoke eddied in the rafters. Hector hoped she wasn't about to get personal. He sensed her irritation and felt obscurely that he might be at fault. He smiled at her tentatively, slightly bashful in her presence. He always was.

"Two women got into a fight at the clinic today," she said. "Sisters-in-law, both pregnant, came in together. Maybe they were arguing in the car on the way. I don't know what set them off, but they started going at it hammer and tongs in the waiting room." She grinned at him. "I thought I'd have to call a cop."

"I'm no good at family fights," Hector said.

"Maybe that explains it," Katie said.

Explains what? Hector wondered.

"What's your own family like, Hector?" she asked.

"Like anybody else's, only different," he said. His father owned a hardware store in Bozeman. His mother had gone back to college after the kids were grown and gotten a master's in social work. She was half Indian, but she didn't trade on that any more than she pretended not to be. Hector's grandmother still lived on the reservation, south of Crow Agency. You could see Little Bighorn battlefield from her front porch.

"You're more of a traditionalist than you want people to think," Katie said. "Like the bones we found. If they'd turned out to be Indian, you would have handled it off the record."

"Indian or not, the bullet hole changed that."

She studied him for a moment, her expression serious. "Hector," she asked, finally, "why do you feel responsible for what happened to her?"

"It's my job," he said.

Katie shook her head. "There's more," she said.

"I'm the only one who gives a damn, so it's up to me."

"What about the FBI?"

"Lame Deer pretty much told me the case was being dumped in the circular file."

"But if they were going to drop it, and you wanted to go ahead on your own, wouldn't they give you what they've got?" she asked.

Hector snorted. "I'd be surprised if they'd admit who shot Dillinger," he told her.

In the event, Lame Deer surprised him. He called two days later, but he didn't want to talk on the phone. He was headed for Butte, and suggested a sit-down. Hector agreed to meet him at a truck stop near Big Timber, just off the interstate about halfway.

Hector got there first. He sat at a window table, nursing a cup of coffee. It was late morning, and the weather was seasonably sudden and moody, mottled sunshine streaking the grasslands, bleaching the color out of the landscape. Ragged strips of dirty cirrus scurried east to west, while a few miles north, over the Crazies, a storm front was building, milky cumulus turning darker as thunderheads piled up along the horizon. The shifting pewter light made the prairie ripple like running water, the wind changing quarters, flattening the grass.

Lame Deer beat the rain by minutes. Drops were dotting the pavement as he ~~loped across the parking lot with his head down~~ and his shoulders hunched up to ward off the threatening sky. His body English was stormy, too. Hector took it for a warning.

The FBI agent got a cup of coffee and a danish at the counter and brought them over to Hector's table. He shrugged off his windbreaker and sat down. "I followed up on your suggestion," he told Hector, gazing out the window and not making eye contact. "Ran a search on the NCIC database." He sipped his coffee carefully. "Got a couple of hits, but I don't know that it's usable. Sensitive material is buried in privacy codes."

Lame Deer seemed to be working up to something. Hector had the sense to keep quiet.

"Here's the thing," Lame Deer said, shifting his weight and looking at Hector directly. "Without an ID on the body, this is going nowhere. Short of a miracle, they're going to pull the plug, which means it's no longer an active case."

"Who's this they, exactly?" Hector asked.

Lame Deer shrugged. "I queried Regional in Denver," he said. "According to a pal of mine down there, the Ayatollahs in D.C. have their panties in a bunch over the militias."

Montana was considered ground zero for right-wing crazies like the Aryan Nation, Hector knew, but he'd personally had little or no contact with neo-Nazi gun nuts. "In other words, Washington wants to turn the heat up under a bunch of skinheads, so your garden-variety homicide goes on the back burner."

"It's a matter of reordering our priorities." Lame Deer didn't bother to mute the sarcasm. "Point is, my hands are tied. Outside the Bureau chain of command, I've got no sanction to pursue this."

It had taken Hector a minute to see where the FBI agent was headed. "You want a stalking horse," he said.

Lame Deer handed an unmarked file folder across the table. "Those are the names the computer kicked out," he said.

Hector didn't open the file.

"That's protected intelligence," Lame Deer told him. "Restricted to the use of authorized personnel only. So it's my ass in a crack if word gets out how you came by it."

"Something about this doesn't sit right," Hector said.

Lame Deer smiled thinly. "What's your beef?" he asked.

"You don't think it's routine, or just bureaucratic inertia, your people putting this on the back burner," Hector said, realizing why the FBI agent had compromised himself. "You think it's more than that. Somebody's circling the wagons."

"You didn't hear it from me," Lame Deer said.

The rain blew past as abruptly as it had come, in the sudden way of Western weather, and watery sunlight broke through the clouds, refracting in a double rainbow as Hector headed back up the highway. The damp pavement hissed under his tires, and the road began to smoke, steam rising off the tarmac. He turned south at Beavertail, following the old railroad right of way down the Gallatin Trace. It wasn't the most direct route, and it wasn't entire-

ly conscious, either. He was letting instinct drive the truck, in fact, and didn't realize at first where the road was taking him. Then he topped a rise and saw the shadow of the mountains through the retreating storm system, the curtain of rain drifting up over the foothills, blurring the ragged outline of the high peaks, and he calculated he couldn't be that far from the meadow where he and Katie had collected the bones. He pulled over and got the heavy portfolio of USCGS maps out from under the seat. Locating his position on the upper Yellowstone-Gallatin quadrangle, he rotated the map to orient himself and studied the immediate area. A lot of the country was too steep and rough for vehicles, so you went horseback, or on foot, but much of it had been cut over, and old logging tracks were indicated on the map. The closest one was about half a mile down the road. It looked to go some distance into the woods. If a lumber company could get a skidder through, he imagined his four-by-four would make it.

When he'd driven up with Katie, they'd approached from the other side and left the truck when they ran out of road. The ranch hands from Tumble Mountain had ridden in. But if somebody knew the terrain, or scouted it in advance, then the crime scene wasn't as isolated as it seemed. Hector wondered if it had been chosen at random.

He found the turn. The road was no longer maintained, and runoff from the spring snowmelt had washed it out, rutting it badly, but it looked navigable, Hector decided. He shifted the transfer case into four-wheel drive and put the truck in low, and felt his way forward, nursing the clutch. The pitch was shallow to begin with, but it got steeper as the track took a dogleg, moving upslope. Hector nudged the accelerator and felt the truck sideslip, the wheels spinning and then grabbing, the differential whining with the uneven traction, and he lurched ahead, wrestling with the steering wheel, keeping the front end in line, the back end fishtailing. He was bouncing like dice, and he could feel the pickup ~~body twist and groan, torque punishing the frame as it rocked~~ back and forth across the ruts, the shocks bottoming out. It was a bruising eight hundred or a thousand yards up the hill, but once he made the crest the ride was easier, on him and the truck both.

The trees thinned out along the ridge and afforded him a view of wooded mountains at either hand, some of the timber virgin stands, but much of it second growth. Logging rights would be coming up for lease again soon, now that the land had forested over. Hector had already noticed a couple of survey stakes, and he stopped when he spotted the next one and got out of the truck.

The stake was driven into the shoulder of the road, the upper half spraypainted fluorescent orange, with coded numerals written on it. It was unweathered and looked fairly new. From this vantage there were clear sight lines for an engineer using a transit level. Hector recorded the numbers on the stake in his notebook and got back into the truck.

The track dipped and climbed, dipped again and climbed higher, following the brow of the ridge. In the hollows, thick pockets of conifers crowded the road, brushing against his outside mirrors, but then the road would rise and the trees would fall away, and he could better judge distance and elevation. The mountains stood up against the changing sky, the mottled light feathering the landscape with shadows. The cloud cover had torn into ragged streaks, like muslin.

He'd clocked barely seven miles on his odometer when the road petered out on a crown of bare rock. Hector turned off the ignition and got out of the truck. The engine ticked briefly, cooling down. It smelled fresh after the rain, the air sharp and metallic with resin. He thought he heard a fox kit bark, not far off, but when he cocked his head and listened, the only sound was the wind murmuring in the lodgepole pines.

Hector looked around, getting his bearings. He didn't recognize where he was right away. It was as if he'd entered a familiar room by a different door, and he was looking at everything backwards. It took him a minute to adjust his perspective and notice the landmarks. He saw he was standing on the same hogback the bear had shuffled across with her cubs the day he and Katie had come up the mountain. So the meadow itself was only a few hundred yards off beyond the trees. Hector took a walk through the woods.

There was no yellow tape to mark the spot. The crime didn't demand a full team to sift for forensic clues like an archeological dig, leaving no stone unturned. In fact, the site was mostly undisturbed, either by accident or design, and nothing had been left behind. In places, the earth was a little beaten down, but there were no cigarette butts or candy wrappers, no careless debris. Lame Deer had probably seen to that. Hector poked around, here and there, but he didn't think he was going to find something they'd missed. He guessed he was hoping more for a feeling, a sympathetic vibration, a sense of kinship. Murder had been done here. Maybe the dead couldn't speak, but Hector thought he might be vouchsafed some sign. He knew it was fanciful.

It was beginning to warm up. Hector had missed lunch, and he was getting hungry. He picked his way back to the truck, got it

turned around, and drove out the way he'd come in, telling himself he'd learned something.

Just before he got back on the interstate, he saw two ravens picking at something by the side of the road. Is that all she was? he wondered. Road kill, a rabbit caught in the headlights? The birds took flight as he went by, and settled again after he passed. He glanced back at them in the rearview mirror. Raven was a clan totem, he reminded himself, and a shapeshifter, or so the story went, but Hector didn't know what to make of the omen.

"There's got to be a local angle," Katie said.

"People stick to what they're used to," Hector agreed. He heard the echo of Lame Deer's earlier remark.

Katie did, too. "What's he after?" she asked.

"Lame Deer?" Hector shrugged. "He smells a rat. He can't pursue it. I can."

"He's not giving up something for nothing," Katie said. "We both know he's got his own agenda, and he wouldn't be putting his career on the line if he weren't hunting bigger game. He's throwing you a bone, Hector. That man means to take scalps. You play his game, you're playing by his rules."

He wasn't so naive he hadn't thought the same himself, but it made him nervous to have Katie come right out and say it, as if it were bad luck, putting the thought into words.

"Lame Deer's trying to steer you into something, and you don't like being manipulated," she said. "That doesn't mean his information's no good, just that his motives are suspect."

Hector nodded gloomily. "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, in other words," he remarked.

"Well, don't be too clever for your own good," Katie said.

Hector didn't see what she meant by that. He wasn't in the habit of thinking himself clever at all.

No, they didn't sound like timber company claims, not from the description. More like a point-to-point survey, probably for widening the road and running utilities in.

"Utilities?" Hector asked.

"Drainage. Electrical service. Whatever."

The bar at the VFW served fifty-cent shots, with a bump back for a quarter. It was four in the afternoon, and *Hawaii Five-O* was on the satellite dish.

"You always flag your stakes with something bright, so your heavy equipment operators can spot them," Conroy Loomis said.

He was a retired engineer with the Highway Department. "You're gonna bury your power lines, a place like that, not string poles along the horizon."

"It's public land," Hector commented.

Conroy shrugged. "So it's off the grid," he said. "All the more reason somebody might commission a study, look at the costs of wiring it up."

"What's the point?"

Conroy shook his head. "Hector, I have to wonder about you," he said. "For a peace officer, you can be awful damn thick sometimes. It's an embarrassment, you being an Indian and all." Conroy was Arapahoe.

Hector had to smile. He knew the older man was just dying to explain it to him.

"What makes it public land, Hector?" Conroy asked. "An act of Congress, right? And since when could you trust that bunch of clowns not to steal the treasury blind or sell us out to the highest bidder?"

This was no more than the bitter truth, certainly as far as native populations were concerned.

"What happens when the oil companies come along and tell people there's huge reserves in Alaska? You get Prudhoe Bay and the pipeline. Gold in the Black Hills? Send in George Armstrong Custer to get rid of them pesky redskins. Same old, same old, Hector."

"It's a wicked world," Hector said, "but nobody's found oil or gold in the Absarokas."

Conroy knocked back his Four Roses and had a pull on his chaser. "Money ain't always in the ground," he said.

Hector admitted that was true.

"Take your Penobscot land case back East," Conroy said. "Or that casino the Pequots built in Connecticut. Biggest in the world. Higher revenues than Atlantic City or Vegas. It ain't the real estate, Hector, it's what you can do with the real estate. Or what you think you can do. Speculation. Sell the possibilities, play a little air guitar. Of course, white folks want to cash in on it now. That's your backlash working. Can't let those Indians get some of their own back."

Hector had heard this grievance before. It was common enough. Nobody had expected tribal lawsuits to succeed in recovering land or sovereignty, and the sponsors of the Indian Gaming Act hadn't thought much beyond reservation bingo. All of a sudden, it was like the Beverly Hillbillies. Of course there were instances of mis-

handled funds, or outright embezzlement, so you got people saying Indians couldn't be trusted with real money. What it all boiled down to was the politics of greed, in Hector's opinion.

Conroy glanced around the bar and turned back to Hector.

"You listen for the sound of money changing hands," he told him, "the whisper of crisp bills."

Hector thought it was good advice.

Cops say you crack a case in the first forty-eight hours, before the trail goes cold. After that, it's mostly dumb luck. This case looked to be dead in the water, and Hector certainly wasn't feeling lucky.

He'd gone over the case files again, although he knew he was spinning his wheels. Hector felt no closer to an answer than the day he'd gone up into the mountains with Katie. Maybe he'd never get any closer. The clearance rate for homicides wasn't promising if you eliminated murders with an obvious motive and suspects ready to hand. Every once in a while, years later, somebody doing time might brag about an unsolved crime to a cellmate, and if the second guy was looking for points, he might finger the first guy. Not a sure thing, by any means, but known to happen.

Hector shook off his distracted mood. The problem, as he saw it, began with not knowing who the victim was. The rest of it was fiddlesticks and moonshine, until you could put a name to her bones. Means, motive, opportunity, they were points of the compass, but without reference to true north, your bearings were meaningless, and you were just trudging around in circles.

Of course, when you were lost, sometimes the best thing to do was to simply stop and sit down and take stock of what you had in the way of water and matches and candy bars and such, so at least you'd know exactly how bad a fix you were in.

Hector unwrapped a Hershey's with almonds, cocked his heels on the desk, and took stock.

Lame Deer had pulled his names off the NCIC database. A listing with NCIC was the first step before a name was fed into the Missing Persons Clearinghouse files. Hector had looked at the file Lame Deer had given him, and it did nothing for him.

FBI Regional had checked everybody listed with the Clearinghouse for the previous six months to a year, looking for a match, and drawn a complete blank.

Hector went out to the garage, where he stored his records.

He kept current material in filing cabinets in the office, but law

enforcement generates a lot of paperwork, and he didn't have enough room for outdated stuff. State law, however, required that he maintain his files a minimum of five years. Hector kept them in cardboard boxes he got from the liquor store, Jim Beam, Old Mr. Boston

Creme de Menthe, Taylor Ruby Port, each box dated with Magic Marker, stacked four high

Maybe the dead couldn't speak but Hector wanted a sign.

and two deep, sitting on pallets to keep them off the concrete so moisture wouldn't wick up into the papers.

He dug out the most recently stored box of bulletins from the Missing Persons Clearinghouse. Updates were issued monthly by state departments of public safety, and by the RCMP in Canada. Hector was on the Montana mailing list, and subscribed to bulletins from the contiguous states and provinces.

He took the box back to his office.

"Luna Robinette?"

Hector was on the phone with a constable at Fort Belknap Agency named George Fox. The tribal police had posted Luna Robinette's name to the Clearinghouse bulletin when her husband had reported her disappearance.

"What's your interest, Deputy?" Constable Fox asked him.

"I've got a set of unidentified female remains."

"What makes you think they're hers?"

Hector didn't have a ready answer. "The timing, her age, the geography," he said. "It boils down to too many unanswered questions." He explained how they'd found the bones, bones they couldn't put a name to, bones that happened to be on federal land. He told Fox the FBI was dragging its feet, so it looked like they'd just as soon see the case die of neglect.

"You figure the Feebs are holding out on you?"

"Well, yes and no," Hector said.

Fox said nothing. Hector was stalling and Fox knew it.

Even though they were both working the same side of the law, Fox had a cop's habitual mistrust, and Hector was no more than a voice on the telephone. Hector had no real choice, he realized, not if he expected Fox to warm up to him any.

"The FBI ran a computer search, but they didn't get a confirmed match," he said. "I dug a little further and came up with Luna Robinette." He hesitated a moment, then plunged ahead. "What

caught my attention was the fact that she seems to have vanished on her own hook. From the looks of things, she wasn't abducted, unless her husband fed her into a wood chipper and claimed afterwards she'd run off to cover his tracks."

"We established that Henry Robinette was over in Cut Bank buying horses the day Luna disappeared, a hundred and fifty miles away," Fox said. "Witnesses last put her in Lodge Pole, headed south off the reservation."

"She alone?"

"So it would seem," Fox said. "Where you going with this?"

"The lab tells me my woman's been dead six months, give or take," Hector said. "Nobody's gone missing in that period who fits the profile. Luna Robinette's the closest I've come to any kind of ID."

"Time frame's right," Fox said. "Your math may differ."

"It's a long shot," Hector admitted. "If it turns out to be her, then there's still the question of why she wound up dead down here in Stillwater County."

"One thing at a time," Fox said. "I'll forward a copy of her dental records to Billings."

"I'd have to say the husband looks good for it," Katie remarked.

"Husbands always do," Hector said.

Katie gave him a funny look.

"I wasn't being sarcastic," Hector told her. "Cops go for the spouse every time, estranged or otherwise, first shot out of the barrel, because it's just too common, family problems."

"You're saying there's no evidence to support that?"

"No-o-o," Hector said, stretching the word out and smiling at himself for doing it. "But the guy up in Fort Belknap, the cop, I mean—Fox—he put Henry Robinette through the hoops, looking for any inconsistencies in his story, until finally Robinette blew his cork, according to Fox, and demanded whether that was as far as they were going to take it. ~~If they couldn't pin it on him, in other words, were they just dropping it?~~"

"Were they?"

"Fox says no. He went further than that, actually. They didn't just go through the motions. And he's kept the file open on Luna Robinette, like he's got something stuck in his teeth."

Katie smiled. "You two sound a little alike," she said.

"Yeah, well, I was thinking I'd drive up there, tomorrow or the day after," he said.

"I'll see what I can do to clear my schedule," Katie said.

Hector had been working his way up to inviting her along, but she'd beaten him to it.

As a courtesy, he called Lame Deer.

"Okay," the FBI agent said. "Granted, you got nothing if you can't identify her. Long shot or no, you might just as well go for it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Hector said.

Lame Deer sighed. "Just wanted to make sure you'd gotten the message."

Hector had gotten the message, but Lame Deer seemed to be crouched down, like he expected incoming. It occurred to him that they were talking on an open phone line, and maybe the FBI agent thought the call was being monitored.

"How's the doc?" Lame Deer asked, conversationally.

Hector realized he meant Katie. "She's good," he said.

"She's better than good," Lame Deer said, turning the adjective around a little, looking at it from a different angle.

Hector wasn't sure he understood where the conversation was going.

"The lab in Billings copy you on the fax?" Lame Deer asked.

Hector was out of the loop. "What fax?" he asked.

"Second set of X-rays turned up a bullet fragment lodged in the lower parietal."

"They recover enough to reconstruct the caliber?"

"Twenty-two," Lame Deer told him. Hector could almost hear the other man smile over the phone. "No way they could tell whether it was short, long, or long rifle."

Hector nodded. Twenty-two shorts were subsonic. A silenced twenty-two was the mob's weapon of choice. "Why bother with a suppressor?" he asked. "Who'd remark on a shot up there?"

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it," Lame Deer said.

He meant the M.O. Hector still couldn't see the killing as a Mafia contract, but maybe he was overlooking the obvious.

They rang off.

The FBI had a fortress mentality, reflexively custodial and self-important, with an exaggerated mistrust of outsiders. Why wasn't Lame Deer running true to type? Hector wondered. The FBI agent was in pursuit of something, just like Katie said, Hector decided, and Lame Deer thought he knew something they didn't, or was pretending to.

Fort Belknap was three hours north, thirty miles shy of the

Canadian border. Historically, the country beyond the upper Missouri was Blackfoot, but the reservation at Fort Belknap was Assiniboine and Gros Ventre, traditional enemies up until the late nineteenth century, when federal policy had settled the two tribes together.

"You think Luna Robinette just slipped through the cracks?" Katie asked Hector.

"Maybe," he said. He'd told her pretty much everything he knew, bringing her up to speed as they drove. "Then again, Lame Deer's hinting at something more sinister."

"If you read between the lines."

"The first step in listing a missing person is to register their name with the NCIC database," Hector explained. "Then you can list them with state departments of public safety."

"Lame Deer figures her name was erased?"

"Or transferred into a secure file, one he can't access."

"Which suggests what, the Witness Protection Program?"

Hector shrugged. "It's just speculation," he said.

"It's more than that," Katie said. "Lame Deer's building a conspiracy theory out of wishful thinking."

"Sort of like Conroy Loomis," Hector said, smiling.

"I don't see exactly what Conroy was getting at," she said. "How is it possible to return public land to private use?"

"Well, actually, there are some precedents," Hector said. "For instance, there was a case in New Mexico not that long ago. One of the pueblos made a three-way trade with BLM and the local community." BLM was the Bureau of Land Management, part of the Interior Department. "There was a highway running across Indian land and the lease ran out. The Feds worked out a deal where the county got a permanent easement on the road, the county deeded a piece of land to the National Park Service, and the Park Service gave a piece of land to the pueblo in return. It was Indian land, historically, anyway. Now, it's part of the reservation again."

"What's the connection?"

"Tribes are sovereign nations, Katie," Hector reminded her. "They can play by different rules."

It took her a minute. "Holy smoke," she said. "A casino?"

Hector was noncommittal. "That seems to be what Conroy was driving at," he said. "Exploitation of Indian land rights."

"You don't buy it."

"I'm not convinced, no."

"How about Lame Deer?"

"You read the newspapers?" he asked her.

She grinned. "Out with it, Hector," she said. "What is it you're on to?"

"You remember, they appointed a special prosecutor in Washington, back during the Clinton administration," Hector told her.

"One of many," Katie remarked

"Yeah, well, this one was investigating the Secretary of the Interior for a possible conflict of interest over a decision involving Indian gaming."

Katie waited for the other shoe to drop.

"Some tribe running a big casino up around the Great Lakes put the kibosh on another tribe's plans to develop a rival gambling operation. The second tribe needed Interior's approval, and they didn't get it. After the competing casino got the deep six, the first tribe made a hefty campaign contribution to the incumbent party, which raised some eyebrows, to say the least."

"And then there's the Indian Trust Fund screw-up."

She meant the mismanagement of tribal royalties by Interior over several administrations, which had resulted in losses running into the millions, or hundreds of millions, depending on who was doing the accounting.

"Okay," Hector said, smiling. "So that's where Lame Deer's setting his sights."

"I get it," she said. "Your garden variety homicide isn't high profile, but a major case against a cabinet official is."

"Andy Lame Deer's retiring, and my guess is he'd like to go out on a high note."

"What if he's right?" Katie asked.

"Right about which?"

"Conspiracy to commit murder," she said. "Luna Robinette was looking for evidence of a dirty deal, and they killed her to put the lid on it."

"They?" Hector asked.

"Lacking any specific somebodies, *they* is all we've got."

"Let's try and narrow the field, then," Hector said.

Local legal outreach worked out of a double-wide on the other side of the Milk River, just off the reservation. Understaffed and short of money, like so many grass-roots social services programs, they'd been grateful when Luna Robinette came aboard as a volunteer. She had the background, having worked as a paralegal in Hays before her marriage, and her interest in the work was genuine, not just an excuse to get out of the house.

Hector posed an indelicate question.

"No," the administrator told him, amused. She was Hidatsa from Fort Berthold in North Dakota. "Luna wasn't what you'd call an Indian groupie. I mean, she wasn't burdened with white guilt. Reservation life can be disillusioning enough without having a lot of romantic ideas. Not that she wasn't idealistic, but she knew her limitations."

Hector inquired about Luna's caseload.

"Normal," the administrator said. "In other words, more than any one person could handle by themselves. We get a lot of domestic abuse, delinquent child support, custody fights. You reach the point where your sympathies erode, for either side. I know how that sounds, but that's just the way it is. I think it must be a lot like being a caregiver for the elderly, or AIDS patients. It wears you down. After a while, you don't have any reservoirs of compassion left. Everybody's terminal."

He wondered aloud if the emotional backlash affected Luna.

"Luna kept her own counsel," her supervisor said. "She wasn't shy about bringing something to my attention, if she thought I could help, but she wasn't one to cry wolf. And if she had issues at home, she didn't let them spill over onto the job, so far as I know."

What kind of issues? Hector mused. He hadn't said he was investigating a murder, just that he was looking into Luna's disappearance from a different angle. He didn't think the administrator was being evasive, but she seemed to have a chip on her shoulder for some reason. Maybe she'd disliked Luna and felt badly about it now, after the fact.

"I had to redistribute her caseload, of course," she told him. "Assign her files to other people in the office. I don't recall that she was working on something that would have taken her off the reservation, but it's unlikely, unless she had a new client and hadn't filled out her initial contact sheet. That's not unheard of. We all play catch-up ball around here. She would have had her field notes with her, in any case, so they're gone, too."

Hector was tempted to shake the woman out of her irritating complacency, but he would have been doing it to satisfy his own frustrations, so he let it alone. Besides, he didn't have a firm ID. For all he knew, Luna Robinette was alive and well, living under another name in Spokane or Pocatello. And it wasn't any of his business to pass judgment on the problems and pressures that came with managing Legal Aid on a shoestring.

"It was irresponsible," the administrator said. "She left me in a bind, but maybe she was in a worse one herself. I'd like to give her

the benefit of the doubt. I suppose it might make me feel better if I thought she was running from something. Isn't that just too weird?"

Hector didn't think it was all that weird, not for somebody who dealt with a lot of domestic violence in her line of work. It was the second time Luna's boss had hinted that Luna had some kind of trouble at home. Had anybody noticed obvious signals?

"I don't think there were any red flags," the administrator said. "She was preoccupied much of the time, but that comes with the territory. All the same, you know that expression, the cobbler's children go barefoot? You see so much of this kind of thing, you don't think it can happen to you."

All of which still left Hector with unanswered questions, but none of them were questions Luna Robinette's old boss had an answer to.

Henry Robinette was half-blood Assiniboine, his father having been French Canadian. Henry worked a small spread east of Bear Paw, breeding stock, until he gave up and let the bank take it over. They'd gotten Henry's backstory from George Fox, the local constable at Fort Belknap Agency, along with directions to the Robinette ranch. The place was abandoned now. Fox had no idea what they expected to find there, and neither did they, but the ranch was all they had, because Henry Robinette was Gone, No Forwarding. His last place of work was a feed and grain over in Malta. He'd quit three weeks earlier.

"Right after we brought her bones in," Katie said. The partial skeleton had rated a brief mention on the Billings newscast, along with a reference to Kennewick Man and the Indian Graves Repatriation Act.

"She was last seen at a pay phone in Lodge Pole," Hector said, "the same day Henry was in Cut Bank, two hundred and fifty miles apart, three, maybe four hours' driving time."

"He could have been establishing an alibi."

"Sure, and maybe the woman in Lodge Pole wasn't Luna after all, just somebody who matched her description."

"Then all we have to do is find the shop where Henry bought his girlfriend the wig," Katie said.

"This being the Russian girlfriend he met on the Internet."

"Okay," Katie said, smiling. "Still, it must strike you funny that Henry's suddenly pulled up stakes. I mean, who else but the murderer would get nervous we might identify the body? Who else

but the murderer would even know there was a body? Not that we know for sure it's Luna, anyway, but—" She shrugged.

"Yeah," Hector agreed. "Hubby takes a powder, that's what you might call collateral evidence."

"Why are we assuming she was killed the day she was seen leaving the reservation?" Katie asked. "Henry could establish he was buying horses then, sure, but what's to say he didn't follow her afterwards? Or more likely, that they'd arranged to meet somewhere."

"Good point," Hector admitted. "Maybe me and Fox are looking at things through the wrong end of the telescope. Henry didn't report her missing until she'd been gone three days."

"That's standard, right? Seventy-two hours."

Hector nodded. "Which gives Henry a fair amount of wiggle room," he remarked thoughtfully. "She stopped to use a pay phone, that's the last place anybody positively identified her."

"Think she was calling Henry?"

"It's awful thin, Katie," he said.

She changed direction. "Suppose she was headed down to Stillwater because she'd heard something about the land possibly being developed for other uses?" she asked.

"Not logging."

"Which might just be a red herring," she said.

Hector chewed on that. "Okay," he said, after a space. "You're saying that he got her to go there because the idea was planted in her head that a dirty deal was going down."

"And he took the opportunity to kill her there, and leave her for the scavengers to finish off, figuring there wouldn't be any evidence left by springtime."

"There are a lot of holes in this story," Hector said.

Katie gazed out the pickup windows at the landscape. The terrain was rising, Baldy Mountain on the skyline, but the plains were watered, not arid. Grasses grew high, open range, back in the nineteenth century. Katie's expression was pensive.

"What are you thinking?" Hector asked her.

She glanced over at him, taken by surprise. It was uncharacteristic of him to ask that kind of question. Hector immediately felt foolish, his ears hot, and he tried to concentrate on his driving. Amused, Katie looked back out the window. "Did you ever read Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*?" she asked.

Hector had never heard of it.

"It's a novel about pioneers," Katie told him. "Immigrants who come west to the northern plains, Montana, the Dakotas."

"Farmers, then, not cattlemen."

She nodded. "Actually, what happens in the story is that the wife goes crazy, little by little," she said. "The country's too enormous, the sky's too huge. It overwhelms her. She doesn't have any sense of belonging to the place. She loses her moorings. She just floats off into the Twilight Zone."

"I can see it," Hector said. "But the first white men who came this way, Lewis and Clark, say, they were looking to be astonished, and they weren't disappointed. They had their share of trouble, but in the end they were flat-out amazed."

"They were adventurers, they weren't homesteading," Katie said. "What if you stepped out the doorway of a sod hut, and all you saw was this endless horizon, this sea of grass? Every day the same, punctuated by weird weather, hailstorms in June, or the terrors of childbirth, but no real change in sight. What if there were no remedy for despair?"

"Henry Robinette ran a mom-and-pop operation, pretty much," Hector said. "At least according to the tribal police."

"So what was Luna doing as a volunteer at Legal Aid, then?"

"You figure she had cabin fever."

"Could have been a source of friction," Katie said.

"You kill your wife because she wants to get out of the house?" He knew it was a dumb thing to say as soon as he said it because that was exactly how it happened. She gets sick of watching *Let's Make A Deal* on satellite and announces she's going to Wal-Mart, at which point her husband guns her down like a rabid dog.

"He loses his wife, he loses the ranch," Katie said. She sighed. "I don't buy it, either. We're missing a piece. Henry fits, but that's only the edge of the puzzle."

They were on a secondary road, graded hardpan, angling west by southwest, into country that opened up like a door into outer space. It was grassland, but the swells and movement of the land were tricky. Distance was deceptive. A rise that seemed only moments away kept receding into the infinite prairie like an object of erotic desire, never achieved. Hector, who'd grown up in this landscape, had never taken it personally, and yet never objectified it. It might be indifferent, even actively hostile, if you made a mistake, but he'd never felt his powerlessness so acutely. He knew it was Katie's influence, to see the landscape as an alien, predatory force, but was this how Henry Robinette had seen it, as an enemy to be tamed?

"What are you thinking?" Katie asked him.

Hector took a moment to collect his thoughts. He didn't want

to get this wrong when he said it. "Henry Robinette might have been a lot of things," he began. "He may have beaten his wife, or simply been unable to communicate with her. But somehow I don't see his having an adversary relationship with the land. He would have had his frustrations, sure, but he wouldn't have blamed the place. He would have blamed himself, or Luna, or plain bad luck. The weather, the cost of feed, the recalcitrance of his livestock. But not the land itself. He had an understanding with the land. He knew the land was under no obligation to him. He was just passing by, like the wind blowing over the grass. Maybe he killed his wife, Katie, but he didn't do it because the Big Sky made him go postal."

The ranch was in a fold in the hills. A stand of cottonwoods showed there was water. Corrals, fenced grazing, a barn, a small outbuilding that might have been a bunkhouse, if Henry had hired seasonal help. The house was one story, probably no more than four rooms, with a porch running along the front, built out of pressure-treated planks. The place seemed deserted.

They parked in the yard and got out.

"Looks pretty snug," Katie said.

Hector nodded, checking the house out. Snow shields on the eaves, aluminum storm-and-screen combos, door and window trim touched up. "Henry looked after the place," he remarked. "Must have been hard on him, giving it to the bank."

There was a foreclosure notice tacked to the front door, with the name of a savings and loan in Havre, and a new hasp and padlock.

"What's the chronology?" Katie asked, thinking out loud. "Luna disappears, then he loses the ranch. Is this just a guy having a run of bad luck, or is he decompensating, losing the capacity to manage his life? I mean, we know he held a job, but how often was he late? Did he call in sick a lot?"

"Was he coming apart at the seams, in other words?"

"Basically"

They were making a circuit of the property. It was still in pretty good shape, the fences tight and the gates secure, the barn weathered but weathertight. You'd have thought somebody would have made an offer on the place, Hector thought, but then, farms and ranchland were going begging. Too much work, too little return. They came around to the back side of the house.

Katie remarked on the curtains in the windows. Maybe a Guatemalan print. Not store bought, she didn't think. Hector

noticed there was no padlock on the back door. He tried the knob, and the door swung open. They glanced at each other, surprised, but they only paused for a moment before they went in without knocking.

"This won't work in court, you know," he said. He meant it was an illegal entry.

Katie made no comment.

The kitchen ran the width of the house, large and airy in summer, with a lot of light. There was a Defiant wood stove at the far end. More efficient than canned gas, for sure, this far out in the sticks. The countertops were tiled, the floor was hardwood, with a Navajo rug in the dinette area. The rug looked real to Hector, not a knockoff.

"Place still feels lived in," Katie said.

Hector nodded. The house didn't have that stale, absent smell, the sense of cold and damp, musty upholstery fabric nobody had sat on. He tried a light switch. The power was off.

He turned one of the faucets in the sink. The water ran clear, no rust in the pipes. There was a well, and enough pressure not to need an electric pump. Something didn't feel right.

Katie had gone into the next room.

Hector bent down and looked under the burner top of the gas stove. The pilots were lit.

Katie was in the living room, leafing through a stack of magazines. She glanced up. Hector had his weapon drawn. She started to say something, and thought better of it. The look on his face was enough. She moved carefully, to get next to him.

They went out the back again, Hector watchful, both of them silent, and walked around the house to the truck. Hector kept his gun pointed down along his leg. They got into the pickup. Hector started it up, put it in gear, and drove away, not in any hurry, either, but deliberately.

"What was that about?" Katie asked him.

"He's been there," Hector said. "Or somebody has."

She looked down at the Smith autoloader on the seat between them, where Hector had laid it down, cocked, not safed, not reholstering the gun. "Where do you think he is now?" she asked.

"Maybe watching us," Hector said.

"Not a comforting thought," Katie remarked.

They reached the gate, and Hector turned north. Just as he got up to speed on the straightaway, the right front tire blew into shreds. The roadway was unpaved, but it was a graded surface, and he was pushing fifty. Hector hadn't had too many high-speed

blowouts, and it took him off guard, the steering wheel jerking suddenly in his hands as the rubber peeled off and the bare rim chewed into the gravel. The rear end started to swivel around. He fought the wheel to keep the truck in a straight line, so she wouldn't swing sideways and flip over. He had a few nasty moments until he eased the truck to a stop on the shoulder, and then he sat there for a minute, breathing hard through his mouth. He looked at Katie. His heart was still pounding. She lunged at him across the seat, pulling out of her shoulder belt, pulling him crossways.

Hector was thinking it was a weird damn way to get him in a clinch when the windshield cracked across in splinters, the driver's side spiderwebbed, and the rear window punched out from the impact. Pebbles of glass showered on top of them.

Hector reached behind him for the door latch, jerked it, and slithered down out of the truck, taking the handgun. Katie got herself switched around without showing her profile above the dashboard and slipped across the seat, dragging the Ruger .44 carbine off the gun rack. She popped the glove box and felt around for the spare ammo.

Hector was hunched back behind the left front wheel well. He'd been slower on the uptake than Katie, but now his instinct was that the rifle was in front and to the right, and not that close. Katie had the engine block to protect her, he had the undercarriage. There were no more shots, but Hector figured the shooter was waiting for a better target.

Katie slid down next to him.

It was dusk, the twilight thickening. The road was empty in both directions. If he'd rolled the truck, it might have been a while before somebody came along. Hector considered them lucky. It might have even looked like an accident.

"We're pinned," Katie said.

Hector nodded. There was a curve five hundred feet up the road, with trees crowding the shoulder, and underbrush to give firing cover. "One of him, two of us," he said. "If there were more than one, we'd be dead."

Katie was no-nonsense about it. "You're going after him?"

"Not my first choice, but no choice," Hector said.

"Right." She flattened out into a prone position, firming up her grip on the carbine, solid but not stiff, elbows apart to steady her aim, the butt of the gun tight against her shoulder.

She wormed forward a little to get her upper body underneath the truck. Four-wheel drive, it gave her just enough clearance to

shoot between the front tires, with a sight radius right to left. Katie snapped the safety off, flipped the bolt to chamber a round, and let the muzzle come naturally to rest.

Hector was something close to astonished.

"Go, damn it," she growled.

What was she pissed at him for? he wondered. He ducked around behind the truck. Katie let off three rounds, *wham wham wham*. He heard the spent brass clinking off the underbody of the truck, and scuttled over the shoulder into the high grass on the side of the road. There was a hard, metallic pop as a bullet from the trees hit the pickup body, and he sensed the air shock before he heard the shot, the slug traveling faster than the sound. Katie fired again, another quick burst of three, bracketing her target, and he realized she'd fed fresh cartridges into the Ruger. It only had a four-shot capacity, and she was being careful not to shoot it dry. He wondered if she'd actually seen something. Another shot hit the truck, punching the front bumper. Hector began hunching through the grass, elbows and knees, dirt working its way into his pants and shirt sleeves. *Wham wham wham*, another three shots from Katie, and then an answering shot from the trees. Her gun was an autoloader, and the .44 was basically a revolver cartridge, with a sharp crack. Whatever the other guy was using had a slower rate of fire, a lever gun or a bolt-action, and it was a heavier load, the report more of a boom.

Katie had seen the muzzle flash the last time the shooter fired, and chips of rust off the engine block where the bullet struck had dusted her face and made her flinch. The guy had to be using a scope, she thought, to hit the tire in the first place, and if he lowered his sight picture, to shoot blind through the grass on the shoulder of the road, she'd be dead meat. She inched back, getting behind the wheel, and just as she did, a shot skidded off the ground and ripped a hole in the exhaust system. Katie grabbed what was left of the box of ammo and skated sideways across the road to her left, diving across the shoulder as another bullet spent itself in the dirt, spitting gravel in her hair. Breathing hard, she thumbed cartridges into the Ruger, keeping her head down. He'd be triangulating the spot where she'd gone to cover, and she couldn't show herself. But wouldn't he assume she was moving forward, not back, so he'd be watching for her to show closer to his position, on the wrong side of the road? And she realized the shooter might also calculate he was dealing with one person, not two. He might have seen both of them in the truck, or seen them even earlier, but would he figure a

woman could handle a gun? She had to make him think she was Hector, while Hector was crawling through the grass. She crept along the shoulder.

Hector had heard two shots from the trees, in quick succession, and no answering fire from Katie. Was she okay? He hunched forward, dragging himself on his elbows, but he didn't dare raise his head. How far was it to the trees, and had the son of a bitch changed his position? Hector licked his lips and took the safety off his .40 Smith. He was cradling the pistol in his hands, his arms across his chest, pulling himself along on his belly. The light was failing fast, and it would be full dark inside half an hour. Already the landscape was gray, without color or depth, and the sweat on his body was congealing. Hector shivered. And kept hunching forward.

Enough was enough, Katie figured. She flipped herself up onto the verge of the roadway and snapped off three quick shots at the shooter's last known position. He didn't shoot back. Katie scuttled backwards, feeding cartridges into the magazine. He's waiting me out, or he's moved, she thought. Damn. This is a no-win situation. Where the hell was Hector?

Hector was still in the grass when he heard the shots, and knew it was Katie shooting. But there was no answering shot from the trees. Which might mean he wasn't there anymore, or it might mean she'd hit him with a lucky bullet. Hector didn't favor the odds. He slithered around and began edging toward the road, where the shots had come from.

If she went ahead, he could be waiting for her. Or he could have circled behind her, and if she went back, same result. Katie felt trapped. She'd been brave enough, up until now, using the lessons her dad had taught her back home in Idaho, but now she was scared. She'd never shot at a man before, of course, even if she'd shot game, and it came home to her quite suddenly that the guy out there who was shooting at them obviously meant to kill them both. She'd understood that, she supposed, and reacted appropriately, and it gave her some small satisfaction that Hector had been surprised she was so matter-of-fact, but here she was in a ditch, and a guy was stalking her with a high-powered rifle. Katie wasn't so brave, after all, she thought to herself. But she wasn't going to go easy, either. Not if the bastard was out there, gunning for them. She had to set him up for Hector. And then there came a quite unexpected warm leakage in her chest. Because she didn't want to lose Hector, and she didn't want Hector to lose her, and she sure as hell didn't want

to lose either one of them to some Looney Tunes with a weird grudge.

The light was bad now. Hector had the shoulder in sight, but he couldn't see the road. There'd been no more shots, which wasn't a good sign. He couldn't yell for her, or show himself. He got as close as he could, flattening out in the drainage ditch below the surface of the roadway. Crows called in the near distance, like mourners. It was the loneliest sound Hector thought he'd ever heard.

Katie changed her mind. She knew she'd made a mistake to back up. Take the fight to him, she thought. You've given him too much time. She should have kept him pinned down and not given him time to improvise. Nuts. She ducked along the ditch below the shoulder, moving heel-and-toe, not looking up, and then came up for air, letting her breath out, the gun pointed in front of her, like an infantryman, frightened but ready.

And he stepped on the barrel.

Katie jerked back, convulsively. The gun went off.

"Nice try," Henry Robinette said. "Not quite good enough." And then Katie saw his look as he realized he'd been had. It might have been a look of remorse, or regret, or simple disgust. Henry snarled, and started to turn.

He got halfway. Hector, kneeling on the far side of the road, shot Henry three times in the back and twice under his left arm, penetrating the lungs. The .40 Smith metal-jackets were through-and-throughs. Henry was dead when he hit the ground. Hector stood up and crossed the road. He shot Henry in the back of the head to make sure.

There was a very long pause as they looked at each other.

"Thank you," Katie said, finally.

"You're welcome," Hector said, equally subdued.

"You sure that's Henry Robinette?" Katie asked him.

"Better be," Hector said, holstering his gun.

Luna Robinette was identified by her teeth, Henry by Constable Fox. The gun Henry had been using was a Marlin .45-.70, and the ballistics matched, spent casings at the ambush site and the bullet fragments out of Hector's truck. Henry also had a .22 High-Standard in the glove compartment of his vehicle. It was impossible for Billings to get a positive match with the .22 fragment taken out of Luna Robinette's skull, and they forwarded their material to the FBI lab in Washington.

"Might as well drop it down the rabbit hole," Hector said.

"Not in the mood to forgive and forget, are we?"

Hector looked at Lame Deer. "You took me for a ride, Andy. You put me and Katie at risk."

"No," the FBI agent said. "Let's be precise. You wouldn't let it go, Hector."

"Why was Luna's name locked out of NCIC?" Hector asked.

"She was on a secure watch list. AIM."

AIM was the American Indian Movement. "Luna was a Legal Aid volunteer, helping victims of domestic abuse," Hector said. "Working with Indian women got her flagged as a subversive? You have to do better than that."

"Pine Ridge pushes a lot of buttons in the Bureau."

Two FBI men had been killed at Wounded Knee. Hector knew it wasn't something he could question, not if wanted Lame Deer's good will. Still.

"She contributed to Leonard Pelletier's defense fund," Lame Deer said, knowing how feeble it sounded. Pelletier was still in jail for conspiracy in the deaths at Wounded Knee. There were a lot of people in Indian country who thought Pelletier was a political prisoner who'd been unjustly convicted, and an equally fervent bunch inside Justice who felt he was a murderer, plain and simple.

"You're embarrassing yourself, Andy," Hector said.

"It's weak," Lame Deer conceded.

"It's not just weak," Hector said. "It damn near amounts to obstruction. You withheld information that could have solved a murder."

"That's the royal *you*, right? I didn't hold out on you."

"No, you gave me more than you had to. Too much, in actual point of fact."

"I went a little overboard," Lame Deer admitted.

"So did I," Hector said. "That road survey up off the Gallatin was commissioned by the Park Service. They're planning to close the roads to vehicles, not open them up."

~~"The dead woman made the same connections we did."~~

"I'd guess Henry put the idea in her head," Hector said. "And you put the idea in mine. Of course, I've probably got too active an imagination."

Lame Deer spread his hands. "This mean you might give me a break?" he asked.

"I accept the apology," Hector said, "if that's what it is. I still got blindsided. You guys played it too cozy."

Lame Deer nodded. "It was just a simple little murder."

"And we both managed to make it complicated."

"So who owes who, here?" Lame Deer was making an offer.

Hector shook his head ruefully. "I'll have to get back to you on that," he said.

Lame Deer got to his feet. "You're a good cop, Hector," he said. "We ought to be on the same team."

"We are on the same team," Hector said. "But you don't get to play if you're left on the bench."

"That's what he said? 'A simple little murder?'"

"That's what he said," Hector told her.

Katie stifled her outrage. "You saw justice done, Hector," she told him. "You should be proud of yourself."

"I damn near got us both killed," he said.

"We're lucky we can both take care of ourselves," she said. "Although you could probably use some looking after."

Hector still didn't seem to get it. "Why were you so angry at me, out there?" he asked.

"That's a big question with a big answer, and you're such a big, damn dope," Katie said, exasperated.

Hector absorbed this like a body blow, and Katie thought she'd miscalculated. There was a moment's hesitation, then he leaned forward and kissed her. A little too tentatively, she thought, and his look afterwards was altogether apprehensive.

She took his hands in hers. "I wasn't mad at you because you got me into something I couldn't handle," she said. "I couldn't handle it, not as well as I'd have hoped, but that's not the point. The point is, I was afraid we'd both gotten into something we couldn't handle, and I might let you down."

There was an awkward pause.

"We can handle this," Hector said, with an air of decision, and he kissed her again, a good deal more firmly.

"Well," Katie said, smiling, when she came up for air, "I'd say that's a start." 🐾

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Stephen Wolff/Graphistock

Skipping a Beat

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

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

SETTLING MR. ERDY

NEIL A. SCHOFIELD

In the car, driving away from Nice Airport toward the coast road, Jude glances to her right and looks at Mr. Erdy's face in profile. He's staring straight in front of him, his bag clutched on his knees. He doesn't look like her idea of a key executive, but then what does she know? He's not bad looking: a thin, handsome, tired face, blondish hair blowing back in the warm mimosa-and-bougainvillea-scented breeze. She has opened the windows, since her battered VW Polo lacks, as it lacks many things, air-conditioning.

She looks at herself surreptitiously in the mirror. She has made up with care, but she knows that in the heat that builds up down here in the afternoon, and with her tendency to blush and perspire under stress, she can end up looking as though she'd been colored in by a three year old who then panicked and tried to rub her out with spit. But for the moment she doesn't look too bad, considering.

On the road that follows the coast all the way to Antibes and Cannes, French drivers are performing their usual lethal choreography and trying to kill her, but she drives at a steady eighty kilometers an hour, ignoring them, because that's the only way to deal with the French.

"Pretty," he says.

"Excuse me?"

"All that." He waves a hand at it all, the sparkling blue Baie des Anges, the misty blue-green Alpes-Maritimes rolling down to the sea, the whole South of France, everything. He's right. It is pretty.

"Yes," she says, knowing that she should be saying more. And horrors, she hasn't even said "Welcome to France" as she's supposed to. He reaches forward and pulls the nameboard from the

open glove compartment. It has his name written on it in bold black felt-tipped capitals and at the top is printed the name of the company.

"The Early Settlers," he reads. "Well, that's resonant enough."

She spins straight into the official text which she knows by heart. "The name was chosen by our founder Laura-May Wendell Polk. She feels it communicates the spirit of pioneering and exploring new territory."

"Well, hats off to Laura-May," he says, "it does all that. And then some."

Jude realizes that on top of not having welcomed Mr. Erdy to France in that peculiarly Early Settlerish proprietary way, she hasn't even mentioned the Welcome Pack. If Marcia could see her now, she'd be out on her ear. She said almost as much on the telephone last night.

"Okay, Jude," Marcia said, "let's get, you know, our ducks in a row." Jude had absolutely no idea what this might mean. "You have an Incoming tomorrow at Nice Airport, and I don't want any foul-ups, not with this one, because he is a key guy working for an important client company of Early Settlers. Not putting too fine a point on it, Judith, after the Pulsifer Imbroglia and the Dillworth Fiasco (and she really spoke them with CAPITALS, as though they were now official designations), there were those within the organization who were saying that maybe you don't fully profile, that perhaps we should spend some further time human resourcing in the area."

"I understand completely, Marcia," Jude said. "I—" Marcia rode straight over her. Marcia's voice had a whiskey rasp and, telephoning from Detroit, a weird satellite echo. Jude has never met Marcia, probably never will, unless Pulsifer and Dillworth become the subject of some Early Settlers version of a Senate committee hearing, but she has always imagined her as looking like Barbie aged fifty, her face a roadmap of the gin-soaked years since the breakup with Ken. She lives in a dripping cave overlooking a gray, rain-lashed lake and she works by the light of burning slaves.

~~"But we'll talk about that at some other more appropriate future point in time because Mr. Erdy arrives tomorrow. I don't want to get into the whys and the wherefores here."~~

The way she said "woise and wherefoosers" made Jude wonder yet again just where Marcia hails from. She seemed to drift in and out of accents like someone else might wander from bar to bar, sometimes sounding like Katharine Hepburn and at other times like Bette Midler.

To underline just who was who in this relationship, Marcia took a power drag on her current cigarette so deep that Jude felt her ears pop.

"So, Judith," she said, and Jude distinctly heard the sound of ice tinkling in a glass, "to avoid the occurrence of any bloopers, let's go through the Manual. You have your Manual with you, I most sincerely hope?"

Jude's heart sank. Yes, she had her Manual, the inch-thick Early Settlers Bible. And, as she knew they would, they went through it from front to back, from "The Early Settlers: The Mission," through "Home Sweet Home: Guiding Your Incoming Assignee through the Realty Maze," right to "How to Diplomatically Avoid Paying for Meals."

Of course, there was nothing in the Bible about what to do if, like Mr. Pulsifer, your Incoming goes walkabout one night and ends up in a police cell after having punched out a club owner, a bouncer, and two members of the *Police Municipale*. Nor was there anything about how to cope with Mr. Dillworth, who, having turned down all the perfectly adequate three-bedroom apartments you have selected for him, goes off and secretly signs a lease on a five-bedroom villa with pool, servants, and a view of the Mediterranean, the monthly cost of which is roughly twice his paycheck. There was nothing of this in the Manual. No mention here of Pulsifers and Dillworths, no advice on the use of leg irons, injections, or humane killers.

Mercifully, after ninety minutes of telephone call, even Marcia had seemed to run out of steam.

"Okay, now you have your realtor up to speed, and your school principals have had a heads up, yes? And your church? And you have all your appointments written up on your Daily Assignment Sheet, I truly hope and trust?"

"Yes, Marcia," said Jude.

"Good," Marcia said tersely. "Judith, take care of Forrester P. Erdy, okay. Don't give me any Pulsifers or Dillworths. Forrester P. Erdy is an executive off the corporate and familial leash. He works in Sales, Judith, *Sales*. And he's in a foreign country, also. So you should treat him like you would treat a small child who has had access to the knife drawer. Don't take your eyes off him. Not for a single second, hear?"

As usual after speaking to Marcia for over an hour and a half, Jude was bathed in sweat and panting like a dog. Her telephone ear, she knew from experience, would remain that plum color for six hours. Well, it was plain enough. At the end, Hepburn-Midler

had morphed into the Godfather's henchman. If Jude didn't get this one right, the message was, she would be sleeping with the fishes. Nothing personal. Just business.

Please God, don't deal me another Pulsifer or Dillworth.

And good for God, she had thought at the airport, because Mr. Erdy didn't look like a closet berserker. Coming out of the customs area at a smart clip, ahead of all the other passengers, with just a soft carry-on over his shoulder, he seemed like a perfectly ordinary man in his forties, wearing a light tan suit. He looked round, saw her standing there in her best powder blue business suit (well, her *only* business suit, but he didn't have to know that) holding up the name board, and headed straight for her.

"Shall we?" he had said, and that was that, without even giving her time to do more than stammer out her name.

Now in the car, Jude makes the effort.

"I understand this is your first time in France, Mr. Erdy?"

"Jack," he says.

Jude is confused and says so. His personal file which Marcia has faxed ("*You do have a fax machine, Judith, I sincerely hope?*") gives his name as Forrester Porteous.

"Come on," he says. "Can you imagine being called Forrester all day? Jack will do fine." He smiles at her, and she notices again that he has very white teeth. He looks the tiniest bit like Richard Widmark, with that lopsided smile and the lazy eyelids. "And," he goes on, "this is my first time in France."

"Well, I have prepared a Welcome Pack for you, which gives you some useful information about the area in which you'll be living in,"—there's something slightly wrong there but she plows on—"together with a schedule for the visits I have scheduled for us for the next few following days." Pure Marciaspeak. She is proud of herself.

"A welcome pack?" he says. "Just for me? To keep for my very own?"

Jude glances up at him and sees his wide-open eyes, and sighs inwardly with relief. This is no Pulsifer. She smiles back.

"Just for you. I noticed you don't seem to have much baggage," she says.

"Travel light, sleep easy," he says.

"Well, if there's anything you need, please ask."

"Certainly will."

"Would you like me to tell you anything about the region in which you and your bride and children will be living and working?"

He is looking at her again in that strange way.

"Forgive me, but is that how you talk to everybody?"

"Sorry. It's the Manual." Now, this is wrong. Getting Pally With The Incoming is punishable by disembowelment.

"The manual?"

She tells him about the Bible, designed to coach her in helping transplanted company executives negotiate the dark and vicious place that is Abroad. And she tells him about Marcia.

"Marcia talks like that?"

"All the time."

"Dear me."

He looks out of the window at the bright landscape for a long moment, humming to himself. He seems very comfortable with silences.

He asks, "How do you get into a business like this? I mean, I take it you didn't plan it from fourth grade, saying what I'm going to be when I grow up is a—what is it, exactly?"

"Trans-cultural enabler."

He stares at her, shaking his head slightly.

"Right," he says, very slowly. "I mean, you didn't plan that."

This is definitely wrong. She doesn't have to tell him about meeting Jean-Luc and coming to live in France with him against her parents'—against *everyone's*—advice, and about how he turned out to be the perfect, but the *perfect*, bastard and walked out, leaving her to fend for herself, which she did, preferring to open her veins rather than go back to England with her tail between her legs and about finding a job teaching EFL ("*What?*" "*English as a Foreign Language.*" "*Oh.*") and how that dried up naturally enough in the summer and how her friend Paulette turned her on to Early Settlers ("a piece of cake, *chérie*"), twenty dollars an hour showing incoming American executives around apartments and schools. And finally about Mr. Pulsifer and Mr. Dillworth.

She doesn't have to tell him all this, but she does, and by the time she's finished they're rolling into Cannes and threading through the people and palms on the Croisette.

He's listened in silence.

"Sounds to me like you're about due for a change."

"Well, yes, but to what? And how?"

"Sometimes you just have to take a little step sideways. Change isn't life threatening," he says. "Well, mostly."

"I wish I believed that."

"You can believe anything you like, Jude. You have my permission. And there's not a damn thing they can do about it."

She is approaching the Carlton and slows down.

"This is where I'm staying?"

He looks up at the great wedding cake of a hotel and shakes his head.

"They must think I'm quite something," he says, "but it's not really me. Find me something smaller, Jude, could you? Less ostentatious, I mean, you can do that, can't you?"

"I can do whatever you like."

So they drive off into the tiny, twisting streets of the Old Town and find him a room in a smaller hotel, the Beaumarchais, which looks smart, clean, and not too cheap.

"I'm sure," Jude starts her Leaving Your Incoming For The Night speech, "you'd like the evening to relax. So, if you would like to take your Welcome Pack—" She hands it to him. "—you can peruse it at your leisure. You'll find full details of our planned program in the interior."

"Spoken like a pro, Jude. Marcia would be proud of you. See you tomorrow, not too early. And don't worry, I won't be doing any Pulsifying."

And he walks off into the hotel swinging his bag. Without looking back he raises one hand and gives a little wave, index finger wagging: Take care.

Jude drives out to La Bocca and her little studio apartment. She opens the window and the shutters to get rid of the day's stuffy heat, takes off her suit and blouse, and drinks a glass of wine, listening to the answering machine, the first message which is Marcia telling her to ring me, Judith, immediately please. No thanks. She is not going to listen to Marcia telling her yet again the critical *impawertance*, Judith, of sticking to the client company's accommodation budget. She pulls the plug on Marcia and the whole thing and goes to take a shower.

The next day is as bright as the first. She dresses in her suit again, but decides to wear it with a white men's shirt, which gives her a crisp, cool look. She sincerely trusts. The shirt is one of Jean-Luc's, one of the few things she got out of that mess. She hopes that Jean-Luc really, really misses this shirt.

Jack is waiting in the cool, marbled lobby of the hotel and walks quickly out to the car, his bag swinging from his shoulder. He climbs in and grins at her as Jude drives off along the narrow street, still cool and shadowed, freshly washed and already smelling, as most of France does in the morning, of coffee and fruit and bread and fish. And of drains too, a little, but nobody minds that.

"I tell you, Jude," says Jack, "I really don't feel like visiting schools and apartments today. Will it throw you too much if we just make this a sort of tourist day, drive around, get a flavor of the place?"

Jude feels like screaming.

"It's just that you have a limited amount of time on this trip, and you have quite a lot to do. And finding schools for your three children is quite important. Especially for your daughter—Fortnum, isn't it?" He seems to wince.

"Fortnum," he says. "Hell, Fortnum's no problem."

No, indeed, Jude thinks, four years old and already in therapy. According to Marcia.

"Come on, Jude. Let's play hooky."

So they find a café, where Jack drinks a large coffee and Jude spends half an hour on the phone, explaining to the real estate agent and the three school *directrices* that unfortunately her client has a problem of the stomach. They are not sympathetic.

Then they drive out of Cannes and up into Provence to show him the *villages perchés*. They go to Eze, where she shows him the heart-stopping view of the Mediterranean, then to Mougins and Vence.

At one point, high on the Corniche, Jack points out across the sea into the hazy blue distance and asks, "What's over there?"

"Well, eventually, Africa. But you can't quite see it from here."

He stares at her.

"Africa. I was never in a place before where you couldn't quite see Africa."

In Saint Paul, because it's lunchtime, they find a terrace restaurant, perched over a terrifying drop, with a view of the hills and the sea. They take an outside table.

Jack loops his bag over the back of his chair, sips a whiskey, and surveys the landscape, the hills, and the scattered white villas. He nods approvingly.

"This is good. You could find a nice place to settle someone in these here hills."

She knows what he means. She had once imagined herself living with Jean-Luc on a hilltop like this looking at a view like this. *Bastard*.

He looks at her and grins.

"Early Settlers," he says, "I do like that name. Basically, I guess, because deep down I'm a man who likes things settled."

The waiter strolls up, in no hurry, and they order. Jude is a little nervous about ending up paying for her own lunch—that's the

way it had worked out with Pulsifer, at least—so while Jack is ordering his steak with a salmon and leek tart to start with, she decides on a *salade niçoise*. Jack raises his eyebrows.

"Just a salad?"

"Mediterranean diet," she lies—actually she'd kill for a steak. "That's why people live longer down here."

He raises his glass to her. "Live long," he says.

Jude goes to the toilet and when she comes back everything has changed: another man is just sitting down at the table with Jack. For a moment she thinks that one of the other lunchers has joined him, but then she realizes that they know each other because as she gets to the table, the man says, "Jack."

Jack nods, in a strangely satisfied way, and says, "Arlo."

Jude sits down. The widest man she has ever seen turns and looks at her. He has a blocky sort of head, with a wide, grim mouth. He isn't wearing sunglasses, and as he looks at Jude against the bright hills, his eyes crease into slits. He is wearing a cream suit with a blue shirt open at the neck, or where the neck would be in any normal-shaped person. He nods at her.

Jack says, "This is Arlo."

"How do you do," says Jude.

"Tolerable most of the time, thank you kindly, miss." His voice has a familiar rasp. Jude wonders if he and Marcia are related.

Jack and this Arlo are staring at each other with the same tight little grins on their faces.

"Just you?"

"Just me, Jack. They thought I'd do. And seeing as I know you."

"And now you take me downtown and book me, Danno?"

Arlo nods.

"Murder one," he says. Jude hasn't the faintest idea what they're talking about. They seem to be carrying on a conversation that started a long time ago.

"You forgot to tell me that we can do it the easy way or the hard way," says Jack. The smile is still on his face. Arlo settles back in his seat and stares past Jack into the distance for a while.

"See, Jack, what it is . . . I think there is no easy way."

Now the waiter arrives with Jack's appetizer, the salmon and leek tart, and Jude's salad. The white wine arrives in a bucket of ice.

Arlo asks the waiter for an extra glass. He has a surprisingly good French accent, Jude notices.

"I got to hand it to you, Jack. It's been hell trying to find you."

"What'd I do?"

"Nothing. Pure dumb luck. Some kid spotted you in Paris getting into a taxi, but wasn't sure. It was the hair that threw him, I guess. I like the new hair, Jack."

"I think a boy should experiment from time to time."

Arlo grimaces, that awful face twisting up as if he's going to cry.

"Most people I know think a boy should go on doing what he's paid to do, carrying certain things from somewhere to somewhere else, and not disappear into the undergrowth with other people's goods," Arlo says, and then, "And most people I know, and that includes me also, are wondering why."

Jack shrugs. "Boredom. Mental Fatigue. Dem Ole Bagman Blues."

Arlo, without asking, is serving all three of them from the bottle and has lost interest in the answer to his question. "Yeah, whatever. We missed you by that much at Nice. But in the terminal one of my little helpers spots this *other* little guy raising hell with everyone, about someone should have met him, someone's gone off with his settler or whatever, patati-patata. We have a private little discussion with this gent, all polite and everything, and after that all we had to do was look. Good camouflage, Jack. Quick thinking."

Jack shrugs. "I'm good at quick."

"I'll say," says Arlo.

He turned again to Jude.

"I'd say you got the good end of the deal, miss. The guy at the airport looked like a bumptious little twerp."

But Jude is staring down at her plate, feeling sick, her eyes hot, her eyes misting. Oh God, oh God. She imagines Marcia in Detroit, spitting acid, devouring her young, swearing vengeance.

Arlo was still speaking.

"But it was just a matter of time, Jack, you know that. These kids down here, they're shit-hot, they can find anyone, *anyone*, in two hours."

Jack nods.

"He's upset, is he, the old man?"

Arlo considers. Then he turns to Jude.

"What's a good word to describe a guy who's so angry he can't speak?"

Jude thinks about the next conversation she is going to have with Marcia on the subject of a Forrester P. Erdy who has been left floating around Nice airport.

"Incandescent."

Arlo nods at her approvingly.

"O-kay. Very good. Incandescent. Incandescent is what he is, Jack. I can't blame him."

"So he wants to see me," Jack says. He is hunched over the table now, diddling absently with his fork in the salmon and leek tart.

Arlo sips his wine and takes his time answering.

"Not 'specially. He just wants what's his, he says. He's leaving it to us to do the seeing." He pauses. "You still got them, I sincerely hope?"

Jack nods. "Still got them."

Now they are just looking at each other, nodding, involved in some sort of silent exchange. Jude feels as though she has forgotten how to breathe. She has the feeling that you have when you're watching a film of a car crash in black and white and slow motion, knowing all the time that behind that graceful, silent ballet there is unimaginable violence and noise.

Arlo leans over. "Why'd you stay around? A whole night and morning? You knew there'd be somebody."

Jack nods again. "I was having a nice time. Did you know, Arlo, that from here, you can't quite see Africa? Were you ever in a place before where you couldn't *quite* see Africa?"

Arlo is slowly shaking his head from side to side like a man shaking off light blows.

Jack says, "It would have to be you, Arlo." His voice is strangely gentle and regretful.

Arlo says, "Can you believe this? Whaddawe, whaddawe gonna do witchoo, Jack?"

"Let's go find out," Jack says abruptly and finishes his wine. He pulls his bag over one shoulder. Arlo looks as surprised as Jude imagines a man like Arlo is ever allowed to look, but drinks the last of his wine.

"Okay. Let's go get this thing resolved." Then he does a funny thing: he raises his eyebrows and flips open the left side of his jacket. Jack shakes his head.

"You know me, Arlo. I rely on charm."

Jude stares dumbly at them both. Jack has taken out his wallet and has fished out two bills, dollars, Jude notices, and then sees the figure 100. Jack puts them down, gives her an astonishing grin, and takes her wrist between his fingers. It's the very first time he has touched her, apart from a handshake, and it's just his fingers, but Jude realizes how shockingly strong he is for a thin man in his forties.

"For the lunch, Jude. Next time, it's on you. And remember what I said, just a little sideways step. Another thing, do me a favor, the tart is excellent, finish it for me."

Then they both get up and walk away down the terrace. Jack

does that little backward wave, and suddenly and unaccountably, Jude feels like weeping. Then the waiter arrives and is ready to take away Jack's plate, but Jude stops him, pushes aside her salad, and tells him she will eat Jack's steak. She is going to have a decent lunch, at least, since it is probably the last she will have for a while.

She begins to eat the tart. What does he mean by *excellent*? Jack didn't even start it, just sort of diddled with it, making little patterns and holes while he was talking to that Arlo.

She wonders what this will be called in the Early Settlers iconography. The Erdy Catastrophe, perhaps. But she decides to wait until tonight to do the Serious Worrying About The Future and whether this time Marcia will actually take out a contract on her. She decides instead to worry about Jack, and what he's got with him that Arlo seemed so tense about.

That's before she finds the first of the three brilliant-cut diamonds, like olive stones, buried among the salmon and the leeks. She doesn't *think* the term "brilliant-cut" because she doesn't know it until later when the jeweler in Le Cannel explains it to her and tells her the unbelievable, *obscene* sum ("as a strictly private transaction you understand, mademoiselle"), he would be willing to give her for the stones.

But she doesn't know all that yet, so she finishes her tart, lines up the diamonds by her plate, and wonders how many more of them Jack has. She suspects it's lots and lots. She hopes so.

The waiter arrives with Jack's steak. Then he tuts impatiently and flounces off to return, apologizing, with a steak knife. He was sure he had laid one.

Jude knows for a fact that he had laid a steak knife and she knows who's got it now. So she's going to stop worrying about Jack because clearly he's decided not to rely totally on charm.

And she's going to stop worrying about herself. Marcia who? I'm sorry my dear. I've never heard of the sad old bitch. Jude knows what she's going to do. She'll find a small place to rent on a hill-top, somewhere not far from here, a place where you can't quite see Africa. And she'll wait there patiently because she's sure that, however long it takes, after he's finished taking his latest sideways step (poor Arlo, she's already thinking) Jack will come to find her.

She owes him a lunch, and Jack's a man who likes things settled. 🐦

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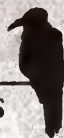
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DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY JACQUELINE E. MATHEWS



Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters 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 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. The solution will appear in the April issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 140.

1	T	3	H	4	O	5	A	6	V	7	B	8	H	9	C	10	T	11	K						
12	O	13	J	14	M	15	F	16	A	17	P	18	H	19	E	20	S	21	D	22	G	23	C	24	E
25	D	26	J	27	M	28	V	29	U	30	J	31	R	32	U	33	M	34	G	35	T	36	K	37	D
	38	F	39	M	40	T	41	L	42	M	43	P	44	D	45	O	46	T	47	V	48	O			
	49	N	50	E	51	U	52	F	53	S	54	B	55	G	56	O	57	R	58	B	59	U	60	F	
61	J	62	R	63	P	64	I	65	Q	66	N	67	D	68	S	69	Q	70	S	71	N				
72	M	73	A	74	G	75	K	76	N	77	K	78	O	79	T	80	A	81	J	82	E	83	P		
84	I	85	K	86	V	87	J	88	O	89	B	90	U	91	T	92	I	93	N	94	U	95	Q		
	96	J	97	R	98	N	99	F	100	A	101	H	102	A	103	P	104	L	105	V	106	C	107	A	
108	J	109	U	110	P	111	G	112	B	113	E	114	F	115	L	116	Q	117	I	118	V	119	K		
120	I	121	J	122	C	123	M	124	A	125	K	126	R	127	E	128	B	129	M	130	K	131	Q		
132	J	133	H	134	O	135	E	136	O	137	M	138	G	139	P	140	Q	141	O	142	M	143	T		
	144	S	145	G	146	O	147	B	148	G	149	Q	150	N	151	S	152	M	153	A	154	F			
155	K	156	F	157	P	158	B	159	L	160	D	161	E	162	J	163	L	164	Q	165	B	166	E	167	D
168	N	169	G	170	R	171	F	172	H	173	K	174	I	175	E	176	Q	177	O	178	I	179	D	180	A
181	V	182	C	183	H	184	P	185	D	186	F	187	B	188	J	189	C	190	M	191	T	192	Q		

DEFINITIONS

- A. Baker's designation:
hypth. wd.

WORDS

102 180 16 5 100 124 107 73 80 153

B.	Particular	158	54	7	128	89	165	147	187	58	112
C.	Blitzed	182	9	122	189	23	106				
D.	Magazine founded by Andy Warhol	160	25	44	21	185	67	167	37	179	
E.	"Pity from . . . —wave" (Richard Lovelace)	175	19	113	127	166	50	82	24	161	135
F.	Recruiter's target: 2 wds.	154	99	156	38	15	114	60	171	186	52
G.	Sought-after John Hancock	148	138	55	34	169	22	74	111	145	
H.	Lagniappe, e.g.	101	3	8	18	172	133	183			
I.	Far East cafe	120	92	174	117	64	84	1	178		
J.	Quite significant	132	13	96	30	121	26	87	108	81	
								61	188	162	
K.	Shaky	173	125	119	36	11	155	77	75	85	130
L.	42nd Street (with "the"): slang	159	115	104	163	41					
M.	Barley brew: 2 wds.	152	72	27	14	33	42	137	142	123	
								129	39	190	
N.	De Maupassant story (with "The")	168	66	49	150	98	76	71	93		
O.	Electoral pacesetter: 2 wds.	134	4	12	56	88	177	141			
							136	45	48	78	146
P.	Demonstrative, maybe	110	17	103	139	43	83	63	184	157	
Q.	Circuitous	149	164	140	69	116	95	131	176	192	65
R.	Astrological diagram	126	170	31	57	62	97				
S.	Became less strained	144	20	70	151	68	53				
T.	Dwarf, in a way	191	35	10	143	2	46	91	79	40	
U.	Budget concern	59	29	109	32	94	51	90			
V.	Showed deference	6	118	47	105	28	181	86			

HUNCH

DAN A. SPROUL

When historians finish rearranging history to suit their particular agendas, the birth and death of Hunch Bambis will not be included. For good reason, Hunch was not a mover or shaker, not a statesman or industry mogul. Nope, Hunch, whose proper first name escapes me, was a horseplayer. And as his nickname implied, Hunch was driven by instinct, perception, insight, and a sixth sense but not a lot of handicapping study.

Hunch toiled as a thoroughbred trainer back in the seventies. He wasn't much good at it. Forced to run cripples and also-rans, he couldn't make a decent living. And worse, he made the woeeful mistake of betting his own horses. With the last of his cheap string claimed away in the late eighties, Hunch slid into welfare and social security. The change didn't slow down his betting much. He appeared trackside most afternoons sending in his monthly stipend from the government. He owed me ten bucks for more than three years.

Me? My name is Joe Standard. I work out of a small P.I. office in the Sun Belt Realty Building in Miami . . . Miami, the city that would never permit a serious horseplayer to go betless, not with year-round thoroughbred racing. All of which brings us back to Hunch and the third race at Gulfstream Park—a six furlong sprint for three year olds and up—non-winners of two in a lifetime other than maiden, claimer, or starter.

"Joe, I been looking for you all over the clubhouse. Why ain't you in your usual spot?"

"The seat is jinxed, Hunch. And so are you. You got my ten bucks?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, unexpectedly handing over a ten spot. "Here you go."

This alone should have made me apprehensive. Dazed and frozen for several seconds, I came to my senses and snatched the bill. "You drunk or did you snag that last trifecta?"

"No, I keyed the four," he said seriously. "Rivera on the five cut

him off at the three-eighths pole. The stewards are the ones that are drunk. The five horse should have come down."

"Well, thanks for the cash. I can use it. I'm into a twenty race dry spell."

"Ah . . . Joe, how much you charge?"

I had forty to win on the six horse, a small gray filly. She was dancing in the gate for the third. "What are you talkin' about?" I mumbled back at him with profuse irritation as Dashing Donna, my selection, stumbled awkwardly at the break, digging her chin into the dirt—a certifiable catastrophe.

*Within a small voice cried, "You fool!
You aren't abiding by the rule.*

*The nine colt is a distance horse.—
He won't have speed on the shorter course.*

*The four, now that's the bet to play.
He has the speed and he will stay."*

*The voice I knew was speaking true.
So what else could I really do?*

*I played it like the voice had said.
Nine won by six, and four dropped dead.*

H. K.*

We watched the field flash past the finish line. Dashing Donna came late to run third. After registering the finish, Hunch continued on. "Ain't you supposed to be a private detective or something? I just wanted to know what you charge." He punctuated the request by wadding up his own tickets to add to mine and the thousand others littering the floor.

"My prices are two hundred fifty a day for strangers, three hundred a day for my friends—three fifty if they want to help. Expenses are extra."

"What about a senior discount?"

"Hah . . . you kidding? What's your problem?"

I plopped down in the hard upper clubhouse seat. Hunch took the place alongside. "Not really a problem," he said. "It's more like a dilemma."

"Well, so tell me your dilemma."

Hunch pulled his bankroll from his baggy pants pocket, a large rolled-up wad with a Cecil (read hundred dollar bill) on the outside. "Don't you get a retainer up front or something?" he asked, peeling off three hundred in my direction.

The fact that the normally luckless Hunch had such a robust

*A k a Kipling, resident poet of the Surfer Bar and Grill; see "Daily Double Cross," AHMM, March 2002.

bankroll captured my interest. "Just kidding about the rates," I said. "Tell me the story. I'll let you know what it costs."

Hunch nodded. "Yeah, okay. Well, yesterday I had Admiral Vee in the sixth—you know, the grass race. Had him as an only in the third leg of a live bet-three. He won by daylight—"

"I remember. Paid over sixty bucks."

"Sixty-two eighty," said Hunch. "Anyway, the dollar bet-three paid eight hundred and sixty."

"So you hit a good one—doesn't sound much like a dilemma."

"I'm not to that part yet," said Hunch, beginning to fluster. "But it all happened because of the win. If I didn't hit the bet-three, I would'a had to wait and take the bus after the ninth race, like I normally do. I hate the damn bus. Seeing as how I was flush, I left before the seventh. I was able to flag down a Blue Bird cab tearing past the clubhouse entrance."

Hunch imparted to me that the cab driver spoke mostly Hindustani and the lingering odor of neglected goats haunted the cab's back seat, but otherwise, he enjoyed the eighteen dollar ride. A paper bag resided on the back seat alongside him. Upon departing the cab, Hunch scooped up the bag and took it with him without looking inside.

"So you stole a paper bag from a cab. What was in it?" I asked.

"Eight thousand dollars."

"Really, and that's your dilemma?"

"Sort of . . . because that's not all that was in the bag."

"What else?"

"This." He pulled a photograph from his shirt pocket and gave it to me.

It was the picture of a mature woman with brazen eyes, upswept hair, and perfect teeth. Depicted with an expression between demure smile and smirk, she exploited a rare, ethereal beauty that seemed to defy time. It made her age tough to guess—certainly more than forty, but open on the high end. I flipped the photograph over. There was an address on the back—155 N.W. 97th Street—and below the address an enigmatic message: "Before 4-1."

"What do you think it means?" I asked Hunch.

"If I knew what it means, I wouldn't have to hire a Mickey Mouse, no-handicapping gumshoe for three hundred bucks a day, now would I?"

Normally, I'd have responded with surgically sharp and savage wit to such a crass appraisal of my horse-betting talents. Considering the size of Hunch's bankroll, however, I wisely

deferred my response. "Before four one," I said, thinking aloud. "You must think all this means something or you wouldn't hire me." Unable to adhere absolutely to my no-insult plan, I added, "You could have just kept quiet and lost the whole eight grand in the next few days."

Hunch nursed a quick grin. "I got a hunch the money was for a hit man," he said, ignoring my not unexpected reciprocal insult. "The woman in the picture is the target and the hit guy is supposed to get the job done before April first. Today is March thirtieth. I can't give back the money—I don't even have it all anymore and it wouldn't do any good anyway. But, I figured I ought to do something . . . maybe use some of the money to help her out. She's a fine looking lady. Hate to do nothin' and have her end up room temperature."

"If you're right, maybe you ought to go to the cops."

"You crazy?" said Hunch. "I'd have to tell about the money. Anyway, I don't know if I'm right or not. That's what you're for."

"Okay if I keep this for awhile?" I asked, holding up the photo. "I doubt if this is about anything as sinister as a paid assassination. But, I'll look into it." I ended up taking two hundred fifty in up-front money from Hunch—before he could blow it on bet-threes.

Hunch wandered off back to the cronies at his special spot. I stayed for two more races. I left after the fifth. Roger the Rogue paid eighteen sixty and almost got me even. I wanted to make it back to my tiny office at Sunbelt Realty before the realty office closed.

At Sunbelt Realty it took Bonnie and her computer five minutes to check the prior year property tax records for 155 N.W. 97th Street. She handed me a printout with the annual taxes and the owner's name. No charge. She'd been real nice to me ever since I took her for a couple of drinks to the Surfer Bar, the gin joint around the corner. The fact that Larry, her boyfriend of six years, refused to move out of his mother's house, then dumped her a week back could also have had something to do with it.

I extracted myself from Bonnie politely and stretched out on the office cot beneath my coveted giant photograph showing the illustrious, unmatched Seattle Stew pitted against the gritty Cormorant. Heads apart, they battled into the far turn in the nineteen seventy-seven Preakness Stakes.

The property tax report listed Jillian Claymore the property owner of the address on the back of Hunch's picture. The annual tax last year was twenty-two hundred. I dropped the report to the floor, closed my eyes, and tried to figure what it might all mean. I

couldn't shake the idea of the stinky Hindustani cab. Hunch said he flagged down the cab passing in front of the clubhouse entrance. This was Miami, not New York. A citizen couldn't just flag down a cab—at the airport or a big hotel maybe, but at the racetrack? The concept only computed if the cab had just dropped a fare and was leaving.

I took the idea a little farther. If the cab was passing by the front of the clubhouse it had to be coming from the horsemen's parking lot and administration buildings around behind the main racing plant. One then had to ask how long a paper bag with eight thousand dollars could last on the back seat of a Blue Bird cab. A no-brainer, the odds were one to five that the fare dropped at the racetrack forgot the paper bag in the cab. Hunch said he left before the seventh race. That would put the episode sometime between three thirty and four o'clock. So, what did it all mean? What kind of a hit man would bother to stop at the track or leave his hit money in a cab? A trip to Northwest 97th Street might shed more light.

Miami is spread out. It expands virtually unbroken through various municipalities up the eastern coast of Florida for forty miles or more—but not so to the west. Northwest 97th was a fifteen-minute drive, a bit west and a good deal north of my office, almost into Hialeah in northwestern Miami.

It looked like rain. I nursed the top up on my classic '65 Mustang convertible.

One fifty-five was a modest home, well manicured and richly fixtured, as was the lady in Hunch's picture when she greeted my knock.

"Yes?"

"Jillian Claymore, I presume?"

"Yes."

Her dark eyes locked onto mine and did not waver. It was spooky. I had to look away first. She said nothing more, forcing me to stumble onward with an explanation for my appearance at her door. I held up Hunch's picture. "I'm here to talk about this."

She took the picture from my hand, studied one side, then flipped it over for a quick look at the reverse side. "It's me," she said, more or less in confirmation, not handing it back. "How did you come by it?"

I explained to her that the picture was found in a paper bag with a considerable amount of money. There was, I told her, some concern that she might be in danger.

"Really, why is that?"

"We feared that it might be payment for an attempt on your life," I said.

She stifled a laugh with a hand to her mouth. "That's absurd. Was the amount of money eight thousand dollars?"

"That's right, eight thousand," I said. "Then you know what this is about?"

Her attitude eased and her eyes no longer bonded to me like a snake on a mongoose. It started to rain. "Yes, please come inside," she offered.

The living area was a working wonder of spotless white leather—chairs, ottomans, sofa, and loveseat. I sank into one of the two stuffed chairs, refusing her offer of coffee, tea, or something stronger, although the something stronger was tempting.

With unpretentious sensuality, she drew her legs beneath her and used up the loveseat directly across from me. "How did you happen to come by the money?" she wanted to know.

"A client . . . I'm a private detective. He was worried that you might be in danger."

"How sweet, what's his name?"

"Before we get into that, maybe you'll tell me what this is all about?"

"It's innocent enough. I gave a check to my fiancé to cash and bring me the money. I wanted to give it to my daughter to start an account for my new grandson's college education."

"What about the address on the back of the picture?"

"Ah . . . yes, the address. I just bought this place and moved in two weeks ago. My fiancé was still in New York where my bank is. I mailed him the check with the picture and the new address. Now, I really would like to thank the gentleman personally who found the money. What's his name?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you his name."

"I see. Well, can you tell me when I can get my eight thousand dollars back?"

This was the part where the worms started crawling out of the can. "I'm not sure you will get it back. I imagine my client doesn't have all of it any more. I might be able to get you part of it."

"What did you say your name was?" she asked.

"Didn't say. But the name is Joe Standard."

The snake-mongoose business with her eyes began again. Her long legs hit the floor and started for the front door. She swung it open and invited me into the maelstrom waiting in the street. "We don't have anything more to discuss, Mr. Standard."

The top on my Mustang leaked around the back and passenger-

side windows, but not as bad as Jillian Claymore's story leaked. I only wished I had the chance to ask about the date of four one, if it was a date. It was worse than trying to handicap a race at Mountineer Park: you could rely on exactly nothing to be as it appeared. Jillian Claymore was owner of record on the tax files the prior year for the house on Northwest 97th Street. No way she bought the house and moved in two weeks ago. This was getting complicated. I should have gotten at least three hundred from Hunch.

The dispatcher for Blue Bird cabs was a skinny loudmouth with a front tooth missing. His breath would have knocked over a small brown bear and he needed a shave real bad. His name was Harold.

"Mustafa ain't no Hindustani. He's a Paki."

I had to back up a step when he hit the P on Paki. "I don't care about that. Where is he?"

"He's real popular," said Harold. "You're the second guy that's come 'round tonight lookin' for him. He's talkin' to the other guy in the back parkin' lot right now."

The rain had stopped, replaced by the night. Twenty or so Blue Bird cabs in various states of repair occupied the lot. A couple of the overhead lights were out. I could barely make out the two figures at the far end of the lot. But it looked like the smaller guy, undoubtedly Mustafa, was getting the crap pounded out of him. Conditioned by many sprints from the track parking lot to a seller's window to make the first post, I started out toward the hapless Mustafa across the tarmac.

I shouted ahead, advancing rapidly toward the pair. "Hey! Let him go." This got no reaction from the huge guy who had Mustafa by the throat.

I thought he might break and run, but I was mistaken. He was big but not quick. I ducked under his roundhouse right and slammed the heel of my right foot into his kneecap. He let go of Mustafa's throat to bend over and grab his hurting knee. I allowed him to have the flat of my elbow upside the head, which bounced him headfirst off of Blue Bird number eighty-three and then to the ground. Up quickly, he hobbled off swearing.

I guided Mustafa under one of the working lights. The right side of his face was swollen, his lip was busted, and his right eye due a shiner for sure.

"I am thanking much, sir . . . I am thanking . . ." Mustafa spoke in high-pitched singsong. Then, unexpectedly, he grabbed my hand and kissed it.

I jerked my hand away.

I asked him why the thug was beating on him. He grinned, showing me one black tooth and another broken in half. Both hands came palms up in a shrug.

With his limited English, it took a while to extract the story from Mustafa. The best I could figure, the big guy beating on him was looking for the paper bag left in the cab or the guy that had the paper bag. I found out from Harold's route sheet and Mustafa's pidgin English that the passenger Mustafa dropped off at the track had been picked up at the Tropic Bar, north of Miramar. According to Harold, the big guy beating on Mustafa had examined the route sheet as well.

Mustafa said the passenger was stupid drunk, that he threw up soon after departing the cab near the Gulfstream administration buildings. He indicated this to me with a forefinger pointing down his throat thence making a large arc to point at the ground. He then bent over, grabbed his neck, and made appropriate gagging noises. According to Mustafa, the drunk had a paper bag with him when he left the bar for the cab ride. Mustafa said he thought the bag contained a bottle. He conveyed this to me by tipping thumb to mouth and twisting the top of an imaginary bag. I began to see how the paper bag might have been left in the cab.

I returned to my office at Sunbelt Realty through the back parking lot entrance. It was getting late. If some drunk was in the horsemen's area yesterday at three in the afternoon projectile vomiting, there was an excellent chance track security at Gulfstream knew about it. My longtime friend Niles McMahan headed up security at Gulfstream. I called his home number but got no answer.

Although I didn't recognize the goon working on Mustafa, there seemed little doubt that he was paid muscle. I pulled the copy of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary from my small bookstand. Nestled inside the hollowed-out interior of the large volume rested my nine millimeter Beretta. A visit to the Tropic Bar in Miramar where Mustafa picked up his drunken fare was in order. The Beretta was a precaution. No way to tell what I might be dealing with.

The city of Miramar sits in close proximity to Calder Race Course. The Tropic was a neighborhood joint. I crowded up to the bar and ordered a bourbon and water. The bartender told me that he normally came on duty at six P.M., and directed me to the owner at the other end of the bar feeding drinks to a short, pudgy blonde. I introduced myself as a private detective and asked the owner if

he had been in the bar yesterday afternoon, and did he remember a drunk calling a cab around three o'clock yesterday afternoon.

"So you're a private dick?" he said. "You got any ID?"

I handed him a laminated license and ID in a two-sided wallet. He opened the small packet and offered it up to the blonde for scrutiny. "Look there, Ethel. He's an honest-to-God private eye." Ethel dutifully squinted at the documents. Without examining the ID himself, the owner tossed the wallet into accumulated slop on the bar. "I don't talk about my good customers behind their back, especially to strangers."

I picked up the wallet with two fingers and shook some of the liquid off. I wiped it on my pants leg. "And what is your name, sir?" I asked.

"The name's Maxwell. You got about two minutes to get out of here." He smirked at the blonde, then at me.

"All your barking is wasted on me, Maxwell," I said. "I'm sure your girlfriend is impressed, though, so maybe we can move on. You need to realize that if you don't tell me about your good customer, chances are he'll end up an injured or dead customer—if he isn't already."

Maxwell looked at me with renewed interest. "How do I know that?"

I outlined it for him. "Your good customer left here with a paper bag. The bag had money in it. He lost the bag. Somebody dangerous is hammering on people to find the bag. What do you think?"

I struck a nerve. "Yeah, okay. That explains some things. Maybe I buy what you're saying. What do you need from me?"

"Tell me what happened. Who is this good customer?"

"George Dunbar," said Maxwell. "We took his keys and called him a cab. You're right, Georgie had a paper bag."

"George Dunbar the trainer?" I asked.

"Yeah, he comes in here all the time. He came in yesterday, early, just after we opened. Sat at the bar all morning with the bag sitting on the bar next to him. About two thirty in the afternoon a big guy comes in and Georgie joins him in a booth at the back. The big guy is a hood. I saw him here before tossin' 'em down with Nolan Goody."

"Hollowpoint Goody?" I asked.

"Ah . . . so you know him. Goody is mob. So I figure the big guy Georgie was talking to was probably a hood."

"You know what they were talking about?"

"No idea," said Maxwell. "But the hood gave him a piece of paper or something. I watched Georgie put it in the sack. Then the hood

got up and left. Georgie could barely walk. He was really smashed. I grabbed his keys. No way would I let him drive out of here."

"You say that George came in with the bag?"

"Yeah, he had it sittin' on the bar. When I asked him what was in the bag, he tells me it's his soul. He was pretty high by then. Never seen him that blasted before. I don't know what Georgie is mixed up in but he's a good guy. I don't want to see nothing bad happen to him. And I think you might be right about the trouble he's in. The hood he was with came back this evening. He wanted to know what cab company picked up Georgie."

I gave Maxwell one of my new business cards and headed for the Mustang. George Dunbar wasn't really an acquaintance. He was, however, familiar to everyone in the world of thoroughbred racing. Dunbar trained the lowly bred three year old, Mr. Spats, unbeaten winner of five races—two of them graded events. Mr. Spats was one of the top four contenders for the Kentucky Derby. George Dunbar, a Calder-based local handler of mediocre halter horses, found instant celebrity and a diamond in with his zircons when Mr. Spats began to whip top Derby contenders.

Obviously, the only way to unravel all this was to find George Dunbar.

It was getting late, almost nine P.M. Getting into the backstretch was no problem. Years ago, before becoming a full-time private investigator and horseplayer, I worked for Buddy Wayne as an assistant trainer. Many of my clients come from the residents, workers, and owners in the backstretch, so I pay the fee to maintain my license every three years. I took the backstretch pass from the glove compartment and hung it on the rearview mirror. While Clarence, the day security guard at the Gulfstream horsemen's gate, knew me well, there was no way to know who might be on the gate at night.

Headlights on the Mustang bathed his big ears, bug eyes, and Walkman earphones. Immediately the dilapidated lawn chair where he slouched jerked to an upright position in concert with his hyperthyroid lurch forward to meet me. The gate guard was Frankie Swinehart. Frankie preferred to be addressed as just plain Swine. This was, he explained, because he disliked the name Franklyn, Frankie, or Frank—go figure. Swine worked with me as an operative from time to time augmenting the income from his job as night security man at Calder Race Course.

"Joe!" he said in surprise. "What's up?"

"What are you doing at Gulfstream Park?"

"Just temporary," he said, "came over from Calder until they find

somebody who doesn't drink or take dope, and can stay awake. I might be here awhile."

"Look Swine, I need to find George Dunbar. And I think somebody else might be looking for him. Any strangers come through in the last half hour or so, possibly a big, fat-faced guy, with maybe a bruise on his head or a black eye?"

"Oh yeah, I seen him. He came through about five minutes ago. Had a bandage on his forehead. No pass. I give him a temporary. Signed in to visit Nick Meriwell's barn on personal business—deliver some papers or something. I directed him to V&M Racing Stables in barn twelve."

"You say he signed in . . . What's his name?"

Swine studied his clipboard. "John Smith," he reported. "That's what was on his driver's license. Sounds phony, don't it?"

"Meriwell . . . Isn't he one of the owners of Mr. Spats? And the other owner . . . What was the other owner's name?"

Swine gave the question minimal consideration. "You mean Harvey Vance?"

Something finally began to jell in my brain. Vance and Meriwell were both small-time owners who had collaborated on the purchase of the nondescript two-year-old colt, Mr. Spats. Like George Dunbar, they became celebrities overnight when Mr. Spats came into his own. The story got legs in racing news. Their bitter battle over the horse was ongoing. Vance wanted the Derby contender to prep for his one-time chance in the mile and a quarter Kentucky Derby on the East Coast in Kentucky's Bluegrass Stakes at a mile and an eighth. Meriwell, on the other hand, who was West Coast-based, wanted the horse shipped to California for the prestigious mile and an eighth Santa Anita Derby.

Meriwell was old family money, a prominent breeder of thoroughbreds. His reputation as a playboy and womanizer had crept from the social pages into the daily racing news. Vance's pockets, on the other hand, were not nearly as deep. He was the owner of a small but elite restaurant in Boca Raton. Meriwell had bred Mr. Spats and put him in the Calder two year old sale. Nobody wanted to pay much for Mr. Spats. When the horse didn't reach his small reserve, Meriwell sold half interest to Vance, who had one other runner. According to Meriwell, he sold half to Vance because Mr. Spats was Florida bred, eligible for state-bred-restricted races in Florida, and he wanted to save on shipping costs to California. At the time, he was clueless as to Mr. Spats's true caliber. Needless to say, there was now a ton of money involved.

Considering that the first Saturday in May heralds the beginning

of the classic races with the Kentucky Derby, the date of 4-1 on the back of Hunch's picture began to make a bit of sense. A horse intending to run in the Santa Anita Derby the Saturday after next, April sixth, would have to be entered at least four days in advance—April second. Might be something there, but where did Jillian Claymore fit into the picture?

"George Dunbar?" Swine said after a while.

"What?"

"You said you were looking for George Dunbar."

"You know if he's here or not?"

Swine gleefully reported that everyone in the backstretch knew about George's bender. Security found him passed out in the horsemen's parking lot yesterday afternoon. According to Swine, George was probably still at V&M Racing Stables, the very same location where he had directed Hollowpoint Goody's colleague, Mr. John Smith.

Avoiding the horsemen's parking area, I gunned the Mustang in as close to barn twelve as possible. For the second time I headed out in full gallop. Barn twelve displayed a row of open stalls, twelve or fifteen on a side. Every stall seemed to be filled with a horse's head curious about my presence. I heard the first shot after turning the corner of the barn, then witnessed the bright flash from the second shot at the far end of the shed row.

"Hey!" I yelled—not at all clever, as it turned out, because Mustafa's throttlar, alias John Smith, turned his weapon in my direction. I stopped dead still.

Funny how time seems to slow down in a moment of crisis. All sorts of things have time to race through the brain, like how smart it was to have my Beretta safely tucked in a holster fastened under the front seat of the Mustang.

Mr. Smith was about thirty yards away. He held a snub-nosed thirty-eight. If he was an excellent shot, I figured the odds were eight to one that he could hit a vital spot. If he wasn't at least a decent shot, the odds were about twenty to one that he could hit me at all. Sadly, the odds weren't going to get any better. I took off running for the corner of the barn.

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG . . .

I made the corner and put on the burners for the Mustang with the sage words of my idol, Winston Churchill, echoing in my thoughts: Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result. In all, six shots were fired. I got a reprieve while he stopped and reloaded.

It was enough time to reach the Mustang. I began to grope

around under the driver's seat for the Beretta as the shooter cleared the barn fifty yards away. His seventh shot sparked off the Mustang hood and whined away into the night sky. Number eight busted out the windshield and showered me in glass. I pulled out the Beretta, fumbled the safety off, and jacked a round into the breach. His number nine blew a hole in my rearview mirror on the passenger side. This time the Beretta answered back, spitting at him seven times in rapid succession with, to paraphrase Churchill, no result. There is little doubt, however, the scoundrel would be wringing out his shorts later. Surprised at the response, Mr. Smith ducked and stumbled awkwardly. His knee still suffering the embellishment of my heel mark, he departed, stiff-legged, for the parking lot, swearing all the way.

Smith made about twenty yards before I emptied the Beretta at him, aiming low. Eight more bursts from the nine millimeter flashed in the dimly lit backstretch. The henchman grabbed his good thigh, hop-scotched another few steps, then hit the ground hard. Clearly, I should have gotten at least four hundred from Hunch.

Track security began to show up in numbers along with several grooms. Some had witnessed the gunfight. I recognized Tony Wallace, one of the track security guys, and motioned him over to me.

"Joe, what the hell's going on?"

John Smith was attempting to crawl away. I pointed him out. "Tony, you boys need to hold that guy over there. I think he dropped his gun, but be careful. You saw him shootin' at me and he was blasting away at something on the back side of barn twelve."

Tony asked for my Beretta. I handed it over, warning him that it was empty.

"I'm headed back to barn twelve for a look-see," I told him. "Better call an ambulance." I didn't wait for his concurrence. With all the running and the adrenaline high, I could only make a fast walk back to the last stall on the back side of the barn.

I'd seen his picture plenty of times in the *Racing Form*. It was George Dunbar alright, with a couple of holes in him, one in the right shoulder, another in the upper right chest. But he was alive. I knelt down in the wood chips beside him and took his hand. "Take it easy. There's an ambulance on the way."

"He'll go all the way," George whispered. "Couldn't give him up . . . no choice. He said it would look like a natural death. Had to go along . . . couldn't lose him . . . he'll go all the way." It was the last thing Georgie Dunbar was ever going to say in this life. He died with his eyes open. I closed them for him.

They let me out of the Dade County holding cell three days later. It took almost no time at all to find Hunch at his customary spot in the Gulfstream grandstand.

"Joe! I was beginning to think you skipped off with my retainer. Where you been?"

"It's my retainer," I said for clarification. "My expenses, including all the damage to my Mustang, add up to another seven hundred—not even figuring in the jail time—due and payable before the next race."

"Jail time, huh . . . yeah, okay, but I don't have it on me right now. Catch me tomorrow."

It is a well-known and long-established fact that a true horse player will not give up any part of his bankroll short of his own immediate heart surgery and doubtfully even then. The retainer offered up last time by Hunch was set-aside money. The balance of the eight thousand was now bankroll. And bankroll, after all, is like a vendor's inventory. Without inventory there is nothing to sell. The bettor with nothing to bet, like the vendor without inventory, is out of business.

"Right," I said. "Bring the seven hundred tomorrow and I'll give you my report."

"Then you found out something?" said Hunch excitedly. "What about the woman? Did you save her?"

I held out my hand palm up. "Cost you seven hundred for the report."

Hunch's response was a four-letter word of exasperation. He grudgingly peeled seven big bills from his horse-choking wad and thrust them at me. I proceeded to give him the story up to the death of George Dunbar and my trip to the slammer.

"I don't get it," said Hunch. "Was George Dunbar supposed to give eight thousand to this Smith guy to kill that good-looking woman in the picture? Wouldn't put it past him. He was always stiffin' me with his first starters."

"You're not paying attention, Hunch."

As the horses for the third race paraded around the paddock, I told Hunch my theory—the theory laid on the police to gain my release. A theory later confirmed when Grover Martin, alias John Smith, fessed up after copping a plea three days into custody.

The first thing that bothered me was the paper bag. Eight thousand dollars is a lot of money to be carrying around. And granted, eight thousand makes a pretty big wad, but not so big you couldn't fill your pockets. The only reason you would carry it around in a paper bag—or briefcase, or whatever—was if it didn't belong to

you and was just being conveyed to the intended destination. George came into the Tropic Bar with the bag, and he left with it. He was obviously carrying the money for somebody else.

"So who?" Hunch wanted to know.

"The proper question here is why; that will give you the who. Remember when George whispered to me, 'He said it would look like a natural death. Had to go along'? The *he* in that statement was obviously Harvey Vance. When George said he 'couldn't give him up' he was talking about giving up Mr. Spats. Everybody knew that Meriwell wanted to ship Mr. Spats to California. George was based at Calder; his whole public stable was here. Meriwell intended to switch to a big-time West Coast trainer. George did not want that to happen.

"Harvey Vance also did not want it to happen, but for other reasons. He wanted it all. There was the standard partnership insurance between Meriwell and Vance. Vance could pay off the estate and have complete ownership of Mr. Spats. To avoid any personal involvement in the enterprise, Vance must have assured George that his help in the plot would insure him trainer-for-life status of Mr. Spats. But for all these good things to take place Meriwell had to die. And there could be no hint of murder. It had to appear a natural death."

Hunch rubbed his chin, oblivious to the horses that paraded onto the main racecourse. "So, what you're saying is that Vance and George paid—what's his name?—John Smith, to kill Meriwell . . . No, wait a minute . . . What are you saying? That can't be or George would have handed the money over in the Tropic Bar."

I watched a few seconds as the post parade took a slow walk to the starting gate set up for a sprint in the backstretch chute. "It took a day in jail to figure it out," I confessed. "Grover, alias John Smith, the goon that worked for Hollowpoint Goody, was the tip-off. I had to assume that Harvey Vance, being in the restaurant business, was probably on a first name basis with some of the mob. If you wanted to kill somebody and have it look like a natural death, where better to start than with the professionals?"

"So Harvey Vance sent George to meet with John Smith?" Hunch reasoned.

"Yes, but not to pay him. George was there for directions. I suspect John Smith was just in for the finder's fee."

"Directions . . . directions to the woman in the picture?" asked Hunch.

"Exactly."

"Are you saying she's the hit man, ah, person?"

"Consider that for somebody to slip a toxic Mickey or injection that mimics a natural death into the victim, the assassin has to get close—intimately close. Meriwell liked the ladies. And there is no argument our picture girl is the right age and quite a looker. Even if it were to be something like a hit-and-run or push down the stairs, which is highly unlikely and would be suspect, information from her as to Meriwell's exact whereabouts would be required."

"That's hard to believe," said Hunch. "Why the hell would she be passing around her picture if she was a hit woman?"

"That had me going for awhile. But once George gave her the down payment, she could remove the picture from circulation. The picture was to insure that George did not hand the bag off or blab to the wrong person. If you think about it, in and of itself, there is nothing incriminating about a picture with an address on the back."

"Did you say down payment?"

"Yes, according to John Smith, twelve thousand more was to be handed over after Meriwell stiffened up. Jillian Claymore, the woman in the picture, had already made contact with Meriwell the week before. Things were set, just waiting for the money to change hands. But all went awry when George failed to show up with the downstroke money. George was the shaky ingredient to begin with. His heart wasn't really in it. When he didn't show, they feared he'd roll over on them. Particularly John Smith was bothered being the only conspirator George had met with outside of Harvey Vance. The next day all of their worst fears were realized when I confronted Jillian Claymore with the picture."

"Well, I guess my hunch was right then, wasn't it?" Hunch said.

"Right . . . right about what?"

"There was a hit involved."

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it was pretty much like your normal hunch, kinda right, but not right enough to win much money."

Hunch pulled his tickets from his shirt pocket and checked his numbers as the last horse was coaxed into the starting gate. "And it was all for nothing, too—damn shame."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I forgot, you been in jail. I guess they don't have the *Racing Form* in the joint."

"What?"

"Mr. Spats," said Hunch, "he came up lame in a workout a couple days back. Fractured cannon bone . . . he won't be going in the Derby. Stud duty maybe, but his racing days are over." 🐾

JANE AND DICK

GARY ALEXANDER

The window faced an acre of closely trimmed grass. A bell tower shadow darkened the lawn below. Jane pictured it blackened and scorched. She closed her eyes and smelled smoke wafting from the pyre.

How often could you look out at the spot where the written record of a civilization was very nearly obliterated?

At Stonehenge, she had become one with the Druids. In the Colosseum, she shivered at the bloodlust of the Caesars. Now, in Yucatán, Mexico, Jane stood in Mani's church with Miguel, the caretaker, to view the site of another atrocity.

"Construction of this church took place between 1549 and 1560," he explained, a fact Jane already knew.

Between hand gestures and a modest comprehension of the other's language, they managed to communicate.

Jane said, "By Maya labor?"

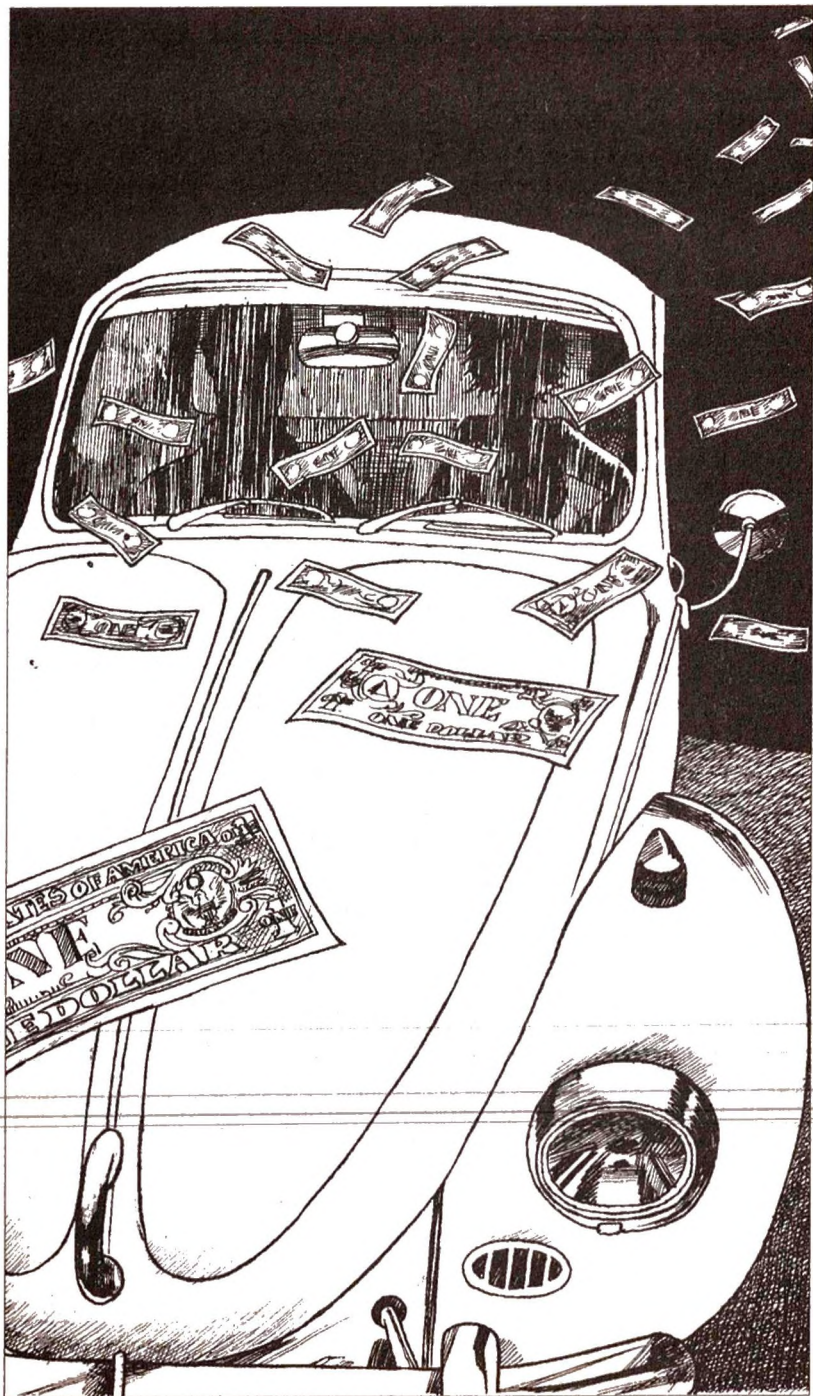
"Yes. Spaniards made Maya people tear down temples they say were works of Satan."

Six thousand slaves, he elaborated. Dismantling their ancestors' pyramids and reassembling limestone blocks that weighed hundreds of kilograms apiece into this church.

Miguel was a pleasant young man who wore an Orlando Magic T-shirt. Mani wasn't a tourist destination and the church provided no formal tour schedule, so Jane had him to herself. When she had inquired about Mani at her Cancún hotel, she received puzzled silence.

Once in town, Jane easily located the church. Typical of Yucatán Mexico, the town featured blockish houses, pockmarked streets, and dogs that snoozed wherever they chose, displaying their ribs. And typically, the Catholic church dominated the community. With its massive walls, twin bell towers, and arched entries, the church at Mani appeared even more out of scale because of the attached two-story monastery.

But it wasn't old stone and bell towers that drew Jane. It was what



happened in the yard four hundred and forty-two years earlier.

In 1562, the church friar, Diego de Landa, had gathered every Mayan idol and book he could lay his hands on, and in a pious rage, he burned those works of the devil. Those who resisted his zeal paid with their lives.

~~The Maya were the only New World people to have a written language. Three readable books, or codices, survived in European museums. Jane had seen the Paris Codex and she could see it still. White limed paper on bark, folded like screens. Richly colorful glyphs and illustrations, a work of art as well as a manuscript.~~

Landa's act disturbed even Spanish consciences. He was summoned to Spain to answer charges. While in jail awaiting trial, he wrote an apologist book entitled *Account of the Things of Yucatán*. Jane happened upon a copy in a bookstore. A portrait of Landa in the introduction showed a dour, disapproving man, lips tight, eyes downcast. There was no flexibility or tolerance, let alone a sense of humor. In today's lingo, Diego de Landa had been a control freak.

Jane was struck by the fortresslike bulk of the monastery section. The corner stanchions were ten feet thick. The rooms were domed, with iron hooks impaled in the walls to tie hammocks. Although the church remained in daily use, the monastery had long since closed. Fifteen feet above the ground, this floor had a catacomb feel. It gave her the creeps.

Miguel beckoned her to a room.

"Landa's," he said.

A balcony opened into the chapel. Convenient for monitoring the deportment of his flock, Jane thought. An elderly woman wearing a shawl sat in a slatted pew, intent on her rosary beads. The only other worshiper was blond, a young man. Slouched in a back row, he seemed less than devout. He gazed blearily up at Jane.

On the main floor, Miguel unlocked a room identified as MUSEO. This hopeful museum was a musty storeroom that smelled like an attic. Piled chock-a-block was Mayan pottery and bric-a-brac from the monastery era.

They would like to have a real *museo* complete with gift shop, Miguel said, and lots of visitors. But tourists were more interested in Cancun and the beaches and the big Mayan ruins than in a church in the middle of nowhere. "Maybe someday," he added. "If there is the money."

Jane thanked Miguel and went outside into a sauna. After two days in Mexico, Jane hadn't noticed any change in the hot, steamy weather, day or night.

The blond man from the chapel was on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets.

"Excuse me," he said. "Where the hell am I?"

He was American, younger than Jane, clean cut, and not quite handsome. His eyes were as red as they were blue. He smelled like a brewery.

Jane told him where he was.

He shrugged. "Mani? Means zilch to me. Don't have a map. How come you're here?"

"For the history."

That seemed to puzzle him. "I need to get somewhere."

Jane tried to be helpful. "Where are you coming from and where are you going?"

"From Cancún."

Tanned and of medium height, he wore wrinkled khakis and had a paunch. At home you'd find him hanging out in sports pubs with his buddies. She visualized him on Cancún's hotel strip, at the pool bars and discos. He seemed absurdly out of place here.

"To?"

He shrugged. "Farther north. Cancún's too expensive."

A backpacker without a backpack? Jane fished a dog-eared guidebook out of her tote bag and paged to a map. "Are you driving?"

"Uh huh."

"As late as it is, I'd recommend Mérida. It's the major city in Yucatán and about two hours away."

"Awesome. Appreciate it. See a market nearby? I need a soda pop bad."

Jane took bottles of *agua purificada* from her tote and gave him one. He thanked her and said his name was Dick. Jane said she was pleased to meet him.

She watched air bubbles rise as he drained the water in a prolonged gulp.

"You carry everything in that?" he asked, after wiping his mouth with a forearm.

Jane forced a smile. It was much too warm for a stale crack about ladies and their purses. She wished him luck and started walking toward the town square, the *zocalo*.

The bus she had gotten on this morning was like the ancient school buses used by Sunday schools. The locals rode for a few pesos. Their round, aquiline profiles could have been chiseled in the Mayan temples that Jane was so eager to visit.

They ogled the *gringa* as if she were an exotic creature, a Martian even. They chattered in their own tongue; to them

Spanish was a second language, and some knew less *español* than Jane. They offered her food they had brought—tortillas and wedges of fruit.

Once beyond the glitz of Cancún and Caribbean resort enclaves, poverty touched her like a slap. The village huts, the sparsely stocked shops, the rutted alleys that served as roads. Pregnant teenagers held babies, accompanied by mothers and grandmothers younger than she, some of those women also expecting.

When the bus wasn't howling along narrow, shoulderless pavement at unsafe speeds, it barely moved, creeping and creaking over the speed bumps, which protected the villagers from motorized mayhem. A bus stop was anywhere a person wanted to board or anywhere a rider wanted off. Jane swore it had stopped a thousand times. They were gridlocked half an hour at a town near Mani by a crush of traffic—human, animal, and vehicle—bringing newly harvested oranges to the central market.

She found she had grossly underestimated travel time to Mani. Although her map represented kilometer distances accurately, it spoke not to the infrastructure. Or lack thereof. The late afternoon sun shined in her face like a spotlight. At this latitude it would set abruptly, as if a blanket had been thrown over it. Jane was running out of daytime.

A single bus was parked across from the *zocalo*. It was nose down, a wheel and tire propped against the front bumper. The wheel had snapped off. The driver leaned on a fender, arms folded, waiting either for parts or divine intervention. There was no hotel or taxi stand or car rental agency in sight.

Great. She was resigned to a night on a bench, one eye open.

A horn honked. An old Volkswagen Beetle slowed beside her.

"Need a lift?" Dick asked.

"I'm going back to Cancún. You're not."

"Changed my mind. I'd get lost hunting for that whatchamacallit city."

A tire climbed the curb.

"Should you be driving at all?"

Dick applied the brakes. "You could do better?"

Jane kept walking.

Dick climbed across to the passenger side. "Okay. You drive."

Jane got behind the wheel and made her decision after reading the fuel gauge. Three-quarters. Being stuck in Mani was preferable to running out of gas in the middle of nowhere with him.

She shifted into gear.

"What did you say your name was?"

She hesitated. "Jane."

"Dick and Jane. Way cool."

She knew he'd say that. She just knew.

Dick hadn't come to Mani for the history or any other reason. He came because he was scared and panicky and had gotten himself lost. He was tired and hungry and confused and half drunk and hungover. His eyes itched and his mouth tasted like there'd been a frat party in it.

The trunk of the Beetle was stuffed so full of money that he feared the latch would pop. He was rich. He had money coming out his ears, but he couldn't spend a cent. After filling the tank at the last gas station he'd come to, Dick was down to less than ten pesos. Thirty years old and a loser with a capital L.

Jane could change his luck.

"So. You know your way around Mexico good?"

"No. This is my third day."

"A week longer for me," Dick said.

He sized Jane up as she accelerated around a flatbed. Slim. Short straight hair with strands of gray she didn't make an issue of hiding. Good smile. No wedding ring. She had a got-her-act-together way about her, bordering on what you'd call an attitude. Not bad looking for a broad her age, which had to be on the downhill side of forty.

Dick and Jane. Had to be an omen. Dick wasn't sure what kind.

They passed another church next to a school and a soccer pitch. He pointed and said, "There's a ton of old churches in this country. What's the attraction of the one back there?"

Jane told him about Mani's grim history.

"Landa, the book burner, what happened to him?"

"Acquitted of the charges and released from prison. He returned to Yucatán, where he was promoted to bishop and mellowed slightly. Diego de Landa died peacefully in 1579 at the age of fifty-four."

~~Maybe this was the omen. This Landa dude returning to where he stepped into the deep doo-doo, coming out smelling like a rose. History repeating itself.~~

"Where're you from?" he asked

"Portland, Oregon. And you?"

Dick had once robbed a convenience store in Longview, Washington, an hour's drive from Portland. Small world. Vaguely remembering his geography, he took a stab at the opposite coast. "Baltimore. What do you do?"

Baltimore sounded to Jane like a question. She said, "Medical

billing supervisor at a hospital. What do you do?"

"Uh, money markets. You know, currency and stuff. Your job, does it pay good?"

Jane didn't answer, thinking that if she had a brain in her head, she'd stop the car and jump out.

"Got an aspirin in that big bag of yours?"

"No," she said.

How she was looking at him, it was time to shut up.

Jane found the highway to Oxkutzcab, the little town with the oranges. She began retracing the bus ride. Map on her visor, she set out for Tekax, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Xel-Ha, Playa del Carmen, and eventually Cancún.

The headlights worked, but beamed weakly and cross-eyed. Her guidebook warned of the perils of night travel. Centerlines and street lamps were not the norm. Travelers were advised to be wary of wandering livestock.

How often had her mother wheedled her to cease gallivanting all over the world alone? "Take a nice cruise on a nice ship and meet a nice fella." At times like this, Jane conceded that mother knows best.

Midway between no place and nowhere, the car died.

"I hear they still make these Beetles in Mexico," Dick said. "They oughta have the bugs out of the Bugs by now."

While he laughed at his pun, she reached down to turn the key. But there was no key, just a jagged hole in the steering column that exposed the ignition switch.

"When were you going to steal the stereo, too, when you abandoned the car?"

"Hey," he said indignantly. "It's a rental car. It's not like it belongs to anyone."

Except for the stars, it was pitch black. Jane gripped the door handle and considered bolting. She listened for things that could eat her. She heard a scream that could either be a howler monkey or a jaguar.

Dick reached inside the steering column and fiddled. The engine started. "There we go. The wires came loose. No sweat."

Underway, Jane hoped for silence and an uneventful trip. They could part company in Cancún and pretend nothing happened.

"I guess I oughta explain my situation," Dick said.

"Oh, that's not necessary."

"I'm what you'd call a gentleman bank robber," he continued.

An oxymoron, Jane resisted saying.

"Who's reformed," he added.

Jane stared at low, scrub jungle silhouetted by the setting sun.

"I swear on a stack of Bibles as high as all of 'em your boy Landa owned in his entire life, I never used a gun or raised a hand to nobody. What I'd do, see, I'd go in and sit at the manager's desk, out of range of the cameras, and say I had a bomb and gimme the money. First time, the manager laughed. I was dressed like I am now and he could see I wasn't carrying nothing. Duh. He laughed at me, and I skedadddled. Lucky they didn't catch me.

"Second and last time, I was cool. I went in duded up in jacket and tie. Had me a briefcase. I tell the manager I'm packing a bomb. He says, 'Okay, you win,' goes to the vault, comes back with this duffel bag I can't hardly lift, and says to please go and don't hurt anyone. I figure he's setting me up and I'd go down in a hail of bullets outside. *Nada*. Doubt if he hit the alarm button for at least an hour. Wanna know what was in the bag?"

"No, thank you."

"Since you insist, 885,770 dollars, in twenties and fifties. Wanna know where it is now?"

"No."

Dick tapped the dashboard. "Under the hood, which in these old Beetles is what they call the trunk."

Jane didn't reply.

"Don't believe me?"

"I believe you."

"Everything's the honest truth, I swear."

"I said, I believe you."

"You know what all that cash is worth to me now?" He made a circle with thumb and forefinger. "A goose egg. Know why?"

"I can't imagine."

"It's not counterfeit, if that's what you're thinking."

"I have no opinion regarding your money."

"Pull over and I'll show you what I'm talking about."

"In case you haven't noticed, there's nowhere to pull over. The jungle is crowding the highway."

"No traffic neither."

Dick disabled the car. After it sputtered to a halt, he got out and opened the lid.

He removed a wad of currency and said, "What's wrong with this picture?"

"Everything."

"C'mon, Jane, what's this bill?"

"A fifty."

"And?"

"Please get in and start the car before somebody comes along and hits us."

Dick tossed the money straight up. He danced a jig as it rained on him, then did as he was told.

Moving again, Jane had to use the wipers to swipe a twenty out of her view. Dick said, "It's not funny money, its real money, before those fancy new bills came out to screw counterfeiters. You know, the color-shifting ink, the stuff you gotta hold the bill up to the light to see, tricky stuff like that."

"I occasionally see the old bills in circulation."

"Not down here you won't. Can't spend 'em, can't change 'em for pesos. I hopped a plane, planning on retiring with the margaritas and the señoritas. You know what? They won't touch my money with a ten-foot pole. One waiter, he went down the hall and picked up the phone. I scrambled. Counterfeiting is big time in this part of the world. The bills we used to use, anybody with a color printer could crank 'em out. Know what I think?"

"Dare I ask?"

"My friendly neighborhood banker was laundering money. They stiffed him with this humongous shipment of old cash he couldn't explain to the auditors. The banker had a problem and I solved it for him."

Dick finally shut up. They went into Tekax, the last town of any size before turning north at Felipe Carrillo Puerto, toward the Caribbean coast and Cancún.

There were lights, people, shops, restaurants, activity. At a stop sign, Jane opened her door and said, "I'm leaving."

Dick said in a whiny, hurt tone, "I thought we were friends."

"Oh, sure."

"How do I know you don't blab what I told you?"

"Trust me, I'll be delighted it we simply go our separate ways."

Dick pointed at two uniformed men, police officers or soldiers, who were drinking coffee in a corner café.

"They haven't spotted us yet," he said. "If they do and they hassle us, we're in a stolen car with a bunch of cash we can't explain. Guess who's driving? I'm a hitchhiker you picked up."

Jane closed her door and eased through the intersection, eyes forward. At the edge of Tekax, Dick said, "That wasn't a threat, Jane. It was, you know, food for thought."

They didn't speak for the next four villages.

"I been thinking," Dick said.

"Wonderful."

"See, it was easy to slip the money into Mexico, you know. You can

bring anything across. A hydrogen bomb, anything. They don't care. I wanna take my chances at home, but going back, it'd be impossible on account of airport security and U.S. Customs. They'd check me and my bags close. A young guy alone, I fit what you call a profile. "

"I have an idea. Fling the money into the jungle."

He looked at her. "That's crazy."

"You said it's worthless to you."

"I got a better idea. You're an upstanding citizen, right?"

No response.

"Nobody'd hassle *you*. You could run the money into the States a chunk at a time. I'd split with you, fifty-fifty."

"No."

"How much does your job pay you? Sounds like it'd be diddly squat."

"None of your business."

"Okay, maybe this car belongs to somebody, but the money sure as hell don't."

"If you say so."

"I bet you live with your mom."

Jane felt herself redden. So what if she did? In fact, her mother was quite robust for her age. Despite her cautions about Jane's travel, it often seemed that they were more like sisters. Jane wasn't ashamed of her lifestyle, but she had no wish to endure old maid and spinster remarks.

"That's also none of your business."

"Think it over between here and Cancun. Nearly nine hundred grand split down the middle. Donate it to that church we met at, if you're too good to line your own pockets. I don't give a damn. Whether you like it or not, Janie girl, you and me, we're partners. Dick and Jane Incorporated. Mind if I take a nap? I'm beat."

"Please do."

Dick curled up on the back seat. He wondered how many cats Jane had. He wondered if they kept sheets on the furniture. Uptight as Jane was, the prospect of almost half a mil ought to bring her around. It'd damn well better. Though it was against his policy to hurt anybody unless he had to, he'd blabbed too much to let her go off and squeal to the law.

He awoke with a start when they turned sharply. The regular jouncing of speed bumps and bad road had proved the equivalent of maternal rocking.

"Where the hell are we?"

"Felipe Carrillo Puerto, near the coast. We're halfway there."

"Good. Been thinking over my proposition, partner?"

"Yes, I certainly have," Jane said. "Go back to sleep. We'll talk later."

Dick drifted off, smiling. Jane was already spending the money. If she was a good girl, he'd let her keep some, maybe even ten percent.

He next awoke to the car's dome light as Jane was getting out.

"Hey."

"We're here," she said, slamming the door.

Jane hurried along the walkway. If Diego de Landa could return, so could she. The chapel would be open. Perhaps a side door to the monastery, too. She could hide until daybreak. But after seeing a light, she took a path to the right, to what she remembered as living quarters or an office. Miguel was in the yard, putting away tools.

He smiled. "You are my first and second visitor of the day."

"Miguel, I have trouble."

Miguel followed Jane's eyes to her trouble: an Anglo standing at a car, hands on hips. He was angry and familiar looking. He was the disheveled young man in the chapel earlier today. He was not worshipful, not respectful. He was the sort you have to watch.

"He is bothering you?"

"It's hard to explain, but I need to get away from him. I'm sorry to involve you. I didn't know where else to go."

Miguel and Dick played a stationary staring game.

Then Miguel cupped his hands and shouted, "*¡Policía!*"

Dick turned and ran into the darkness, knees pumping high.

"His type," Miguel said, "they know the word for police in every language."

"Will the police come?"

Miguel shook his head. "My voice is not that strong. What has he done?"

"I'm not honestly sure. I don't trust what he told me."

Jane took Miguel to the car, unzipped the duffel bag, and showed him the money.

"Who does this belong to?"

"Perhaps nobody."

"I do not understand."

"I'm not sure I do either," Jane said. "In his own manner, the man suggested a donation to your church. But there are problems with the money."

"What problems?"

"It will take time to explain, and this money won't be easy to spend."

Miguel lifted out the bag and looked upward. "There shall be a way." 🐦

THE STOLEN BLENKINSOP

I.

If it had been necessary for Mr. Hector Bushell to make a fortune for himself there can be little doubt that he would have done it. Fortunately or unfortunately—just as you please—the necessity did not exist, for his father had done it for him before he was born. Consequently, Hector, who was a genial if somewhat boisterous young man, devoted his talents to the service of his friends, whose happiness he insisted on promoting, with their concurrence or without it, by the exercise of his knowledge of the world and whatever was in it, his businesslike acumen, his exuberant animal spirits, and his overflowing, almost pestilential, energy. Quiet-mannered acquaintances who spied him afar dodged round corners and ran, rather than have their fortunes made by his vigorously expressed advice, enforced by heavy slaps on the shoulder and sudden digs in the ribs, and sometimes punctuated with a hearty punch in the chest. For he was a large and strong, as well as a noisy, young man, accurately, if vulgarly, described by his acquaintance as perpetually “full of beans.”

He had given himself a reputation as an art critic, on the strength of a year or two's attendance at an art school in Paris; and, indeed, he maintained a studio of his own, expensively furnished, where he received his friends and had more than once begun a picture. But his energies in this matter were mainly directed to the good of painters among his acquaintances, who were under the necessity of living by their work. He told them how their pictures should be painted, and how they could certainly be sold. Indeed, in this latter respect he did better than advise the painter—he advised the buyer, when he could seize one, and trundled him captive in the studio of his nearest friend with great fidelity and enthusiasm.

"The chance of your life, my dear sir!" he would say, snatching at the lapel of some wealthy friend's coat, and raising the other hand with an imminent threat of a slap on the shoulder. "The chance of your life! *The* coming man, I assure you! Something *like* an investment. A picture they'll offer you thousands for some day, and I do believe I can get it for you for a couple of hundred! Come and see it before some dealer gets in!"

It was with some such speech as this that he interrupted Mr. Higby Fewston, the margarine magnate, full of the report of the robbery a day before of a Gainsborough portrait from a house in Charles Street, Berkeley Square. Mr. Fewston was not the sort of man to take a deal of interest in pictures for their own sake, but the newspapers estimated the money value of the missing picture at twenty thousand pounds, and he found that very touching. He had the same respect for that Gainsborough, which he had never seen, that he would have had for a cheque for the sum signed by the firm of Rothschild; rather more, in fact, for if the cheque were stolen it might be stopped, and so rendered valueless; but there was no stopping the Gainsborough till you had caught the thief. So that Mr. Fewston found himself taking an unwonted interest in art; and when Hector Bushell, seizing the opportunity and pulling at his arm, drew him in the direction of Sydney Blenkinsop's studio, he offered less resistance than otherwise he might have done.

"Man named Blenkinsop," declaimed the zealous Hector. "Capital chap, and paints like—like a double archangel. His studio's close by—come and look for yourself. Of course, nothing need be said about buying the picture, if you don't want to. But just come and see it—I'll pretend we were passing and just dropped in. You'll have the sort of chance that people had in Gainsborough's own time. Why, I don't suppose *he* got more than a couple of hundred or so for the very picture the papers are so full of today!"

Mr. Fewston suffered himself to be dragged through many streets—the studio was not so near as Hector's enthusiasm made it seem—and finally into the presence of Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop, the painter. Blenkinsop was, by the side of Bushell, a comparatively quiet young man, not without apprehension of the possible consequences of his friend's devotion; for one never could tell what wild things Bushell might have been saying about one.

"Ah, Sydney, old boy!" cried that enthusiast. "How have you been all this time?" They had last met the day before, when Hector had hauled in some other possible patron. "How have you been? Just looked in as we were passing, you know—just looked

in! This is my friend, Mr. Higby Fewston, much interested in art, and what he don't know about a picture—well, there! Working on anything just now, eh? I say"—this with a start of apprehension—"you haven't sold that picture yet, have you? The stunner, you know, the Keston?"

"Oh, that?" responded Blenkinsop, who had never sold a picture in his life. "No, I haven't. Not that one."

"Ah, plain enough Agnew hasn't been here lately. I'd like to have another look at it, old chap; probably sha'n't have another chance, unless it goes somewhere where I know the people. Ah, there now; look at that now!"

Mr. Fewston looked at it blankly. "It's—it's a *landscape*," he said, presently, after consideration. The stolen Gainsborough had been a portrait, and Mr. Fewston liked things up to sample.

"Rather!" replied Hector. "It is a landscape, as you say, and no mistake! Something like a landscape that, eh? I knew you'd like it, of course, having an eye for such a thing. Ah, it's a topper!"

He fell back by the side of the man of margarine, and the two inspected the marvel in silence, the one with head aside and a smile of ecstasy, and the other with all the expression of a cow puzzled by a painted field with nothing to eat on it. Sydney Blenkinsop shuffled uneasily.

Presently Mr. Fewston thought of something to say. "Where was it taken?" he asked.

"Keston Common," murmured Sydney faintly and "Keston Common" repeated Hector loudly, making the title sound like a fresh merit. He also drew attention to the wonderful effects of light in the picture, the extraordinary painting of the sky, the subtle suggestion of atmosphere, and the marvelous "values." Mr. Fewston listened patiently to the end. There was another pause longer and more awkward than the last; it seemed likely to endure till something burst in Sydney Blenkinsop. Then, at last, Mr. Higby Fewston spoke, weightily.

"Keston," he said, with solemn conviction, "is a place I don't like. There's a bad train service."

Such a criticism as this even Hector Bushell could not readily answer. He attempted to evade the point and returned again to his "values." But any reference to values unsupported by definite figures made little impression on the commercial mind of Mr. Fewston, and in a very few minutes more he drifted out, with Hector Bushell still in close attendance.

Hector, however, remained with the margarine Mæcenæ only long enough to discharge another volley of admiration for the

picture, and took his leave at the first convenient corner. As a consequence he was back in five minutes, to discover Sydney Blenkinsop vengefully kicking a lay figure.

"Don't bring another chap like that to this place," cried the painter savagely, "or I'll pitch him out o' window!"

"My dear chap, don't be an ass! You've got no business instincts. A man like that's invaluable, if you can only kid him on. He'll buy any old thing, if he buys at all."

"If!"

"You're an ungrateful infidel. I tell you I'm going to sell that 'Keston Common' for you. What could you do with it by yourself?"

"Put a stick through it—burn it—anything! I'm sick of the whole business."

"Just what I expected. You could put a stick through it or burn it—and what's the good of that?"

"What's the harm? I can't sell it and they won't hang it at the shows; I know that before I send it."

"You know everything that's no use to you, and nothing that pays. You can burn a picture, but you can't sell it. Now, I'm going to sell that picture for you, if you'll let me. Will you?"

"You can do what you like with it."

"Done with you, my boy! I'll make you famous with it, and I'll get you money for it. I've an idea such as you couldn't invent in a lifetime. Shut up the shop now and we'll talk it over at the Café Royal. Come along. We'll have a little dinner out of the money I'm going to make for you. But you've to take orders from me, mind!"

II.

The evening papers flamed with the tale of the lost Gainsborough, as the morning papers had done before them, and the morning papers of the next day kept up the flame with scarcely diminished violence. Sydney Blenkinsop rose with nothing but a headache to distinguish him from the other unknown people about him, but by lunch time he was as famous as Gainsborough himself. For another picture had been stolen. The evening papers came out stronger than ever, giants refreshed by a new sensation, with the blinding headline, ANOTHER PICTURE ROBBERY! Sub-headings sang of A DANGEROUS GANG AT WORK, and deplored A YOUNG PAINTER'S MISSING MASTERPIECE. Sydney Blenkinsop was the young painter, and the view of Keston Common was the missing masterpiece. In the eyes of thousands of worthy people Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop became an artist second only in importance to Gainsborough, if second to anybody; and Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop,

himself appalled by the overwhelming success of Mr. Hector Bushell's scheme, would have fled the country, but for the superior will-power of that same Hector Bushell, who never left his side.

For journalists haunted the studio and "wrote up" the whole business afresh for every edition of all the daily newspapers in England. Sydney would have bolted the door and fled from the rear, but Hector ordered in caviare sandwiches and oyster patties and a case of champagne, and was the life and soul of the party. When Sydney seemed at a loss for a judicious answer—which occurred pretty often—Hector was instantly equal to the occasion. The main story was simple enough, and was cunningly left to rest entirely on the word of the police. The constable on the beat had perceived, in the gray of the morning, that a window of the studio had been opened, and a pane broken in the process. Nobody seemed to be in the place, so the policeman kept watch by the window till assistance arrived, when it was found that obviously a thief had entered the studio, and had got safely away. It was not found possible to communicate with Mr. Blenkinsop till the morning was well advanced and somebody was found who knew the address of his lodgings; and then he was met as he was leaving home for the studio, in company with his friend, Mr. Bushell. Things in the studio had been much disarranged, and the picture, a view of Keston Common, had been cut from its frame and taken.

So much for the simple facts as observed by the police; but the frills, embroideries, tassels, tinsels, and other garnishings, which lent variety and interest to the narrative, came in an inexhaustible and glorious torrent from Hector Bushell. He took each separate journalist aside and gave him the special privilege of some wholly new and exclusive information as to the surprising genius of Sydney Blenkinsop, and the amazing prices his pictures were worth and would certainly fetch some day. Doubtless the thief was a knowing file, and was laying up for the future—"saving his stake," as it were. Any possible slump in Gainsboroughs—of course, nobody expected it, but such a thing might happen—would be compensated by the certain rise in Blenkinsops. And with this astute suggestion Hector shut one eye, tapped the side of his nose, and surprised the favored reporter with one of his celebrated digs in the ribs.

The newspapers on their part neglected nothing. Gainsborough and Blenkinsop had a column apiece, side by side, in most of them, and in the rest they had more, or were fraternally mingled together. "Is no masterpiece safe?" asked the Press. And, answering

its own question with no more than a paragraph's delay, the Press gave its opinion that no masterpiece was. To have put in question the new-born eminence of Blenkinsop would have been to spoil the boom in the most unbusinesslike way. Of course, a Turner, or a Raeburn, or another Gainsborough would have been preferable, but as it was the Press had to do its best with the materials to hand, and so it did, to the glory of Blenkinsop. The notion of a thief or a gang of thieves going about after valuable pictures was too good to waste, and every newspaper expressed the sage conjecture that, where one picture was, there would the other be found. One scribbling cynic managed to squeeze in a hint that this might suggest the valuable clue of lunacy in the culprit; though nobody noticed that in the general flood of Blenkinsoppery.

But in the intervals of interviewing, when the friends had a few minutes of private conversation, there was a notable lack of gratitude in Sydney's acknowledgments.

"This is a fine ghastly mess you've landed me in!" he protested, at the first opportunity. "How do you expect me to look all these people in the face?"

"How? Oh, the usual way—only the usual way, you know! The more usual the better. *I don't find any difficulty!*"

"You? No—you're enjoying it; you've the cheek for anything. I'm the sufferer. I've had to stand here and yarn to a police-inspector about the beastly business!"

"Yarn! The simple, plain, clear truth! You dined with me last night at the Café Royal, leaving the studio just as usual. And in the morning you came here, also as usual, and found the police in charge. Straightforward enough. Of course, he didn't ask you anything about *me*. It seems to me you've got the soft job. I'm doing all the work, and as to enjoying it, of course I am! Why aren't you?"

"Enjoying it! Good heavens, man, I never expected such a row as this; I was a fool to listen to you."

"Now, there!" Hector Bushell spread his arms in injured protest. "There's ingratitude! I've positively made you the most celebrated painter alive, all in the course of a few hours, and you—you pretend you don't like it! Oh, come off it! Why, there are thousands of respectable people in this country today, who couldn't name six painters who ever lived, that know all about you—and Gainsborough. I fetched the Press round—did it all!"

"And how's it all going to end? And where is the picture? Why won't you tell me that?"

"Well, I was afraid somebody might catch on to a sort of idea

that you knew where it was, and I wanted you to be able to say you didn't, that's all. Nobody has had any such unworthy suspicions, and so there's no harm in inviting you to admire the dodge. When I got home last night, with the canvas rolled up under my arm, I just took it to bed with me till the morning. When I woke I thought it over, and I remembered a big roll of old stair-carpet up in a garret where nobody went—a useless old roll that my dear old mother has dragged about with us for years—ever since we lived in Russell Square, in fact. It's never been touched since it came, and never will be. So I nipped out and up into the garret with the picture, unrolled a few yards of the carpet, slipped the canvas in very carefully, painted side out, rolled up the carpet again, tied it, and shoved it back among the other old lumber. And there it can stay, safe as the Bank, till we want it again!"

"Till we want it again! And when will that be?"

"When we've sold it. You leave it to me, my bonny boy. Remember that other Gainsborough that was stolen—the 'Duchess.' Would that have fetched such a price if it hadn't been stolen and boomed up? Not on your life. I'm out to sell that picture for you, and I'm going to do it—to say nothing of immortal glory, which I'm positively shovelling on you where you stand. Hark! There's another reporter. Keep up that savage, worried look—it's just the thing for the plundered genius!"

But this visitor was no reporter. It was, indeed, Mr. Higby Fewston, much more alert and affable than yesterday, and eager for news of the picture.

"Is there any chance of getting it?" he asked, with some eagerness. "Have the police got on the track of the thief yet?"

"No, they haven't yet," replied Hector Bushell, calmly. "But I should think there was a very good chance of getting the picture, ultimately."

"I suppose you'll offer a reward?"

"Well, we'll have to think it over. It's a bit early as yet."

"Tell me now," Mr. Fewston pursued, with increasing animation, "~~can the picture be properly repaired? Isn't it cut out of the frame?~~"

"Yes, but that's nothing. It's easily relined and put back."

"That's satisfactory. And now as to the flowers—I think I remember yellow flowers right in the front of the picture. They *are* cowslips, I hope?"

"Oh, yes—cowslips, of course," replied Hector, with easy confidence, since cowslips seemed to be required. While Sydney Blenkinsop, who had spotted in a few touches of yellow in the

foreground because it seemed to be wanted, and with a vague idea of possible furze-blossoms, or buttercups, gasped and wondered.

"And I suppose more cowslips could be put in, if required, by a competent man?"

"I don't think any more are required," put in Sydney Blenkinsop, decidedly.

"No—very likely not—just an inquiry. I *did* think at the time there seemed to be rather a lot of cowslips for Keston Common, but I do a good deal in the 'Cowslip' brand of—the—the article I deal in, and there might be a possibility of reproducing the work as an advertisement. One has to consider all these things, of course; and on the whole I'd like to buy that picture, if you get it back. What about price?"

"Five hundred," said Hector, promptly, before Sydney could open his mouth.

"Um, rather high, isn't it?" commented Fewston equably. "I was thinking of, say, three hundred."

"Well, yes," Hector responded, just as affably. "Yesterday that might have done, but just now it's today." And he regarded the margarine magnate with a long, deliberate, placid wink.

"Ah well, I understand, of course," replied Fewston, who appeared to far better advantage today, discussing business, than yesterday, misunderstanding art. "Of course, I quite recognize that all this publicity—naturally Mr. Blenkinsop wants all the benefit possible from it—quite legitimate, of course. But there, the picture isn't recovered yet. Meantime, I may consider I have the refusal of it contingently, I suppose. You see, Mr. Bushell—you are evidently a man of business—this may be useful to me. A great deal of space is being devoted to Mr. Blenkinsop and his picture in the papers, and I—well, it would be worth my while to be in it, as conspicuously as possible. Do you perceive?"

"I think I see. Tomorrow morning's papers, for instance: 'We are at liberty to state that Mr. Sydney Blenkinsop's now famous picture was destined for the galleries of one of the best known of our merchant princes; in fact, that in the event of its hoped-for recovery it is to be purchased by Mr. Higby Fewston, and will make a conspicuous feature of that gentleman's collection.' I think that can go in—no doubt even a little more."

"Excellent! Will you do that? And it is understood that if you get the picture—you say there's a very good chance—I have first refusal."

"At five hundred pounds."

"Three hundred, I think."

"Wouldn't do, really, as things go. Consider what the Gainsborough would cost you if you could get that, now that it has been stolen!"

"Well, well, we'll leave it at *four* hundred, unless you get a higher offer; it's rather absurd discussing this, with the picture lost. But I do want to be sure that I get proper publicity in the papers. You'll see to that, won't you? You see, this is just the time I want it. I am putting up for the County Council, and—this *strictly* between ourselves—there is just the possibility that I may be turning my business into a limited company. So all these things help, and I and my family are keeping ourselves forward as much as possible just now. Mrs. Fewston, for instance, is making an appeal for the Stockjobbers' Almshouses, and running a sale. And this picture—well, if it's recovered we shan't quarrel about the price so long as you get me well into the papers in the meantime. You see, I'm perfectly frank—we'll do our best for each other, mutually."

And so it was settled between Mr. Fewston and the untiring Bushell, while Sydney Blenkinsop hovered uneasily in the background, a superfluous third party in the disposal of his own picture, which also seemed to be superfluous, so far as its merits were concerned—or even its present possession.

III.

Mr. Higby Fewston was well satisfied with the next morning's newspapers. Hector Bushell saw to it that every office was supplied with information of the merits and doings of that patron of fine art, and during the day the evening papers interviewed Mr. Fewston himself, to the combined glory of Fewston and Blenkinsop. Mr. Fewston expressed strong opinions as to the inefficiency of the police, and made occasion to allude to his views on the London County Council. Speaking as an art critic Mr. Fewston considered Mr. Blenkinsop certainly the greatest painter of the present time: and the stolen masterpiece was a great loss to him, personally, the intending purchaser. There could be no doubt, in Mr. Fewston's mind, that the same clever gang had captured the two great pictures—evidently educated criminals of great artistic judgment. And then came certain notable and mysterious hints as to astonishing things that Mr. Fewston might say as to the whereabouts of the plunder, if it were judicious—which at this moment, of course, it was not.

The "boom" went so well that Sydney Blenkinsop himself began

to look upon his sudden notoriety with a more complacent eye. In another day or two the affair had run best part of the ordinary course of a newspaper sensation, the Bishop of London had given his opinion on it, and while the Gainsborough column shrank considerably, the Blenkinsop column became a mere paragraph at its foot. It would seem to be the proper moment for the recovery of the picture.

And now it grew apparent that this was the great difficulty. What had been done was easy enough; it had almost done itself—with the constant help of Hector. But to restore the picture—naturally, unsuspectingly, and without putting anybody in gaol—this was a job that grew more difficult the more it was considered. Hector Bushell grew unwontedly thoughtful, and Sydney Blenkinsop began to get ungrateful again. He had been dragged up a blind alley, he said, and now he wanted to know the way out. Hector smoked a great many strong cigars without being able to tell him.

They parted moodily one night toward the end of the week, and the next day Sydney was alone in his studio all the morning. He was growing fidgety and irritable, notwithstanding his new-found eminence, and he wondered what kept Hector away. Was he going to shirk now that the real pinch was coming? Work was impossible, so the partaker in Gainsborough's glory loafed and smoked and kicked his furniture, and smoked and loafed again. His lunch was brought him from the corner public-house, and he ate what he could of it. Then he took to looking out of door, as is the useless impulse of everybody anxiously awaiting a visitor. He had done it twice, and was nearing the lobby again when the cry of a running newsboy struck his ear. He pulled the door open hurriedly, for in the shout he seemed to hear something like the name Gainsborough. There came the boy, shouting at each studio door as he passed, and waving his papers. Sydney extended his coin and snatched the paper as the boy ran past. It was fact; he *had* heard the name of Gainsborough, for the thousandth time that week. The picture had been discovered in the thief's lodgings, but the thief had bolted and was still at large. There was not much of it under the staring headline, but so much was quite clear. The picture was found, but the thief had got away.

Wasn't there a chance in this? Surely there ought to be. Why didn't Hector Bushell come? Surely, if they were prompt enough, some little dodge might be built on this combination of circumstances, by which his picture might be brought to light again—this also without the thief. They knew, now, where the thief *had* been, and that he was gone. This was good news.

Hector could certainly make something of that. Where was he?

He was at the door in the lobby, in the studio, even as the thought passed. Flushed and ruffled, wild of eye, with dust on his coat and a dint in his hat, Hector Bushell dropped into the nearest seat with an inarticulate "G'lor!"

"What's up?" cried Sydney. "The Gainsborough—do you know? They've got it!"

"Blow the Gainsborough—where's the Blenkinsop? Sydney, it's a bust up!"

"What is?"

"The whole festive caboodle! The entire bag of tricks! My mother's been and sent the roll of stair-carpet to the jumble sale!"

"The *what*?"

"Jumble sale—Mrs. Fewston's jumble sale; Stockjobbers' Almhouse Fund!"

"Great heavens!"—Sydney leapt for his hat—"where is it? When is it! What—"

"No go!" interrupted Hector, with a feeble wave of the hand. "No go! It's today—I've been there. Blazed off there the moment I knew it. They'd sold the carpet to an old woman just before I arrived. Nice girl I know, helping at Mrs. Fewston's stall, told me that. Just then up came Mrs. Fewston herself, glaring straight over my head as though I was too small and too beastly to look at. A dead cut, if ever I saw one! I felt a bit uneasy at that. But the nice girl told me the name of the old woman who had the carpet and where she lived. So I streaked out after her and caught her two streets off; she was shoving her plunder home in a perambulator. I grabbed it with both hands and offered to buy it. I was a bit wild and sudden, I expect, and the old girl didn't understand; started screaming, and laid into me with an umbrella. I wasn't going to wait for a crowd, so I out with the stair-carpet and bowled it open all along the pavement. There was no picture in it—nothing! I kicked it the whole length out, all along the street, and then pelted round the next corner while the old party was tangled up with the other end. Sydney, my boy, Fewston's got that picture now! The carpet was sent to the house!"

"What in the world shall we do? We're in a fine sort of mess!"

For a time Hector Bushell had no answer: he was considering many things. Mrs. Fewston's disdainful cut; the fact that the carpet—and the picture—had been in Fewston's house since the evening of the day before yesterday. Also he wondered why Fewston had made no sign. He had had a full day and a half to flare up in,

if he had felt that way inclined; but there had been no flare. Why? Hector's faculties gradually ranged themselves and he began to understand. Could Fewston afford to stultify himself after the advertisement he had so eagerly snatched? And there were the interviews in the newspapers! And the County Council election! And the limited company! It grew plain that Mr. Fewston's interests were not wholly divorced from their own, after all.

"What shall we do?" reiterated Sydney, wildly. "We're in a most hideous mess!"

"Mess?" repeated Hector, straightening his hat and gradually assuming his customary placidity. "Mess? Oh, I don't know, after all. I was a bit startled at first, but we haven't accused anybody, you know. *We're* perfectly innocent. If you like to authorize me to get in at your studio window to fetch a picture, why shouldn't you? And if the police like to jump to conclusions—well, they ought to know better. Lend me a clothes-brush."

"But what about Fewston?"

"That's why I want the clothes-brush. He's in it pretty deep, one way or another, eh? We'll go round and collect that money." 🐾

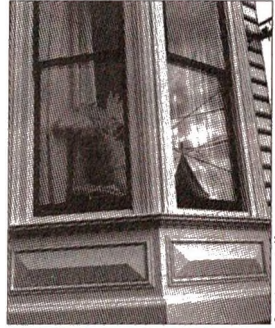
Solution to the January/February "UNSOLVED"

Joe Mitelli murdered the rival gang leader and fled in the Buick driven by Fred Nicoli.

AGE	NAME	COAT	CAR	BORN IN
28	Fred Nicoli	peajacket	Buick	Siracusa
27	Hal Orosco	parka	Chevrolet	Messina
26	Gus Kalyvas	trenchcoat	Ford	Cefalu
25	Joe Mitelli	brown alpaca overcoat	Audi	Palermo
24	Ike Lambroso	black raincoat	Dodge	Catania

THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida. Honorable mentions go to Ben Mosley of University City, Missouri; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Jacquie Juers of Wilmington, Delaware; John Thomen of Katy, Texas; Carolyn E. Kuczek of Cherry Valley, Illinois; Beverley Feather and Karen Atkinson of Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada; Daniel LeBoeuf of Lake Orion, Michigan; and Pat Scannell of Framingham, Massachusetts.



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GUNFIGHT AT TABLETOP RIM

JAMES HAGERTY

Had his time finally come?

The Kid had been in the saddle most of the morning. After a short rest for Rocky, he had hit the trail again for Choco Point and the mother lode.

A fast getaway meant taking a partial haul, but something was better than nothing. He had made a clean getaway before, but this time they were on to him.

It's not that he hadn't taken his haul. He had. Now they were closing in. He was cornered.

He had turned Rocky loose and was holed up in the valley, hidden from view by the lacy undergrowth below Tabletop Rim. If they didn't pass by there would be a gunfight.

He could barely see Rocky silhouetted against the afternoon sky. If they did pass by, he would get back to his horse and be on his way. But, if they were on to him, the lead would fly. And from all appearances they were on to him.

He pulled the bandana over his nose and mouth as if to encapsulate the bittersweet taste that comes with having made a haul and having to face down the law. He drew his six-shooter, hunkered down, and waited for them to make their move.

And it wasn't long before they did.

"Out from under the table, Billy! You've been in the cookie jar again. You're going to your room for the rest of the day!"

His time had finally come.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 49, No. 3, March, 2004. Published monthly except for combined January/February and July/August double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$43.90 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$53.90 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Or to subscribe, call 1-800-220-7443. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 40012460. © 2003 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub. Dept., 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. GST #R123054108.

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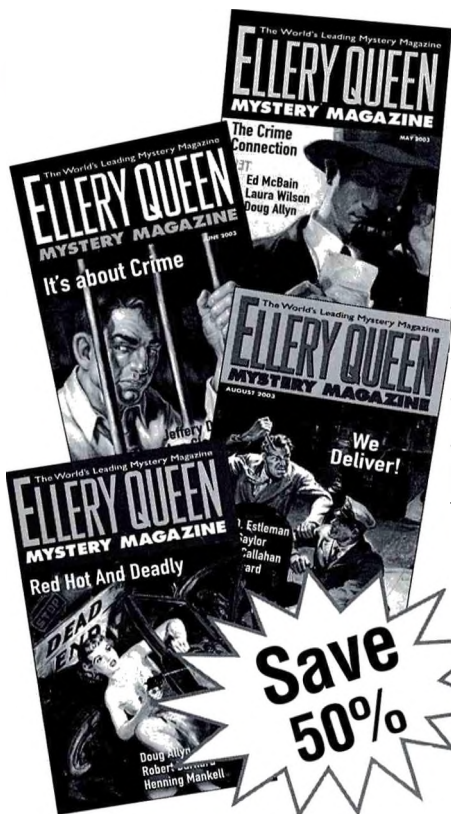
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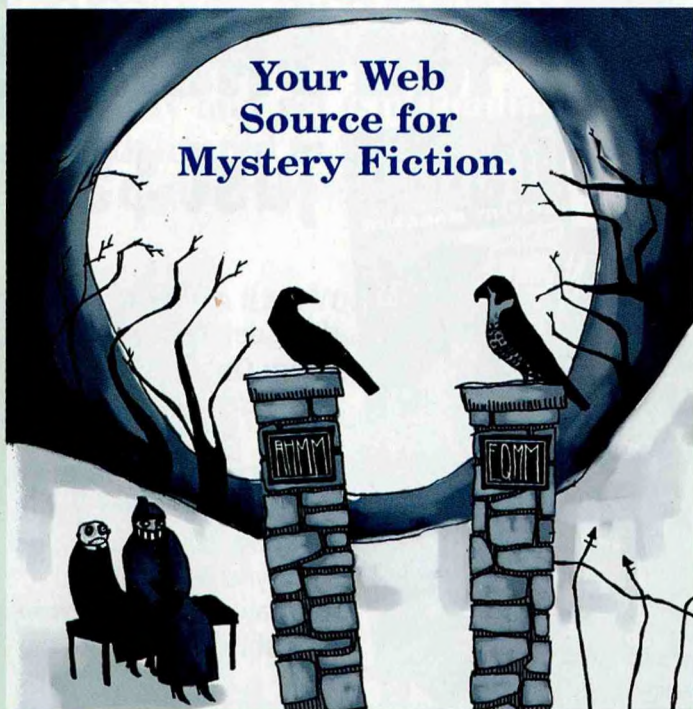
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