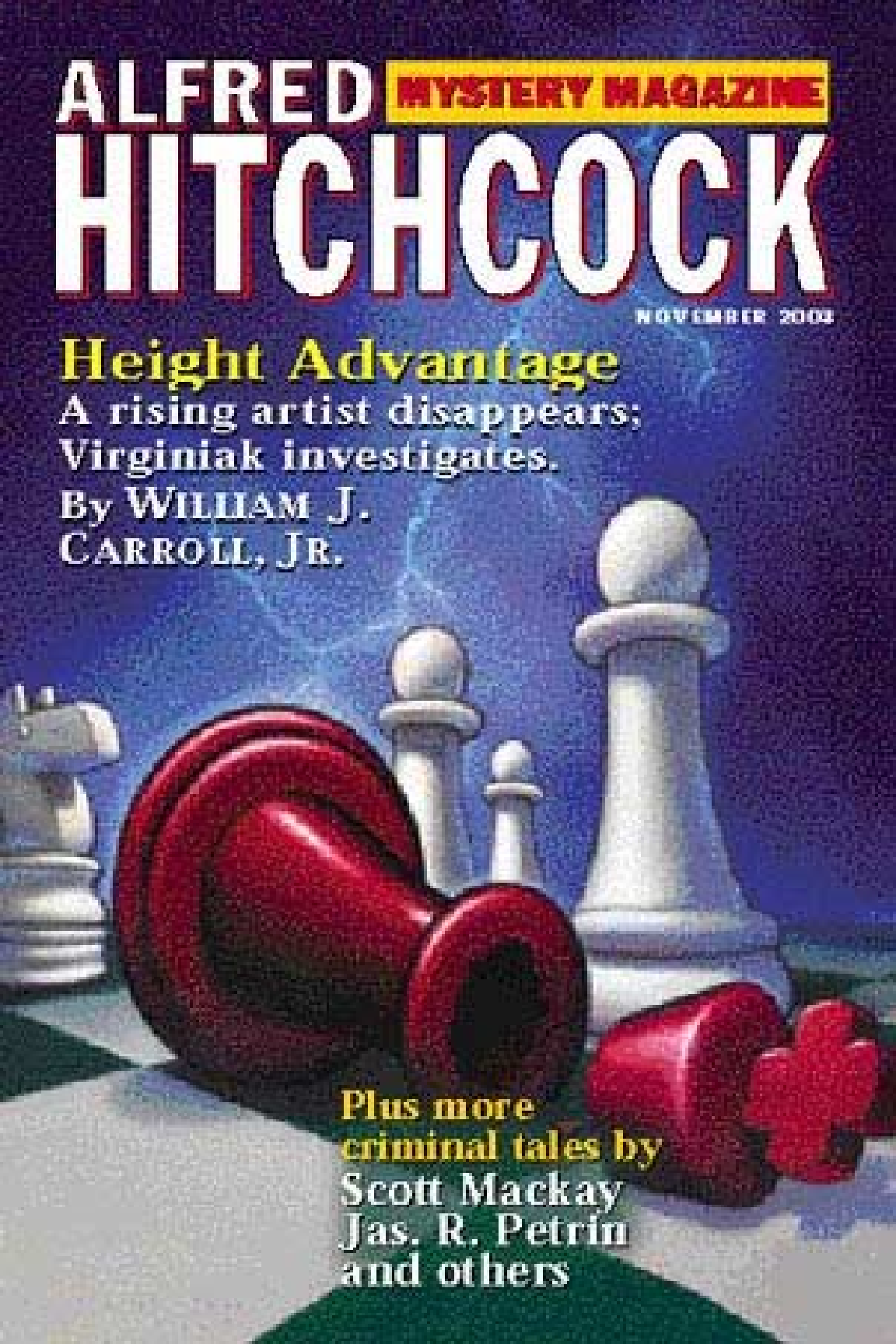
ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2008

Height Advantage

A rising artist disappears; Virginiak investigates.

By William J. Carroll, Jr.



Plus more criminal tales by
Scott Mackay
Jas. R. Petrin
and others

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Alfred Hitchcock's
Mystery Magazine
November 2003
Vol. 48 No. 11
Dell Magazines
New York

All stories in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* are fiction.
Any similarities are coincidental.
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
ISSN 0002-5224 published monthly
except for combined double issues of January/February and July/August.
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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
Editorial Correspondence only:
475 Park Avenue South
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Subscriptions to the print edition
One Year $29.97
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Editor's Notes: **Old friends and new**

Stories and novels that feature series characters offer distinct pleasures. Such stories combine fiction's ability to conjure novel times, places, and experiences with the reassurance of characters whose histories and quirks are familiar. With each installment, we delight in the ongoing development of beloved characters as much as we do in the pleasures and satisfactions of the puzzle at hand. This month's issue includes several stories featuring such recurring characters.

In “Height Advantage,” William J. Carroll's Virginiak, on leave for a few days in Seattle, chances on an old friend's paintings in a gallery—only to end up investigating her disappearance. The warrant officer for Army counter-inteligence has been making appearances in the pages of this magazine for the past thirteen years. Another long-time AHMM author, Jas. R. Petrin, has established several continuing characters (his End of Main stories featuring Chief Robideau are reader favorites). “Egon Roy” checks in once again with the underworld figures who habituate the Westbrook Hotel and dance around mob boss La-La Lloyd and his right-hand man, Hightops. Speaking of underworld (and perhaps other worlds), John Hall offers another adventure in the career of the “gentleman thief” A. J. Raffles (originally created by E. W. Hornung in 1899), who takes to attending séances in “A. J. Raffles: The Other Side.”

New to AHMM this month is Scott Mackay, the Toronto-based author of police procedurals featuring Detective Barry Gilbert and Joe Lombardo, who investigate a car bombing in “The Pines of Cuska.” Gilbert and Lombardo were first introduced in 1999 in Mackay's award-winning novel Cold Comfort, slated to be reissued in paperback by Worldwide next March. His newest novel, Old Scores, is hot off the presses from St. Martin's Minotaur. Also new to the magazine this month is Iain Rowan, author of “Two Nights’ Work,” who hails from the U.K. He is new to the mystery field, but he has published numerous stories he terms “fabulist” that range from speculative fiction to fantasy to quiet atmospheric horror.

In an inversion of the series theme, Robert C. Hahn takes a look at a handful of recent stand-alone novels by writers known for their series characters. Our Busman's Holiday column, meanwhile, visits The Mystery Company and talks to proprietor Jim Huang, who has his own interest in series novels. Mr. Huang noticed that a number of such series are no longer in print in their entirety, and since readers new to a series often like to start with the first book, he has started a line of reprints to address this issue. If you haven't met them already, Crum Creek Press would like to introduce you to Kate Flora, Barbara D'Amato, and Terence Faherty.

—Linda Landrigan

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Egon Roy by Jas. R. Petrin

On this particular day at the Westbrook Hotel, which is Donny Rumano's place, I'm helping Elsie the short-order cook make the TV behave, an effort that involves pulling the back off the antique and beating the neck of its picture tube with a wooden spoon. And I feel I have restored its performance to a semblance of brightness and clarity, when who should thrust his nose into the room but a Weston guy named Egon Roy, a guy sometimes called Roy the Painter, but more commonly known as Eggs. He spots me on the stepladder shoving the TV back up on its perch and legs it for me.

"Can we talk?"

"How does that look from where you're standing?" I ask, twisting the tint control (this is a TV so old that it actually has knobs on it) to shift some of the blue out of the news lady's face.

"It's important," he says.

"You prefer this..." I ask, rolling the brightness between my fingers, "or this..." tweaking the contrast.

"I prefer my announcers without green lips," he says in a tone of bad temper, "but let's leave it and sit down and talk about something important."

I climb down off the ladder, hinge it shut, and lean it against the wall beside the deep-freeze. I can see Egon won't be dissuaded from sharing what's on his mind, and so I lead him to a window seat where I had been drinking my coffee before the TV washed out. Eggs slides into the booth and

braces his hard, pointed elbows on the table. “Remember I told you Reno went missing?” He hadn't; he might have told somebody, but not me. “Well, they finally found him. At Canada Malted. In a pickle barrel with little green gherkins bobbing around his ears.”

One thing I know: If the unfolding of the universe requires that somebody be found in a pickle barrel then that somebody might just as well be Reno Carp, an individual who has failed to endear himself to the local regulars, not to mention the irregulars, or for that matter his own mother, after he makes off with practically all the money she has saved in the world, stashed not secretly enough in a rolled oats box over her kitchen sink. Still, I know why Eggs is upset. After leaving his brother's painting business—on account, he says, of a heart problem: his heart wasn't in it—he had grown thick with Reno Carp, the two of them getting on like brothers in the deepest reaches of the Westbrook bar with their heads together.

“So what was he doing at Canada Malted?” I ask. “That's not a place where I can feature Reno Carp.”

Egon scowls at my obtuseness. “Canada Malted isn't the point. The pickle barrel is the point. Reno was not the kind of guy to deliberately insert himself into a pickle barrel, especially one filled with brine and gherkins.”

I consider this. “He was a short-legged little homunculus. You don't think he was hungry and overreached himself?”

“No.”

“Well, then, what do you think?” I swallow the last of my cold coffee. “Do you have any idea as to how he got there?”

“I have some guesses, and they all start with ‘L'.”

“La-La Lloyd?”

He winces as if struck by a gas pain, and moves his eyes around the room.

“Do you have to shout?”

“But why should La-La have anything to do with it?”

“That's the point! I don't know!”

“You don't know why it's Canada Malted, and you don't know why it's La-La Lloyd.” I can only shrug. “You need to do better if I'm going to help you.”

He sags in the booth. “Look. It's a long story. But here's the bottom line. I don't want trouble with La-La, I don't want to end up in a pickle barrel. Since I heard that news I been laying low, I don't make noise, I don't switch on my light.” He shuts his baggy eyes and a shudder goes through him. “I need a drink.”

So we move to the bar, search out a dark table, and Eggs, ensconced half in shadow with his hand draped across his face, tells me about it—the best parts...

* * *

“The bottom line—I realize it now—I shouldn't of listened to Reno Carp. When he came to me with his idea I should of put him off somehow.”

“Reno Carp had an idea?”

Our beer comes and Egon picks up his glass. Looks at me down the length of it, swallowing in big gulps. He wipes his lips on his sleeve.

“I could of shown him the door—I should of—but see, I didn't know La-La Lloyd would wind up getting involved.”

“Involved in what?”

“I'm telling you! Try to listen!” He takes a breath, a not-too-steady one. “What happened, Reno's doing his rounds one night"—I picture Reno hitting every bar on this side of the Red River, starting at Main Street and working west out to the race track—"and on one of his pit stops he hears some talk. This mouthy guy, I guess a tow truck driver. It seems this guy, works for Happy Hooker, gets sent to bring in a vehicle that broke down in an awkward location, blocking an approach to the Norwood Bridge. He finds a van sitting low on its springs, the driver nervous as a cat in a kennel. A panel van, right? No windows. So the driver can't see what's inside. But when he puts on the hook and starts hoisting the back of the thing, he sees his own front wheels practically rise off the ground, which to him is significant, since he has lifted the backs of city busses without ever observing such a thing.

“He says to the driver, jeez, what's he got in the thing—bricks? And the guy says, right, he's making a fireplace. Only at this moment, the van at an angle, something falls over inside that sounds more like steel than bricks. So when the van guy reaches in to get his personal effects out of the cab, the tow truck driver takes a quick look and doesn't see bricks. You know what he sees?”

“No.”

“You know what he sees in there?”

“Uh-uh.”

“He sees...” Egon aimed his finger in my face and cocked an invisible hammer.

“Guns?”

“That's right. And lots of them. Enough to start a small war. Everything from handguns to rifles to light machine guns. Even, as it turns out, an old RPG. And ammunition, too. Cases of it. This stuff is piled to the roof, and it's heavy. It's no wonder the van gives up the ghost.

“Well, just looking at the tow truck operator, Reno can easily see where the van must of been hauled to, the name of the place embroidered on the operator's shirt pocket: NESTOR'S ENGINE AND TRANSMISSION. And so Reno thinks, hey, why not look into the situation? And so he comes to me.”

“How come?”

“How come what?”

“How come he thinks that?”

“Thinks what?”

“Thinks he should look into it.”

“Because it's the kind of a guy he is.”

“And why come to you?”

“Because he needs a vehicle, a truck, and he knows I got my old Sierra.”

“Right.”

“And also he knows I don't blab all over the place.”

“You're blabbing now.”

“Sure. But this is different. I'm trying to avoid a relationship with a pickle barrel.” He downs the rest of his beer, peers around with a hunted look, and says, “To make a long story short, we make a visit—it must be three in the morning—to the transmission place, okay? Up on Logan, there, where the slaughterhouse use to be. Find a window that's been carelessly left without much of a lock on it, get

inside, open the van up, and Carp is right. There are the guns. It nearly blows me away. Well, we get busy and shift everything out to our own vehicle inside of fifteen minutes and beat it for an empty shed Carp knows about, he's got like about fifty of them rented out all around the city, drive inside and slam the doors. Then we trade a high five. We feel great. We think it's a good night's work."

"Only—I'm gonna guess, now—it isn't?"

"No, not really. Partly, I think, because Carp has neglected his homework. See, what Carp was doing, it's like poaching. You can do it, but you better know whose woods you're in. Reno overlooks this. Big mistake. Two days later he's snatched coming out of his place there above the drycleaners, by guys, I am told, who are very gruff and businesslike. And next morning, there he is in the pickle barrel. I guess because he doesn't speak up promptly about where the stuff got moved and hid."

"You think?"

"Yeah."

"But why do you suppose he didn't? Speak up, I mean. He'd be better off doing that than being stuffed in a barrel."

"He couldn't of told them if he wanted to. Reason being, because the stuff was moved."

"Say what?"

"The stuff was moved. Moved again. Moved from Carp's shed."

I'm about to ask how this could have happened, who Egon thinks might have moved it, when I notice he's looking a little embarrassed, which is not an expression that sits easily on

his face. He holds his hands out, shrugging his shoulders. “I mean, I don't know, do I, the pickle barrel is around the corner? And I'm concerned from experience about Reno meeting his obligations.”

“To you.”

“Yes, to me.”

“You thought he'd stiff you.”

“Such things have happened.”

“So you figure, stiff him first.”

“No, not stiff the guy! Only buy myself a little insurance.”

“Right.”

“Believe me, I was not gonna stiff him.”

“Okay,” I tell Egon, leaning back against the booth, “I'll believe you. Thousands wouldn't. But let's see what we got. The two of you make this grab, you don't know anything about it, who it belongs to, nothing. Then you go back alone later and move it somewhere else. Then some loogans show up and Carp disappears and winds up floating in a pickle barrel.” While I'm counting off these points, Eggs is nodding his head. I say to him, “So, excuse me, but if you know where it's at, what's the issue? Let these guys know where to find the stuff, and there's an end to the matter, right?”

He shrugs. “Possibly.”

“So do it.”

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't know where the stuff is anymore. See, someone else went and shifted it after I did. Took the stuff from me! Took my truck, too!”

We sit there staring at each other, I'm thinking, jeez, how do people get themselves into such things? I don't know.

“You maybe should have stuck with painting.”

“No, that wasn't an option. I don't have to be body-slammed into reinforced concrete to know I reached a dead end, so I went into business.”

“With a guy like Carp.”

“It seemed the right thing to do.”

You try to advise a guy...

* * *

You try to help him, he's got a problem, and with that one little issue he reels you in, right? All the time hanging back and waiting to drop the big one on you. Of course, when he does you can always say, Sorry, you didn't buy into that—back away from it. But you don't. Because you got pride. You went that far, and you're not a quitter.

So there I am. Trying to think.

An observation I've made over the years (clear enough to Egon if lost on Reno Carp) is that when you make a move in Weston you do not step on toes. Most especially the toes of La-La Lloyd. And in order to stay clear of La-La's toes, you need to know where those toes are at that moment. You can guess at this, take your best shot. You can try to go by what the street talk is, but my own personal preference is to visit the expert on all things La-La, namely a character by the name of Hightops, who is what you might call one of La-La's lieutenants. A guy who gets paid to be on top of things.

Now Hightops can be found at the Lalapaloosa Club, or at the Ooh La-La, but today I locate him in Pastie's tucking into

a plate of french-fried potatoes and a coffee and squinting through his five-dollar reading glasses at the sports section of the Sun. He takes the glasses off and lays them down and says, “You're telling me what?”

“I'm telling you there's a guy I know who may have inadvertently appropriated some property which isn't actually his own, and who is now concerned that La-La may not understand the details of it and might get sore at him.”

Hightops considers this. He spears a forkful of gravy-soaked fries, lifts it to his face and holds it there; then he fills his mouth and chews. As inscrutable as a photograph. He swallows this delicacy and says, “Just to make real sure I got it right, your pal boosted something could belong to La-La and is now having the dry heaves about it?”

Cutting right to the root of it.

“That's apparently it,” I tell him, “only he's not my pal. The guy—this guy I'm talking about—didn't know who it belonged to.”

“He didn't?”

“No.”

“Does he know now?”

“He thinks he does. He isn't sure. That's why I come to you.”

Hightops heaves a sigh.

“And just what is this item?”

“It's not one item but a whole whack of them. In fact, a small truckload of items.”

A light goes on at the back of his small eyes; not a warm welcoming glow, but more like a low-wattage bulb in a small, cold room.

“You're not referring to a certain truckload which happens to go into trouble at the Norwood Bridge on account of a mechanical difficulty, gets towed to a repair shop in Weston, then is found there the next day standing empty and cleaned out?”

I nod my head.

He returns to his fries, his jaws working but his eyes still on my face. He says around his food, “For the sake of argument, let's suppose I know what you're talking about. Let's suppose I know of somebody had some—let's call it hunting gear—stole off of him. Who is this guy that swiped it? Where is he now and where is the merchandise?”

I tell him I don't know anything about the merchandise, that I never laid eyes on it, which is true. And again I sidestep giving him a name. But I try to impress on him that I need an answer, that the guy in question is very anxious and will be trying to contact me to find out what I've learned. Something which seems to amuse him.

“What you've learned. Beauty! He's the guy with all the facts.”

I suggest that maybe I can get some of these facts out of him.

“You do that. Especially a very important one, such as what this friend of yours might be thinking.”

“I know what he's thinking. I thought I explained it. He's thinking about how certain people might view matters. I

mean, he's anxious. And he has reason to be. The guy who was in on this with him has been found in a pickle barrel, floating, and he doesn't want that same thing to happen to him."

"Very wise," says Hightops. "A pickle barrel, eh?" as if it's the first he's heard of it. "Feature that. So is there anything else you want to tell me? Anything more to this story?"

There are, of course, a few more facts, the most important one being that Eggs doesn't know what's become of the goods. But I don't mention this. I don't think it'll sit well. It's a problem I'll have to work through from another direction, and quickly.

Hightops stares at his french fries, at the gravy growing cold and clotted on them, then finally says, "Let me check into this. Make some enquiries. Find out what certain people think."

"About the merchandise?"

"About that."

"And about this friend of mine? Who wants to do the right thing?"

"That, too."

I've done my best. I get up to leave.

"One thing," Hightops says, restraining me by raising his fork in the air, "about this merchandise. I can tell you already that before anything gets done, it's got to be returned, okay? All of it. Nothing missing. After that we'll see what can be worked out—to ease this friend of yours' concerns."

Then he adds: "And you're sure you haven't seen it? You haven't been to where it is stashed?"

I assure him that, to my very best knowledge, I haven't been within a mile of it.

And I'm glad I can say that.

* * *

Back at the Westbrook, I don't see Egon around. I sit at the bar awhile, then in the diner, and finally in the lobby, availing myself of the comforts there: the rock-hard davenport with the Spanish moss sprouting from one arm, the rug with the weave showing through in patches. Over there the narrow desk, the single payphone, the velvet painting over top of the Coke machine.

But as for Eggs, I don't see one sign of him. He doesn't put in an appearance. So at a quarter to four, ready for a bit of a bog, I go up to my room, unlock the door, and what do I find but him sitting right there on my bed.

“Jeez,” he says, jumping to his feet, looking expectant and irritated, “I been having ten fits. What kept you?”

“How did you get in here?” I ask.

Which gets me a look that reminds me there's no such thing as a locked door to some people, especially to people like him. And as he's itching to be filled in about my meeting with Hightops, I lay it out for him. He sits on the edge of the bed listening carefully, his eyes darting to the door when La-La's name is mentioned.

“So, you see,” I conclude, “this other problem, the new one you sprang on me about the stuff being missing, it doesn't help us. You need to find it.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess we do.”

“What's this ‘we’ business?”

“Well, you're still gonna help me, aren't you?”

I can see I'm not going to wriggle out of it.

“The question to start with, who knew you had it?” I ask, resigned to my fate.

He shrugs. “I didn't think anybody.”

“Somebody must have. Unless they found it by accident. You didn't talk it around, drop a hint to somebody, you're sure of that?”

He shakes his head. “No, I didn't.”

“And Reno. What about him?’

“He would never mention it, you know, in the bar, anywhere in public. You wouldn't pry his lips open, not where it meant money.”

But somebody else knew about it. This is a fact and we both know it.

“So there was no third party brought in, no jobber or fence, no one hanging around might have overheard something?” I feel if I keep pressing, a little juice will ooze out. And maybe it's working. I hear a tone of reflection in his voice.

“Well...” he says.

“Go on.”

“Well, there was this woman...”

A woman. It is always a woman with these guys. But at least now we are getting somewhere. I fold my arms, keep my mouth shut, and let him proceed to tell me about this lady friend of Reno's he met.

“She never said hardly anything, I never gave her much thought. But now you mention it, she could of heard things

when we discussed it after we got the stuff. All she did was waltz in and out bringing us coffee, and then some lunch." He thought about it, working his face along with his memory. "She kept watching Reno when he talked, I recall, hanging on his words like a teenager, this lady who is, what, maybe forty, and could rip your face off from across the room."

"And you're only now remembering her?"

"I told you, she didn't say anything."

"But she listened plenty, you seem sure of that. And she could have passed everything she heard to someone else. A brother, an old boyfriend, a sister who couldn't keep her mouth shut. You see what I'm getting at here?"

"I do. You don't have to draw me a picture." He slumps forward, dejected, sitting there on the bed. "I dunno. She just seemed so—out of it. Like we're two rocket scientists talking about Mars and she's listening just to be polite."

"Some rocket scientists. Giving away the secrets."

"You made your point," he snarls. "So now what?"

"We need to visit her. What's the name of this gal?"

* * *

Her name, Egon tells me, is Shoat. Kate Shoat. He also remembers where her little house is located, the place where he and Reno spilled out their guts in front of her and didn't think anything of it. A two-bedroom pre-war effort, looking like it's been through a war itself. Out there past the LeFarge cement plant, practically at Fort White, waiting for the next industrial development to send a bulldozer through the living room. A few outbuildings, what looks like a chicken coop, a

swayback barn, a scatter of sheds. And a garden that could supply vegetables to half the Chinese army.

We park Egon's Cadillac in the yard. She's not pleased to see us.

“What do you want?” she snaps at Egon, back-pedaling like she's scared of him, which only lets us step inside. Eggs follows her through the entranceway and into the living room, and I follow after him. She retreats to the middle of the floor, stops and glares at us. I glance around. The place is not too badly kept, but kind of dark, not much light getting in past the drapes; a TV is blah-blahing away. “If I had a gun,” Ms. Shoat says, “I'd shoot you! Coming back here and showing your face and my poor Carpie drowned!”

Like he was drowned in a swimming pool instead of a pickle barrel.

“I didn't drown him,” Egon says.

“No? Well, who did?”

“Maybe you, for all I know about it.”

“Me? Me?” She twists her face into weird lines. If she has a weapon, this is where she'll go for it. I'm ready for anything but she drops into a chair. “You're a cruel man, a mean man! After all I've been through, to say a thing like that!”

“Well,” Eggs says, not letting up, “just listen to you. You're the one with the mouth. Who did you yap to? Who did you tell? Who knew about what me and Reno was doing, can you answer me that?”

She remains slumped in her big brown chair, an item with this fifties-style fabric on it, the kind that looks like it could stop a bullet. Her mouth is slightly open, shallow breath

pushing in and out. It's as if Egon has penetrated to her innermost secret with that question. When she finds her voice, a lot of the bite has gone out of it, and she says in kind of clipped little words, “I don't know what you're talking about!”

“You don't?”

“No, I don't.”

“Oh, you know, all right,” Eggs says. “Don't tell me that. You listened to me and Reno talk private business here, listened to everything we had to say, then you went and shot off your mouth to someone. You must have. Nobody else knew, only me and him. And though Reno was a goof, he did know enough to keep his lip buttoned, especially where it could get him killed.”

“You're wrong,” she says.

“Am I?”

“Yes. Wrong about everything. About him especially. He wasn't quiet. He was braggadocious and loud, just like you are. I bet it was you boasting to somebody, drunk somewhere, with some cheap flirt.”

“What are you talking about ‘cheap flirt'? I don't have a flirt of any kind, cheap or otherwise, not since my ex walked out on me last year. As far as I can see, you're the only cheap flirt in this picture!”

She gathers her legs under her, hooks her fingers on the arms of the chair, ready to jump at him and rake his eyes out.

“Get out,” she says. “Right now!”

“Not till I find out where that merchandise went!”

She lifts her lip, leering up at him.

“So that's what you want to know. And you came here to find out? Well, it's a laugh, I must say, since you're the one came and moved it.”

Well, this kind of slows Eggs down a minute.

He says, “How do you know about that?”

“I got eyes, don't I? All I had to do was look out the window!” Nodding her head now. “I saw you all right.”

“You saw me, and what did you do about it?”

“Wouldn't you like to know!”

“I would, yes.”

“You'll never find that out,” she yells at him, “never!”

And popping out of the chair like she's on springs, she yanks a sideboard open and snatches a knife out. Now this is a blade that would make a headsman proud, something that can slice off T-bones with one whack. We have two options: disarm her or retreat. I decide for both of us and drag Egon out the door. She stands on the porch steps flashing the knife at us. “And don't come back!” she shrieks.

* * *

Egon and I drive back along the road and are almost at the cement plant when he says, “She's lying.”

“About what?” I say. “Cutting our throats for us?”

“Not that. But maybe that, too. I mean about blabbing. She must of. I don't see any other way somebody could of found out anything.” He takes his eyes off the road and cocks his head at me.

“You want to know what I think?” I reply.

“I'm listening, aren't I?”

I put my thoughts together before replying. “I think there's something not quite right about the woman.”

“Like what?”

“Like the way she's right on the muscle from the minute we knock on the door. Not asking you what you know about it, or trying to find out what happened, which is what you would expect from a grieving widow.”

“She's not his widow.”

“Same difference. She ought to show concern.”

We're almost to Route 90. Egon stops the car right there in the ruts and sits with his arms draped over the wheel. “Let's say it was her that shot off her mouth. What would that tell us?”

“Not a lot. She could have yapped to lots of people. She could have yapped to somebody in the mall, or on the phone, talked to all kinds of folks—friends, relatives, anybody. No telling who might have heard her directly or second hand, somebody just listening in. We couldn't possibly track down and take a look at all the possibilities.”

“No.”

“We don't have time for that.”

“No.”

“And that brings us back to her. She's all we got.”

“I see that.”

“Unless, now you've had time to think about it, you feel it might have been you that said something—”

“I told you I didn't! You want a signed statement?”

Which is about where we were before. I look at his big, sallow face across the wide front seat of the Cadillac and I see

we're thinking the same thing. What we need to find out is if there's somebody else besides her. If there is, that could be the answer. It would cut out about five hundred possibilities. I say, “We need to know what she does now, after us showing up at her door. She'd want to talk to this other person. They're going to have to get together.”

“Maybe.”

“We need to be there when that happens.”

* * *

Which is how I wind up slogging through a ditch and then a cow pasture by moonlight, my feet wet to the tops of my ankle socks, pushing through branches and brambles and I don't know what else to get to the back of her lot, the place spread out in front of us, all unpainted shacks, sheds, and outbuildings, and the house with a dim yellow light in the window.

“I hope she don't have a dog,” Egon says.

“Something that makes a lot of noise.”

“No,” he says, “something that's got a lot of teeth.”

With this happy thought we slide in closer. What we're hoping for is a lucky break. Hoping that if Fate doesn't exactly smile on us, at least she'll spare us a crooked grin. Hoping to see a vehicle with somebody in it, get a plate number, track somebody down. Then, of course, we'd have to get even luckier, the driver leading us back somehow to the merchandise. So we're clutching at straws here.

“You shift around to the side of the lot, find out if there's a visitor parked out front,” I tell him.

“Why me?” Eggs says. “Lookit the mud there. It's like Okefenokee. Could be alligators, take my leg off.”

“Well,” I remind him, “there's always La-La. He can take off parts of you, too.”

He drops a cussword and heads off around the back of a shed.

While he's grunting and muttering in the dark out there, I mull things over. If there's a visitor, fine. If there isn't, then what? Do we sit out here all night and hope one arrives? It's a lousy working plan. What I'd like to have, if we could manage it, is a wire on her phone, one of those gadgets the cops have; or a butt-in, like the phone workers use, climb a pole and clip it right on to the wires; but we aren't equipped for any of that.

Suddenly Egon yelps. It's a loud yelp, in fact it's a squawk. There are more cusswords, colorful ones, Egon spewing a whole chromatic string of them. He's going to raise the alarm, all the noise he's making.

I'm starting in his direction when the door of the house pops open and there's a ka-blam. I know this ka-blam. The kind of deep-throated sound you get when you lop a foot or so off the barrel of a twelve-gauge and let loose. Now there's silence over there where the cussing was. I don't even hear breathing. If the twelve-gauge didn't get Egon maybe the alligators did.

There's silence. I'm not moving a muscle. Then, up on the porch, I hear the snick-snick of a pump-action mechanism, followed by the slam of a door. I get moving again and find Egon lying splang out in a low spot, which is probably what

saved him, on his back with his gut jutting up like a hummock.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

“Oh, top shelf,” he moans. “Right up there with the Rice Krispies and the Wheaties. I'm always fine after I been hit in the face by a rake handle, then shot at. It sets me up for the day.”

“Lucky she didn't hit you.”

“I guess if she had, you'd say I was lucky she didn't use a bazooka.” He crawls to his feet. “There I am with two legs and an arm blown off, you'd say I was lucky I could still scratch my heinie. You should have your own TV call-in show. Tell the whole world how lucky they are.” He groans at a secret pain. “Get me out of here, will you?”

* * *

I do that. I get him back to the Westbrook, up to my room, pour a coffee into him.

“You can scoff,” I say, as his fingers probe for hidden wounds, “but you are lucky. Now we know where the missing merchandise went. That was a bobtail—a sawed-off shotgun. You know it was, you heard it too. Now where in this picture does a nice lady like that get a bobtail from?”

His face shows interest. “Hey, you're right.” He smacks his thigh, then gasps at the sting of it. “The broad's holding out on us, that's where she got it. You know what? Suddenly I feel better. Maybe we're gonna retrieve that stuff after all and be able to get La-La all quieted down again.” He's on his feet now, pacing. Hope in his big, baggy eyes. “But how do we

play it? Go back there and rush the place? Wait till she leaves for the hairdresser's, then bust in and grab the stuff? What?"

I suck at my coffee, giving it some thought.

"I'm not keen," I say, "on rushing a woman who's got a twelve-gauge and knows how to use it. And if we wait for her to go to the hairdresser's, we might have to sit a while, by what I saw of her."

"What, her hair was that good?"

"No, that bad. I don't think she goes to hairdressers. I think she styles it herself with a claw hammer. Anyway, the point is, all she really has to go out for is food, and she could have that delivered. She could have enough of it in there right now to last for weeks—did you see the garden she's got?"

"I don't have weeks!"

"No, you don't. Which means you're going to have to take a chance."

"What have I been doing, I'm almost shot to death?"

"I mean take a chance that we guessed right. That she really does have the stuff out there on her place. I can go to Hightops and tell him, okay, here's where the merchandise is, it's in a house out past the cement plant. Give him the directions. Let him go and get it."

Eggs stops at the window, rubbing the side of his face, that long red welt there where the rake handle whacked him. Then he looks at me.

"It might work..."

"It might."

“It might blow up in our faces, too. Hightops, one or two of his guys, go out there and get their butts shot off. What are they gonna think of us then?”

“We warn them first, of course. Spell it out for them. Explain the situation. Make sure they know they got to take precautions.”

“Or they get in there, search the place, they don't find nothing inside except the twelve-gauge. Which could—I oughta just mention—be something Reno left there. One of his toys. Nothing to do with the missing merchandise.”

“I did tell you,” I remind him, “it meant taking a chance.”

* * *

So I go to Hightops. I set it up. I explain everything, as much as I know about it—except, of course, the part where Eggs jacks the stuff away from Reno in the first place. I don't want to get into that and put the focus back on Eggs and myself, and I'm not clear on how Ms. Shoat got the stuff back in her possession again in any case.

Hightops hears me out, draws a hand down his high, shiny forehead, holding it over his eyes a minute. Then he looks at me.

“Okay. I'm gonna trust you on this one. What you're telling me. This broad's got the stuff out there, and she's a hot one. Could take and start blasting away with it. You're giving me a heads up.” His hand slips under his eyes, continues on down to the end of his chin. “But I'm gonna want you there, you and your friend—You are gonna tell me who he is now?”

I give him the name and he doesn't bat an eye. He knows it was Egon all along, I'm pretty sure. Reno had to have told them something before taking his dive into the pickle barrel.

“Just make sure,” Hightops says, “you and him show up. Be there at eight o'clock tonight.”

* * *

We show up, all right. We're first on the scene. Egon is telling me for the fourteenth time how he's got this hunch we should leave, everything's going to go wrong, when we see out the windshield two vehicles coming toward us, lifting on their springs, picking their way along the rutted road. The first one's a Lincoln Navigator, the windows so dark you can't see how many guys are inside; the second one's a Dodge pickup, just the driver in it, a big three-quarter ton Ram with a cap on the back.

“Showtime,” I tell Egon. He says, “Unghh,” or something like that.

Since arriving at the house we've been watching it, and we haven't seen any movement to speak of. A strip of light glows where the drapes don't meet, and the back and side yard with the outbuildings are in darkness. It looks the same as it did the night before.

Hightops is tapping at the window, and I roll it down.

“A country place, huh?” he says. “I don't like country places. Especially flatland. They can see you coming for three days before you get here.”

He's exaggerating, but I take his point. He's right about that. Especially this place. The old lady inside could spot you half a mile down that lousy road, have time for a beer and a

smoke before she stepped out on the stoop, her sawed-off shotgun loaded and ready to pot you.

“So what's the plan?” I ask.

“Well,” he says, “I'll send in one guy first and see what happens. I'll send in Badger. He's been cheesing me off lately.”

I know this guy Badger. He cheeses everybody off.

Hightops goes back to the Lincoln Navigator, opens the roadside door and says something, and Badger slips out—a little rat-faced guy in a long coat. Badger slides around the back of the vehicle, turns in at the driveway, and humps along it towards the house.

Both Eggs and me are scrunched down as low as possible in our seats, and Hightops has smoothly inserted himself behind the Lincoln's big front fender. All of us watching Badger. The guy makes it to the front porch of the house all right, goes up the steps and pokes the doorbell.

“So far, so good,” Egon says. “Still can't see daylight through him.”

“There is no daylight.”

“Well, I can't see moonlight through him, then, how's that?”

Badger rings again, then getting braver, raps on the door.

Still nothing.

“Maybe the old doll took a hike,” Egon says. “She knew we'd be back with reinforcements, and she legged it out of here. Could be halfway to Fargo, North Dakota by now.”

I allow that this is a fair possibility, seeing Badger, brave as a pit bull now, beating on the door with his fist. There's a tap on the car window, Hightops again.

“You're sure this is the place?” We assure him it is. “The old doll ain't home or she just ain't answering,” he says. Glancing around. “No vehicle. Living out here she'd need a vehicle. Could be parked in one of those sheds, I guess.” He puts his head down close to the window again, forcing me to look at him. “What I'm wondering, how come you say she took shots at you with a bobtail and now she don't make so much as a peep?”

There was only us, I remind him. And we were pretty well hidden. This is like the arrival of a small army.

Badger has worn his arms out pounding, and is now kicking the door, and Hightops calls him off with a whistle as if he is a dog. Badger comes down the porch steps and foots it back along the walk to the Navigator.

“Okay,” Hightops says. “Plan B. We take a look in those sheds and outbuildings there, see if we can locate the merchandise ourselves. We'll need some light. I want you to turn your vehicle and shine your headlights up the side of the house.”

While we are backing the vehicle around he gets the Navigator and the Ram to do the same, and soon the outbuildings are lit like garden sheds in a Wal-Mart parking lot. Then Hightops rousts three more loogans out of the Navigator who join Badger and begin to traipse across the front yard of the property. They are halfway to the first shed when there's a familiar ka-blam, and the loogans drop to the

ground and hug the crabgrass. Hightops, back at my window again, says, “Jeez! Where'd that come from?”

The driver of the Ram is half out his door, jabbing his finger at one of the outbuildings, the little red barn, yelling, “I seen the flash! It came from there!”

And maybe it's panic, or maybe something else, but at these words they all start blasting. Projectiles, not to mention bullets, fly in great numbers at the little red barn. The barn quivers, paint scales and wood splinters flying, and then one round, we'll never know whose, makes an unfortunate connection. There is a woofing sound, very loud, and the barn gives a leap in the air and flies apart. Tongues of flame burst out of it every which way, the swayback roof snaps and falls back in on itself. The flash of this conflagration lights up the acreage in every direction.

“Holy cow,” Hightops says, “lookit that. We better go before we draw attention to ourselves.”

It might be late for that. These flames can be seen in Saskatchewan. But there is still time to make an exit.

The Ram and the Navigator are already rolling. Hightops meets the Navigator and jumps inside, sort of hopping on one leg to keep up with it, then slamming the door two, three times until he gets the tail of his coat hauled in. Eggs and I are the last vehicle in the exiting convoy, and we glimpse a female figure out on the porch, ka-blamming away at us.

I believe the guy in the Ram was mistaken. I don't think she fired at us from the barn.

* * *

So Egon Roy and myself are safely back at the Westbrook, the Winnipeg Sun spread out in front of us, a story in there about how a building exploded out by the cement plant, and how in the still-smoking wreckage was found the incinerated remains of a great many armaments.

The occupant of the property, a Ms. Shoat, “plainly bewildered” as the reporter tells it, told the authorities that she had no idea what caused the barn to blow up, no idea what the weapons were doing there, and that there was no reason she ought to know these things, being a renter and not the actual owner.

Hightops puts his head in the door and spots us.

“So you were right about that place,” he says. “La-La is unhappy that it turns out like this.” Egon's face turns a gray color. “But it was Badger,” Hightops said, “started the shooting, and I told La-La that.” Egon perks up a bit.

“And it could of been worse,” Hightops says. “At least we showed you don't bring stuff in here without our permission.”

Now I perk up. “You're saying it didn't belong to La-La—I mean, to a guy that you know?”

He shakes his head. “Guys bring stuff in here, they need permission. You know that. Everybody does. Only these guys don't want to pay the duty on it. Think they can run it by us, make a profit, keep every nickel for themselves. In the business world, things don't work that way.” He shakes his head over this lack of ethics. “It would of been nice to grab the stuff—impound it like the government does, if you don't pay the correct duties. But this is almost as good. They won't try that again.”

“And what about me?” Eggs wants to know.

Hightops looks at him. “You're off the hook. At least for this time. And consider yourself lucky. If it wasn't for La-La, those guys would of put you in the pickle barrel next, hijacking their stuff.”

And he goes out.

“Jeez,” Egon says, “I had it figured all wrong. Well, what do you know about that?”

“I know,” I tell him, “there's still something wrong with the color.” I'm not even looking at the TV. “Too much red in that face. What do you think?”

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Big Winner by Terry Black

For me, winning the lottery was very bad news.

It was a little after six A.M., and we'd just got to the drill face down in Bone Hollow, three hundred feet and change under the Appalachian mountainside. I was drinking black coffee from a Thermos lid and Kid Kolmer was eating a fried egg sandwich because he could never wait until lunch time. And the Ghost was looking up at that coal seam—he'd do that, just stare up at that coal like he could read its secrets, how thick, how far, how long could we keep drilling till the vein went dry and we'd have to pack up and dig elsewhere.

I had my Pennsylvania State Lottery ticket in my hand, purchased the day before at Gorman's Drug and Housewares, and there'd been a line to get tickets because there was a twenty-five million dollar jackpot out there, just ripe for the winning. I scratched off those numbers under the light of my helmet lamp, and I checked them against the winning numbers in the Valley Gazette, and I checked them again.

They matched.

And wouldn't you know, it was right at that moment when there was a sound like a jet engine roaring right at you, a surging riot of noise, and Rusty Bedford comes tearing down the passage yelling, “Cave-in!”

I knew what had happened, I could read it in his face. Here we are wildcatting in a rickety old mine we should never have put a drill to, trying to shave a little more coal off those old walls and pillars, make a few extra bucks and who's the

wiser, only this time someone dug too deep—Crazy Kirby, maybe, he was always taking stupid chances—and now the whole shebang was coming down on our heads.

I got up and ran. So did Kid Kolmer and the Ghost and Sparky Latimer and Diamond Jim, we always called him that because he wore such ratty clothes. They were tripping all over each other trying to get the hell out of there. All except for Pete McCamber. He just stood there dumbstruck. I wanted to go back for him, but I was too damn scared.

Sparky went down in front of me—I think he tripped on a trestle or something—and I tripped over him but managed to keep on going, running half bent over in that tiny space. The jet roar closing fast now, that dirty cave like a throat swallowing as timbers snapped and pillars crumbled and dust and soot rose up like fog, a blind hell of sulfur and lime, a suffocating coffin box for a scatter of lost souls, choking and dying.

The sound engulfed us, so loud you couldn't hear it, a scream of echoes in a rock-walled rat hole. Granite powdered, splinters flew. Up ahead the Kid was yelling something, but his voice was lost in the din, a silent puppet in a blizzard of debris. I thought of that sign that reads BEWARE FALLING ROCK and wanted to cover my head as if that would help with the whole mountain bearing down on us.

I bashed my head and lost my footing. Someone, maybe the Ghost, ran into me from behind. We fell down hard. I couldn't see, couldn't breathe. I thought, I'm going to die right here and now in this filthy old mine, with twenty-five million dollars in my hand.

* * *

Well, here I am telling the story, so you must have figured I didn't die. I coughed and gagged and managed to sit up, trying to catch my breath in that foul, churned-up air. My eyes burned. My head hurt where I'd banged it.

The lottery ticket was still in my hand.

I said, “Who's here?” and prayed for an answer. Someone coughed beside me.

“Ghost,” said the Ghost. I could see his outline in the coal dust fog, the big frame and great linebacker shoulders, his helmet lamp catching dust in its beam.

“Jim,” said Diamond Jim, coughing, his voice high and thready in the gloom.

“Kolmer,” said Kid Kolmer. “And I'm hurt, my arm's hurt.”

No one else said anything. I thought of Kirby and Sparky and Pete McCamber—poor dumb Pete, all crushed in the rock and rubble when the roof came down—and I felt a terrible weight in the pit of my stomach. As foreman of this illegal and botched operation, I was responsible for every one of them.

I tried to focus on the business at hand. “Let's see that arm,” I told the Kid.

My lamp was still working. The others, too. I crawled over to where the Kid was lying, in a settling pool of gray-black dust, and played the light over him. He looked scared. His arm was twisted below the elbow at a sickening angle.

“I think it's broken,” he said.

The others crowded around, seeing for themselves. In the lamplight you could see their faces, soot-blackened and moist with perspiration. Diamond Jim looked worried, the Ghost

resigned. Kid Kolmer tried to look brave, but he was hurting, you could see it, and it was about to get worse.

"Give me your flask, Jim," I said.

He looked wounded. "I don't drink anymore, Bill. You've got my word—"

I held out my hand. He sighed and passed it over. I gave the Kid a generous gulp of no-brand whiskey and said, "Ghost, you're with me. We've got to set the bone. Jim, look around—carefully—and see if there's any way out of here. Don't touch anything, or you're liable to bring the rest of it down on us."

Well, Jim, he didn't like that at all, but he set off down what was left of that tunnel to poke around anyway. I took off my undershirt and tore it into strips, and the Ghost found part of an old ax handle we could use as a splint, and now all that was left was to pull on that arm until the broken bone-ends popped back into place. The Kid screamed when we started, moaned as the bone shifted, passed out when the Ghost tugged hard and the bone slid home with an audible snap. I was tying off our makeshift splint when Diamond Jim came back to make his report.

The news wasn't good.

"We're stuck here," he said, coughing wetly into his hand. "The elevator's out of reach, even if it still works, which it probably doesn't, and the other way goes nowhere. We're dead and buried, we just don't know it yet."

"Slow up a bit," I said. "Help will come. Ernie Colson, he's up in the head house, he probably heard the cave-in and even if he didn't, he'll know something's wrong when we don't

come up at the end of the shift. He's our insurance policy; you can bet he'll bring in a rescue team, probably lead it himself. We sit tight and wait, that's the plan."

"Lousy luck," said the Ghost.

"I won the lottery this morning," I said.

Maybe I should have kept quiet about that, but they needed good news, a reason to keep going—and the temptation to blurt it out was irresistible. They all looked at me like I was crazy, as if the cave-in had stolen my wits.

I said, "Seriously. I won that twenty-five million dollars. If we get out of here, we'll split it, what do you say, there's enough to go around." I showed them the ticket and I would have showed them the Valley Gazette, but it was buried back where I'd been sitting. The Ghost thought it over and decided he believed me.

"I've known you a long time, Bill. You don't make stuff up. You say you won the lottery, you won the lottery."

Diamond Jim looked at the winning ticket, and shrugged. "Hell, even if you did, what good is it now?"

* * *

Hours passed. We traded off helmet lamps, conserving power, leaving just one on at a time. Each would be good for about sixteen hours, give or take, so we had about two days of light between us. I wanted everyone to sit still, but the Ghost kept prowling, studying the walls, running his fingers over the rough surface. That was why we called him "Ghost," he was supernatural, he could pull that coal right out of the ground and the mountain would never feel it.

"There's a way out of here," he kept saying.

I didn't share his confidence. I figured Ernie would get help when we didn't emerge after eight hours, but if the mountain should quake and settle even a little in the meantime, all they'd find would be a bunch of dead bodies.

I wondered about dying, if there's a heaven and would I qualify. I wondered if I'd get to see those men again and say I was sorry. Or Coral Ann, my dear departed wife, dead these nine years when she'd come home and surprised a burglar, by blind chance—could I tell her how I'd missed her every day since then?

The Ghost was still poking at the wall. I said, “Sit still before you get us killed.”

He didn't. “We're getting out,” he said, probing the rock with his blunt fingers. “And I'm going to take my share of that twenty-five mil and buy myself a sporty Jag. The babes love that. And a big-ass sound system you could hear in Cleveland. You watch, that's what I'm going to do.”

“Shut up,” said Diamond Jim. He coughed into a rag, stuck it in the back pocket of his grubby old jeans. “You're going to jinx it, Ghost. You don't talk about getting out before you're got out. You're going to jinx it if you don't shut up.”

The Ghost ignored him. Kid Kolmer groaned. I passed him the flask, over Jim's continuing objections, and hoped Ernie Colson was paying attention up there.

* * *

We slept.

Fitfully, uncomfortably, huddled on beds of coal gravel under a granite ceiling that threatened to drop at any moment. I remember I woke once to Kid Kolmer's drowsy

moaning, and another time to Diamond Jim's hacking, rockhound cough.

I dreamt of Coral Ann, that night I'd found her, the bitter irony of me working these awful mines with her safe at home, so I thought, until I came home late one night after a double shift and found her there, eyes wide, dead on the carpet, the place half torn apart by someone hunting valuables until Coral Ann surprised him—

I came awake. I remembered where I was. It was dark, the only light coming from the Ghost's helmet lamp, a milky circle in the close and thickening gloom.

Kid Kolmer was fast asleep, a blessing that couldn't last. Diamond Jim had stopped coughing. I sat up and flicked on my helmet lamp, a signal for the Ghost to extinguish his.

“There's a way out of here,” he said.

“Trust Ernie, he'll find us.” I fingered the ticket in my pocket. “Too bad he doesn't know about the twenty-five million, that'd speed him up, I bet.”

“What are you going to do with your share, Bill?”

I shrugged. I hadn't thought about it, honestly, except maybe a fancy gravestone for Coral Ann, with some sort of flowery inscription. “I don't know.”

He looked at me carefully. “You're thinking about Coral Ann, aren't you? She was a fine woman, Bill, and no mistake. But she'd want you to move on.”

I didn't answer. The Kid groaned, shifted, and awoke. I passed him the flask and he emptied the last remaining drops onto his tongue. “Ask Diamond Jim for some more,” he said.

“He hasn't got any more.”

“Ask him.”

I started to argue and then it occurred to me that Diamond Jim was awfully quiet, considering how we'd just used up the last of his contraband hooch. I reached over and shook his shoulder, gently at first and then harder, but he was a cold weight under my hand, slack and unresponsive.

I rolled him over. I checked for a pulse, pulled back one of his eyelids. He was dead.

And I knew what had happened.

* * *

Kid Kolmer was in and out, heavy-lidded with pain, unable to think about much else. I tried to comfort him, take his mind off it, asked him what he'd do with all that money when we got out. But he kept saying we were going to die here, all of us, just like Jim had, and what was the use of dead men dreaming in a grave as deep and cold as this one?

I said forget about Jim, he had the black lung, you could hear it in that cough, he should have quit these mines years ago. Him dying didn't mean we had to. Just hang on, they're going to get us out. I kept saying that until he passed out again.

I took off Jim's jacket and draped it over the Kid, trying to keep him warm. I couldn't think what else to do for him. Finally I left him, and went over to where the Ghost was probing the walls.

“There's a way out of here,” he said.

I looked him square in the face. “No, there isn't. Let's face facts, Ghost. Ernie isn't coming for us. We're stuck, we're going to die here.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means we're illegal, we shouldn't be here, and if Ernie opens his mouth to anyone he's looking at criminal prosecution. Be easier for him to keep shut about it, play dumb, forget we're even down here.”

The Ghost shook his head. “I don't believe you.”

“It's true. We're not getting out of here, we'll suffocate or get buried alive. You'll never see a dime of that money. That's the irony, isn't it—you killed Jim for nothing.”

The Ghost opened his mouth, and shut it again. He said, “What?”

“You wanted a better split, three ways instead of four. Hell, he had worn-out lungs and who's to say being stuck down here didn't kill him? Easy money, eight million instead of six, that's what poor Jim's life was worth.”

“You're crazy.”

“Petechial hemorrhage,” I said.

He had no idea what that meant, so I explained it. “Burst blood vessels in the eyeball. You can see them, red spots against the white of the eye. It happens when people get strangled.” I pulled back Jim's eyeball with my thumb. “Like that.”

The Ghost snorted. “That doesn't mean anything.”

“I'm afraid it does. It means you put on those hard-foam miner's gloves, and you choked the life out of Jim without leaving a big enough bruise to prove you'd been there. The Ghost strikes again. I know it was you because Kid Kolmer's got a busted arm and I sure as hell didn't do it.” I sighed, suddenly very tired. “Is that how you killed Coral Ann, too?”

He said nothing.

“I worked a double shift that day. You didn't. You left the mine and saw Coral Ann, God knows why, and when you were all done with your dirty business she had those eyeball hemorrhages, too. One of the cops showed me. He said she'd been strangled, by a man with great strength.”

The Ghost stood up. He ran his fingers over the cave wall, still probing, still looking for an escape route where there was none to be found.

“I loved her,” he said. “We had an affair while you were down here digging coal. I asked her to leave you. She wouldn't. We had a fight, not much else to it.”

Oh, but there was, I thought. I pictured him getting madder and madder but not out of control, not the Ghost, never the Ghost; he had finesse. He could kill a woman and leave no trace. Bust the door in, scatter a few things around, make it a botched burglary. Go up to Bill afterward, poor sad Bill, buy him a beer and let him cry on your shoulder, nobody the wiser, that's our Ghost.

“I have to kill you now,” he said.

“Go ahead. Makes no difference, none of us are getting out of here.”

“Stop saying that!” He spat the words with sudden fury, then, regaining his composure, he said, “You're wrong. They'll find us. They'll be here any minute, you watch.”

“No, they won't. Ernie won't tell a soul, and no one else knows where we are. They'll have to search the whole damn mountain, if they even care about a bunch of outlaw wildcatters stealing coal that was never theirs to drill in the

first place. I'm thinking they'll save the time and trouble and just leave us here."

He took a step forward. His hands twitched, those big square hands, jackhammer tough. He was twice as strong as I was. He said, "They're coming. They'll find us."

I shook my head.

He swallowed. He looked around, frantic, as if the cave was narrowing, the walls closing in on him. "There's a way out of here. I'll find it."

He started running his fingers over those rocks again, sweating now, pressing and prodding, trying to read the seam, as if some unseen escape route lay there right in front of him, just out of reach. He pulled at something and a fist-sized stone broke loose and fell to the ground. Rock dust showered him, like rainfall.

"You'll die here," I said.

He said "No!" and kept going. He was wandering now, back the way we'd come, toward that rocky slope of coal and gravel that had come so close to burying us, the obstacle between our grimy prison and freedom. He started clawing at the rocks, pulling them free, tearing at anything in front of him, saying, "I'll find it, I'll find it!" in a frenzy to dig himself loose.

It wasn't claustrophobia, not exactly. The Ghost's panic went deeper than that. It was because he'd killed my wife all those years ago and no one ever caught him. Maybe he expected to get caught, maybe he'd dreaded that storm of retribution for so long that now he had to believe it was here. That death was certain. That justice would be done.

He pulled on a spur of granite with all his might. It wrenched free. Something cracked and the cave wall shifted; the Ghost had time for just one scream before the roof slammed down to crush him under tons of coal and granite.

I held my breath. The cave seemed to vibrate. Dust motes danced in the beam of my helmet. A tiny little stone fell to the ground at my knee.

Then silence.

“Bastard,” I said aloud.

Kid Kolmer stirred on the ground beside me.

“Is it true?” he asked. “Is Ernie just going to leave us here?”

I wondered how to explain it to him. That the Ghost was so paranoid he'd believe anyone who said escape was impossible—and I'd used that stark terror to kill him.

I said, “No. Ernie's helping us. He's probably got half the state tearing up this mountain, looking for us.”

“But why haven't they found us yet?”

“It's a big mountain. They have to ship in men and equipment, it takes time.” Even if they're racing the clock, knowing that each moment passed makes it less likely they'll find a soul left alive.

“So we sit tight and wait, then?”

“No.” I looked at the ragged rockpile that marked the Ghost's resting place, and I thought about what it would take to avoid that ourselves. There was something left undone, something important.

“I know how to get us out of here,” I said.

His eyes narrowed. “How?”

“You won't like it.”

“Just tell me.”

“Okay.” I settled back on my haunches, closing my eyes, remembering that day nine years ago when the Ghost was still my friend, Coral Ann was still alive, and so much seemed possible—not like today, not like any time since.

“I had an uncle die once,” I said. “I never really knew him, but he had some money and I was the next of kin, the rest of the family was dead. He left me twelve thousand dollars. My wife and I were going to work out what to do with it as soon as I got home from work. Only I got in late because I pulled a double shift.” I let out a long breath. “When I got home she was dead. That was the night she died.”

The Kid looked mystified.

“I figure it's like this. Every man on this earth has a certain amount of luck coming to him. It's like a bank account. If you take out too much all at once, well, they have to balance it, they have to square the books. For every good thing, there's a bad thing. You see what I'm saying?”

“How does this get us out of here?”

“It's simple. We have to take this lottery ticket and tear it into a million pieces.”

“What?”

“I said you wouldn't like it.”

He tried to sit up, wincing in pain. “Now wait a minute, Bill. If you tear that thing up, and they find us then, we won't be one cent richer. We'll be right back where we started. And for all we know, they would have found us anyway.”

“All true,” I said. I took the ticket out of my pocket and held it between my fingers. “I'm sorry, Kid.”

He tried to get up, tried to stop me. He couldn't do it. “You're nuts,” he said.

I tore the ticket in half. And again, and again. I tore it up as small as it would go, and then ground the pieces into that fine Pennsylvania coal dust at my feet until it was finally, irretrievably gone.

“That's that,” I said.

Five minutes passed. Fifteen. Thirty.

There was a noise above us. A drill bit tore through the ceiling. It was connected to a steel pipe, with a panel you could open on one side. In that pipe was a two-way radio.

“This is Emergency Rescue,” said a crisp voice. “If you can hear me, please respond.”

“Oh damn,” said the Kid, as mad as I'd ever seen him. “Damn, damn, damn!”

I took the radio in my hand. I said, “There's two of us.”

* * *

They got us out in a steel cage, pulled through a cylinder sunk into the earth, with much fanfare when we emerged. Ernie clapped me on the back, saying he never thought he'd see me again, and they bundled the Kid off to Sacred Saints Hospital. Later they tried to get those bodies out, old Jim and Rusty and Pete and the Ghost, but sometime after our salvation that old mine caved in on itself, burying its secrets forever. I never said what happened and the Kid didn't know, he hadn't heard enough to put it together.

All he did know was that we'd won twenty-five million dollars, and then lost it again. He told everyone about that. No one believed him. He asked me to back him up and I said I didn't know what he was talking about.

Later I got a notice from the Bureau of Mine Safety, asking about “questionable practices.” They fined me for running an illegal mine and made all sorts of legal threats that finally came to nothing. Two years later I was back in Bone Hollow with another crew, a bunch of old rockhounds who don't care any more than me about what's legal and what's not. Most days we at least break even.

I still play the lottery. I drink black coffee from a Thermos lid and take my Pennsylvania State Lottery ticket in hand, and I scratch off those numbers under the light of my helmet lamp and compare them to the winning numbers in the Valley Gazette. And I pray to God I don't win. But if I ever do, I'll hang onto that ticket for dear life.

A man needs an insurance policy.

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Height Advantage by William J. Carroll, Jr.

The thing on its side at the bottom of the wooden-walled hot tub was not human. Whoever it had been, it wasn't human any longer. Just a brown, shriveled husk, lying in a foot of slimy-black water. Protein for the small animals and insects that had drawn me to look inside.

Nothing now to get upset about.

At least that's what I was force-feeding my mind to consider as I lowered the folding lid and started breathing again.

Jesus, I thought. Poor Carole...

I felt dizzy with shock and moved away, back toward the bench, where I started to sit, but the odor now was suddenly overwhelming. So much so, I stumbled off the porch, into the cold rain, and walked away from the cabin.

Down to the dry creek where I sat on a large rock and for a moment just breathed.

Good God, I thought. Poor Carole!

* * *

After a while, though, the rain came harder, so I moved myself back up onto the covered porch, shivering, and sat on the steps. I still felt dazed and did a bit more deep-breathing, trying to focus on the rain and the thick woods that were all around me, trying to think of something other than what was lying dead only a few feet away. But it wasn't easy.

After another few minutes, I did start to feel better, and thoughts about what to do next—like calling the police—

began to come to me, but I stayed sitting a while longer. There was no hurry now.

Looking up through the trees toward the mountain, lost behind the clouds, brushing my hand at the flies which buzzed my head, wondering where Dirty Hairy had got to and just how “harmless” he really was.

Finally deciding to make the call, I reached into my pocket for my cell phone, but finding the photographs there I brought those out instead and looked them over for a moment.

The photographs I'd taken the day before. Photographs of Carole's wonderful paintings, the artwork that had brought me there.

* * *

I'd first seen the paintings only the day before at Wellman's Gallery—a tiny art dealership in Pike's Place Market near the bay.

I was on leave at the time—two weeks worth taken for no reason but that I'd been feeling a little stale around the office, not myself for some reason, grouchy, maybe old. I was sick of the sight of my room at the BOQ. So I'd moved myself off-post.

Up to Seattle and a room in the condo of an out-of-town friend, where I'd been spending my leave thus far, doing not much at all—mostly walking here and there around town, spending a lot of time in coffee shops, reading some, taking pictures. Doing nothing, really—until yesterday.

I was a week into this hard way of life, having just stopped off at a nearby fish market where the prices were just short of

astronomical, when I passed by Wellman's, which hadn't yet opened, peered inside, and saw the paintings.

Four of them. Large watercolors, prominently arranged. All of them were of various views of Mount Rainier. It was the style that caught my eye—something recognized that clicked in the back of my mind—and then as I stepped closer I saw the name of the artist on a placard in large black letters, CAROLE DORIN, and although the name didn't match, right beside the placard was the framed photograph of a face that did.

“Carole Dragnich,” I said. “I'll be damned.”

I stood there a few moments, then went to a phone booth, where a scan of the directory showed no Dorins nor Dragniches at all. Then I went to a bagel stand, grabbed a coffee, and waited for Wellman's to open.

Remembering Carole Dragnich. Sergeant First Class, United States Army, Retired.

* * *

Short, red haired, feisty, and fun to be around. We'd been stationed and teamed together out of the same office at the 30 MI Detachment in Berlin, nearly five years earlier.

And it had been a good match, her and I, while it lasted.

At the time we'd been assigned to NATO's Counter-Terrorist Division, which in our case meant surveillance of various individuals and groups with subversive or terrorist ties—and, on occasion, long dreary hours of watching streets, doors, and windows.

Spent, in my case, brooding or dozing, but in her case sketching, filling pad after pad with renditions of whatever crossed in front of her bright eyes.

Later finishing in watercolor some of those sketches—most of which I thought, even then, were really very good.

We were friends, though never really close, which was nothing very unusual for people like us. She'd opted for early retirement after her tour in Germany, and we'd lost touch—also nothing unusual.

But we'd been partners, and close enough to make the idea of seeing her again a fun idea, so I decided to try.

* * *

Wellman's opened at nine A.M. I was in the door a minute after, giving the four paintings a close look-over—all bright and lively with color, all priced at fifteen thousand dollars.

Carole, I was thinking, was even better than I remembered.

A young woman clerk eventually approached and offered help.

“These are wonderful,” I said, nodding at the watercolors.

“They certainly are,” she agreed.

“I'd like to get in touch with the artist, but she's not listed in the Seattle directory. I wonder if you'd know how I might find her.”

“Oh,” she said, “I couldn't say, really.”

I smiled at her. “Who could?”

She smiled back. “Well the fact is, I'm not sure. Ms. Dorin's husband is the one who placed these paintings with

us, and we do have his number, but I'd feel funny about giving it out."

"I see."

"When Ms. Carter, the manager, comes in, she might be able to help."

"When will Ms. Carter be in?"

"After lunch."

I looked at my watch. It was 9:05.

"Maybe her agent could help you," the clerk suggested.

"And her name?"

She excused herself and went away, returning shortly with a business card and saying, "I do know Carole Dorin lives in Washington."

"Oh?"

"This isn't her first showing," she said. "She's really very hot right at the moment."

I looked at the card she'd handed me and saw that the office of Jess Collier, Artist Representative, was walking distance from where I was just that moment.

"Well," I told her. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," she replied. "And, if you do find her, let her know she has a big fan here."

I nodded and looked back at the paintings.

The clerk did too, saying, "I wish I had half the talent she does."

"Who wouldn't?" I agreed.

* * *

Jess Collier's office on the thirty-second floor of a very upscale building on Fourth Ave. had a large, mostly empty

outer office, carefully carpeted and furnished in gray-black tones, carefully muralled with obscure black-and-white photography, and carefully receptioned by a young, leggy platinum blonde dressed in white and seated at a curved, black-tinted, glass-topped desk.

She doubtfully asked if I had an appointment and seemed relieved to find out I hadn't, then announced me on the intercom to her boss as if I'd been expected all along. After that she tentatively asked me to have a seat.

Which I took, though a few seconds later a tall woman in a severe black pants suit entered from a short hallway, looked at me, and said, “Mr....?”

“Virginiak,” I said, standing.

She looked expectant. “I'm Jess Collier.”

I gave her my hand to shake, which she did, briefly.

“And how can I help you?” she asked.

“Well,” I told her, “I'm looking for a friend of mine—a client of yours, I think—Carole Dorin?”

She hesitated briefly. “Really?”

“Yes, we were stationed together in Germany some years ago. Actually, I didn't even know she lived in Washington until an art dealer told me, and I'd like to get in touch with her.”

She thought that over.

Collier was a good looking woman, tall with a long, straight body that her black suit emphasized. She wore burr-cut salt-and-pepper hair on an elegantly shaped head, and had a well-arranged, makeupless face, with a pair of deeply dark blue eyes that just then seemed wary of me.

I said, “If you're being cautious, I do understand. I could leave my phone number and you could give it to Carole for me.”

Collier smiled slightly. “That's not the problem,” she said wryly, waving a hand toward the hall behind her. “Please,” she said. “Coffee?”

I told her coffee would be good.

She led me down the short hall into her office, the sight of which once I'd entered made me stop dead in my tracks.

“Whoa,” I said with a laugh.

She saw my face and smiled.

This inner office, done up with huge mirrors and floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over downtown Seattle and most of the rest of the world, gave me the immediate impression of being airborne.

“You're not going to be sick, are you?” she asked with a laugh. “It's happened.”

“It's just a little startling,” I told her,

Adding to the sense of openness, the room was sparingly furnished—a large glass table for a desk, a couple chrome-framed white leather chairs—and that was that.

“You're bothered by heights?” she asked.

“A little,” I admitted.

She waved me to a chair, which I gratefully took.

“I love the sense of height,” she explained. “The cleanliness of being above everything.”

She could have it, I thought.

Collier took a thin cigar from a pack on her uncluttered desk, lit it, leaned against the edge, and looked at me. “Now, you say you're a friend of Carole's?”

“I am,” I told her, “though we haven't been in touch for some time.”

The door behind me opened then, and I got my coffee in a small china cup on a tiny glass tray.

Collier watched the receptionist quietly leave as I sipped.

“Well,” Collier told me, “The problem is, I don't know how to get in touch with Carole myself.”

“I see,” I said.

“And frankly,” she added, “I'm a bit concerned.”

I put my cup on the tiny tray, put the tray on her desk, and said, “Concerned?”

She frowned a little. “How well do you know Carole?”

“Well enough to like her. Why are you concerned?”

She sat back in her chair. “A few months ago, Carole gave up her apartment in Seattle and—well—disappeared. I was surprised she hadn't contacted me because we'd become quite friendly over the past year since her divorce.”

“I didn't even know she'd been married.”

“Yes,” she said, “for about a year before I met her, but she eventually saw her mistake and got out of it.”

I nodded.

She sighed. “A month ago, her ex-husband placed four watercolors at Wellman's Gallery for sale on consignment. They comprise a project Carole called Rainier Summer.”

“I saw the exhibit at Wellman's”

“Yes, and its clearly her best work,” she told me. “Carole and I had no written contract between us, and if she wanted to sell her work by the side of the road, it would be of no legal concern of mine, but my personal concern issues from the fact that it was her ex-husband who delivered the watercolors.”

“I see.”

“Carole's divorce last year,” Collier continued, “was terribly bitter. At one point she was forced to get a restraining order against the man, so you can understand why I was surprised that she would have him deliver the watercolors.”

“But she kept his name?”

“For business reasons, purely. She started selling her work as Dorin, and kept it that way.”

“And where does he live?”

She frowned. “His name is Phil Dorin,” she said, as if the name pained her to utter. “He has a farm near Eatonville, I think.”

“That's on the way to Rainier,” I pointed out. “The mountain was Carole's subject.”

“I know. I called him, thinking—I don't know—that she might be living there, but he said she wasn't, and I don't think, now, she would be living there really.”

“Did Dorin say he knew where Carole was living?”

“He said he didn't, but I thought he was lying.” Her elegant head shook slightly. “He's a very disagreeable man.”

“And you haven't heard from her, since...?”

She frowned, then replied, “I haven't seen or spoken with Carole since early August.”

"Three months."

"It's crossed my mind to call the police, but..."

"But?"

"It's also crossed my mind that I might be over-dramatizing." She shrugged slightly. "I tend to do that."

"What's that?"

She smiled. "I tend to think the worst. Oh..." She shook her head. "Carole is probably fine. Just happy as a clam, and hopefully at work." She looked at me, as if to make her statement a question, but I didn't know the answer.

I didn't know what to think.

* * *

When I left her office a few minutes later, I still didn't know.

Collier seemed like a grown-up, responsible type, and if she thought she was over-dramatizing her concern for Carole's disappearance, who was I to disagree.

But along with my disappointment at not being able to see Carole again, I felt a bit unsettled. I would have liked knowing she was all right at least, but I had no idea how to find her.

That put my thinking in a circular pattern, so I decided on a drive down to Redondo to get in some stroll-and-think time walking along the shore, which has straightened out my thoughts in the past—but not today.

After an hour's walk, I had decided only that I was hungry.

So I grabbed a sandwich at Salty's, then sat a while out in the sun on a bench at the end of the pier.

I watched an old man at the rail fishing for flounder, watched tugs out in the sound ferrying cargo up from

Tacoma, watched some gulls teasing a dog on the beach—landing and waiting for the dog to chase them off, then flapping their way down the beach, waiting for the dog to chase after them again.

Until around three o'clock, when I gave up thinking and drove back to Seattle.

At a stoplight, through some trees and off in the distance, I caught a brief glimpse of Rainier—a smudge of white on the blue horizon.

And that's when I had the idea

* * *

A kind of cart-before-the-horse idea, but it was all I could think of, so I decided to go with it.

I went back to Wellman's, where the same clerk let me take pictures of Carole's paintings and even helped me arrange them so my shots were complete.

Afterwards, I dropped them off at an overnight photo lab near my apartment and went home. I put in some phone time with a friend who had access to things not easily accessed, learning that Carole wasn't even unlisted in the state of Washington.

Phil Dorin was, however, though his phone had been disconnected. But I did get his address.

And then I did nothing, except sit around the apartment, watch the sunset off the rear balcony, and look at a little TV. I went to bed early, but I couldn't sleep.

A small but persistent sense of anxiety—my unconscious working behind my back—having to do with Carole's

disappearance, naturally, but mixed up with a vague sense of obligation—something owed—kept sleep from me.

I ended up going out for a walk, and getting back to the apartment around two in the morning, where I finally managed maybe two hours' sleep in the next six, rising around eight A.M.

* * *

Groggy, grouchy, but anxious to be on my way and glad of my big idea, which gave me, at least, some plan of action, I put myself in uniform—after a few days of civvies, I usually felt the need to be in uniform—and headed out.

I retrieved my pictures, then pointed my Bronco south and west, toward Eatonville, and made the small town around noon, under very dark, rain-heavy skies.

A coffee shop waitress gave me uncertain directions to the address I'd written down, but after backtracking a few miles and a few wrong turns, I eventually found the farm.

* * *

It was on about five acres of cleared land divided by an unpaved road that ran up a hill to where a tiny trailer was parked. Two larger buildings stood back from the trailer, and along with a tractor and two pickups—a rust-finished old Chevy and a newer Ford Ranger—there were the rusted remains littered here and there of other unidentifiable pieces of machinery. A few cattle stood chewing in the field to one side of the drive, and on the other, a dirty white horse was doing the same.

A large mailbox that dangled from a post at the edge of the road had the name DORIN on it, so I turned in. When I

got about halfway up the hill, a man emerged from one of the larger buildings and looked me over as I parked, got out, and approached him.

“Mr. Dorin?”

“Uh-huh.”

“My name is Virginiak, and I'm looking for Carole, your ex-wife.”

“That right?” he said with little interest.

Dorin was a big man. Very big. Six-seven, maybe six-eight, three-hundredish, big-chested, with a ponderous beer gut that hung over the top of his dirty blue jeans.

“I was told you might know where I could find her.”

“Oh, yeah?” he replied with even less interest.

He had a big head, topped by sparse, curly brown hair, and his pug-nosed, thin-lipped, wind-burned face, with a couple of squinty, dark eyes peering at me, passed along an unfriendly message.

“Can't help you,” he told me.

I nodded, but stayed put, watching him look me over, until he finally sneered, turned away, and walked toward the tractor.

I strolled behind him as he climbed onto a wheel, bent down over the engine, and began removing a fan-belt nut.

I said, “Her agent, Jess Collier, says she hasn't been in touch with Carole for three months.”

“No kidding,” he said.

I watched him slowly work the nut loose, and when he'd finished, he looked at me and asked, “What's Carole to you?”

"I'm a friend of hers," I replied. "We were stationed in Germany together."

He gave me a blank look. "Well, I can't help you, you know," he said. He started pulling at the old belt.

The dirty white horse had drifted nosily over to watch us.

"Last month," I said, "you delivered some paintings of hers to Wellman's Gallery in Seattle."

He worked the belt free, tossed it away, and began fitting the new belt over the shafts' wheels.

"Collier wonders how you came to have them," I told him.

He snorted.

"She's thought about notifying the police."

"That bitch," he muttered, struggling with the belt. "She never liked me."

He got the new belt in place, then began replacing the wheel lock, giving me a tired look. "I got work to do," he said with infinite weariness. "So, why don't you take a hike?"

I stared at him.

"Okay?" he added.

I said, "How did you get those paintings, Phil?"

He sighed, shook his head, and finished screwing down the wheel lock. "Man don't hear so good."

"How did you get those paintings, Phil?"

He paused in his work and blinked at me. "You want trouble?"

I didn't, but I could have handled some from him. I didn't like the man. I didn't say that, though. I just waited.

He stared at me a moment, then climbed up into the tractor saddle and started the engine. The horse, which had wandered close, now pranced quickly away.

I stood by the tractor.

Dorin ran the tractor a moment, then killed the engine and came down, looking at me and saying, “Still here?”

He didn't wait for an answer. Instead he started up the hill toward the trailer. I followed him.

Halfway there, he looked back at me, grunted, then walked on. I kept pace. A few yards short of the trailer, he stopped, turned, and pointed the wrench he still held toward the highway.

“Get out!” he told me. “I want you off my property—now!”

I looked toward the highway, then back at him. “Where's Carole?” I asked.

He blinked. I smiled at him.

“I said,” he huffed, with labored breath, “get off my property!”

I stood where I was, watching him.

He brought the wrench he was holding up to his chest and tapped himself gently, saying, “Or maybe you end up with a permanent disability.”

I kept smiling. “Knock it off, Phil.”

He blinked again. “Are you hard of hearing or something? I told you to get the hell off my property!”

I waited.

He raised the wrench slightly. “So help me...”

“That's enough,” I said.

“I'm warning you...”

“Enough!”

But he drew the wrench back anyway, so I grabbed it out of his hand and pushed him hard away from me, then threw the tool—as violently as I could—against the wall of the trailer, where it slammed so heavily something inside crashed.

Dorin stepped back, looking wild eyed. A man his size wasn't used to being physically challenged by another, and it amazed him.

“I said, that's enough,” I reminded him.

“Who the hell do you think you are...”

“Shut up,” I told him, taking a step toward him.

His face had a lot of anger in it then, but all he did was breathe deep and scowl.

“Now,” I said. “I'll ask you again...”

“I don't know where the hell she is, okay?”

“So how did you come to have those paintings?”

“I took them as payment,” he snapped.

“Payment for what?”

He took a few more settling-down breaths. “Part of our divorce settlement, okay?”

I watched his eyes and knew he was lying. “When was this, Phil?”

“I don't know,” he complained. “Around the first of the month, I think.”

“So, she came here to give you the paintings?”

“Right.”

“Even though she had to take a restraining order out on you last year?”

He snorted.

“Didn't she?”

He flicked his hand as if to wave the past away. “That was different.”

“Was it?”

“She was giving me a hard time, all right?”

I waited.

“She wanted a divorce,” he told me. “So fine. The hell with her, but then she gets this wise-ass lawyer, wants me to sell the farm, give her half—and I said the hell with that.”

“And?”

He smiled a little evil at me. “So I went up to Seattle to see her. Straighten her out a little, that's all.”

“How did you manage that?”

He shrugged.

“You bring a wrench with you?”

His smile got a bit more evil in it. “I didn't need no wrench,” he told me. “I know how to straighten women out, they get out of line.” He tried looking cocky. “Wasn't the first time,” he added.

Right, I thought.

“Know what I mean?”

I knew. I also knew that if I hit him, I'd hit him very hard, and despite his size and height advantage, I'd only have to hit him once, but I'd be wrong no matter how right it would feel.

So I satisfied myself with coming up close, looking up into his face, putting my finger on his chest, and saying, “She better be all right, Phil.”

He looked down at me and saw something in my face that kept him quiet.

“Understand me, Phil?”

I was done talking myself, so I just stood there looking at him a moment, wondering about people and the people they marry, then I turned away and walked back to my truck.

The nosy horse trotted up beside me as I neared the road, probably wanting to make friends, but he got a look at my face, saw the same thing in it that Dorin had seen, and changed his mind.

* * *

The drive to Ashford took me back through Eatonville, over an ever-narrowing stretch of highway that finally widened and became bordered by a handful of houses, a coffee shop, grocery store, and a touristy looking thing called the Ashford Trading Post—Hair Care, Guns and Ammo Boutique.

A sign in the window read CABINS TO LET; so I pulled into the drive, parked, got out, went to the door, and found it locked. I knocked, but there was no response.

I went back to my truck, dug out a road map, and with my pictures of Carole's renditions of Rainier and with an eye up on the mountain itself, tried working out where Carole had to have been to see the view she'd rendered in paint.

If, of course, she'd worked that way at all. But this was my big idea after all, so I tried. Going by what I could see of the mountain from where I stood, I was, in fact, very close, but I needed help.

Which is when I noticed the man.

* * *

He was across the road from where I was standing. He'd suddenly appeared from out of the woods—a scraggly-bearded, wild-haired, dilapidated man in an army field jacket and baseball cap. He was looking at me from beside a tree.

"Hello," I called out to him.

He stared suspiciously back at me.

"I'm a little lost," I told him, starting across the road, which caused him to jerk suddenly backward, stumble, then fall hard into a ditch.

I hurried over to help him up, but as I approached he whirled around, still on the ground, and stared at me with wild fear in his eyes.

"Take it easy," I said, holding up both hands. "I just wanted to ask..." But he'd scrambled backward, got to his feet, and ran back up into the woods, casting worried looks over his shoulder as if I might be after him.

Right, I thought.

I went back to my truck and the photographs—still needing help—just as a sky blue pickup skidded off the highway and into the driveway of the trading post.

A chunky young woman with punked-up red hair emerged, holding a two year old in one arm and a small rifle in the other. She had a big grin all over her face.

"Hi," she said, coming up to me. "You looked lost."

"Hi," I said back. "I am."

"HI!" the toddler said.

"Dirty Hairy bother you?" the woman asked, pointing with her rifle in the direction the wild-haired man had fled.

"No," I told her. "I seemed to bother him, though."

She grinned again. “He's just curious. Harmless enough,” she assured me. “How can I help you?”

“I'm looking for someone,” I explained. “A friend of mine, named Carole Dorin?”

She frowned and shook her head. “Sorry,” she told me.

“Sorry,” the child echoed.

“She may be using her maiden name—Dragnich?”

The woman's frown became thoughtful. “Sounds vaguely familiar,” she told me. “She live around here?”

“Might have moved here in the past few months. I have no address for her, and she's not listed in the phone book.”

She gave it another think-over, then shrugged and shook her head again. “We get a lot of folks here let their cabins. People come and go.”

I said, “My friend's an artist, and she made these watercolors of Rainier.” I held up the photographs, which the two year old instantly grabbed. “I was wondering,” I went on as they both looked them over, “if you might know where that view of the mountain could be seen”

“Brown Creek,” the woman said without hesitation. “Runs—or used to run—down below that clear-cut up there.” She pointed the rifle toward the mountain and a barren section of cleared woods. “Course the damn dam dried it up, but that's the view from the creek, all right.”

“Damdam,” the toddler echoed.

“Damn dam?” I said.

She smiled. “Force of habit, calling it that.” She shifted the child around on her hip. “They dammed the creek up along Eatonville way for the farmers, but just about killed property

values down here. Killed my business, anyway." She shrugged and nodded her head at the picture the toddler was tasting. "Creek's flowing in this picture, so it must've been done before damn dam went in, back the first of September."

"How far does the creek run?"

"I can help you better than that," the woman told me. "See that footbridge in the picture?"

"I see it."

"That's not far from here at all," she said, pointing south along the highway. "There's some cabins down along the edge, both sides. Figure you can ask after your friend there."

"Okay."

"There's a road runs down that way, but you'd have to back-track about seven, eight miles, or you can just keep on the road you're on a ways, turn left at the little park, and you'll see that footbridge right there. You can hoof it."

"Hooffit!" the toddler told me.

"Well," I told them both, "thank you very much."

"My pleasure."

I put away my map and pictures and got inside the truck.

"Hey?" the woman said, leaning down into the window and handing me a business card. "If you need a place to stay the night, I got a great cabin with a view to die for—and a twenty percent discount for military."

"Bye-Bye!" the child exclaimed.

* * *

I drove, as instructed, along the highway "a ways," then turned left at a small open area with benches and tables onto a narrow dead-end road, until I came to the footbridge, where

I parked and started walking. Before I got far, I looked at the dark sky, and trotted back for my raincoat, then started out again across the footbridge spanning the rocky creek bed. Looking further southward, I could judge almost precisely where Carole had to have stood to see that particular view of Rainier, towering over me just to the north. I was just on the other side of the bridge when it began to rain.

A hard, cold rain, and my raincoat offered little protection. It crossed my mind to head back and wait the weather out, but I had a small sense of urgency building inside—planted there, probably, by Collier and cultivated a little by Dorin—so I pushed on.

But as I pushed, I began to get a sense of being observed, and after I'd made a few turns along the road, I happened to glance back and saw a dark, shambling shape, which I took to be a man, dart across the road and disappear into the woods.

Curious Dirty Hairy, I thought.

And then, a bit further on, I caught another glimpse of him, watching me from some distance beside a tree, then pulling back out of sight when he saw me looking back at him.

Harmless Dirty Hairy, I thought.

I walked on through another section of the park to another paved road, then along it, past a few ugly looking trailers and several cabins, where I figured to ask after Carole, if I had had no luck on my own.

Then around a turn that angled close down to the dry creek, I did get lucky.

At least I found her mailbox, with the name DRAGNICH stenciled on the side, and through the rain and thick woods beyond it, I saw the cabin.

Which is when luck stopped.

* * *

I've always had a sense for things gone bad, and standing there in the rain, peering into the gloom, seeing the dark outline of the cabin through the pines, I knew nothing good was ahead. And when I checked inside the mailbox and found it stuffed with junk mail, a couple of bills, and two issues of American Artist, I didn't feel any better.

I made my way down a narrow, unpaved driveway, then up to the covered front stair of the large cabin. Beside the stair in a covered box were a half dozen newspapers still rolled in plastic. When I knocked, despite the empty feel of the place, my sense deepened when there was no response.

I looked through a window and saw only the dim outlines of furniture. Then I tried the door, found it locked. I stepped back into the rain and wind and went around to the rear of the cabin. A deep covered porch faced the creek bed. There was a flimsy-looking bench at one end and a large wooden hot tub at the other.

The storm around me picking up steam, I stepped onto the porch, which was a mess of leaves and animal droppings, and looked into the cabin through a sliding-glass door. I saw only the same dim outlines, but I tried the door and was surprised to find it open.

I poked my head inside.

“Hello?” I called out. “Anyone here?!”

There was no answer but the drumming of the rain on the roof.

I stepped into the darkened cabin and took a dreaded breath. There was no scent of death in the air.

“Anyone home?” I shouted. “Hello!”

Still no reply.

The section of the cabin I was in was a living room area. On the left was a compact kitchen and dining room. I found a light switch, which produced no light, but drawing back the curtain over the sliding-glass door gave me enough light to move without knocking into things.

Which I probably would have done because of the mess.

Tables and chairs overturned; drawers pulled out and dumped of their contents; the floor carpeted with various household items, books, newspaper, and assorted junk as if a small tornado had spun into the house.

Damn, I thought, feeling an adrenaline charge.

I moved to the front of the cabin and found a bedroom in the same disordered state, and another room set up as a studio with an easel smashed in a corner amid the remains of various photographic equipment, canvases—some with the start of something on them, some without—crumpled, torn sketches, and photographs of landscapes, of people, of Carole.

I checked the bathroom and all closets, where I found clothes still hanging, and I checked the pantry, which was well stocked, if turned inside out.

But no Carole.

I headed back out onto the porch, wondering what my next move should be, when I caught some movement—peripherally, back up in the thick woods to my right. When I focused I saw Dirty Hairy sitting on the root base of a large tree, looking at me.

Which is when the wind suddenly calmed around me, and flies began buzzing my head, and I heard the clatter of tiny feet scuttling somewhere to my left.

That's when I finally noticed the fresh wildflowers placed on the hot tub lid, and I smelled the smell I hated, and knew I'd found her.

* * *

And it was she—I knew—as soon as I raised the hot tub lid and saw the body. Enough was left of her face and hair to know, and because her wrists and ankles were taped together, I also knew my friend Carole Dragnich had been murdered.

* * *

I felt so suddenly tired I just sat there and watched the storm around me. The shock and lack of sleep the night before had combined to knock me out on my feet, so I just stayed put and watched the world grow dark.

Too tired to move. Too tired to think. Too tired to even grieve. I sat there like a uniformed zombie, doing nothing.

Until Dirty Hairy reappeared.

He wasn't far away at all—down, just across the creek, semi-hunkering behind a large rock, peering at me, a bunch of wildflowers clutched in his hand.

Which got me off my feet quickly.

"Hey!" I called out to him, coming off the porch. "You!"

He hunkered down further as I trotted down to the creek, but then he stood back up and started running.

"Wait a damn minute!" I shouted.

But he didn't, so I chased him.

In the rain, in the dark, across the rocky creek bed, then up into the woods.

"Wait, dammit!" I shouted. "Come back here!"

But he ran on, and he was fast and afraid and knew where he was going. After about ten minutes of stumbling around in thickening woods, I couldn't see him anymore, so I gave it up.

Gave it up and went back to the cabin—soaked to the skin, tired, dirty, and miserable—and finally made the call.

* * *

Which brought the police—sheriff's deputies from Eatonville at first, then state police investigators and a forensics crew, and finally the county sheriff himself, a morose but capable-seeming young man named Stender. I told the story of how I'd found Carole about a half dozen times to most of the officers—the rest of that day, and into the night and morning of the next day.

I told them about Carole's paintings, told them about Jess Collier and her concerns, told them about Phil Dorin and his bad attitude, told them about Dirty Hairy and the wildflowers. Told them everything—over and over—there at the cabin and later, after poor Carole's body had been removed, at the sheriff's station in Eatonville.

Until, in the early hours of the next day, they decided to let me go.

* * *

By then, around four A.M., I was past exhaustion. I'd had two hours sleep in the past forty-eight, and I was running on fumes; so rather than drive all the way back to Seattle, I chanced driving to Ashford and the Ashford Trading Post.

It wasn't open, naturally, but a small diner was, so I had breakfast and waited.

I dozed over coffee until six, when I called the number on the card that the woman with the red hair had given me. She answered—thank God—and an hour later rented me a cabin.

Small, one room, but with food in the fridge, and a comfortable bed, where I just managed undressing, before sleep overwhelmed me.

* * *

I slept the day through, dreamt of nothing, remembered waking up around two A.M. the next morning. I was stiff, sore, hungry enough to eat my shoes, and feeling like death, but after a long hot shower, a few aspirins, some coffee and muffins, I felt human again.

Moving myself and more coffee out onto the back porch, I passed a couple hours sitting on a ratty canvas chair, watching the black mountain above me, framed by a blacker sky, lord it over the world.

And I grieved, finally, at the loss of a friend.

* * *

Until dawn, when I realized I wasn't done catching up on sleep. Despairing of getting my routine to normal any time

soon, I went back to bed and slept less soundly this time, with cold-sweat dreams of high places and falling—until my cell phone rang at noon.

* * *

It was Sheriff Stender. He said, “Town prosecutor wants to take your deposition tomorrow. Can you be in town?”

Rubbing my face awake, I told him I would be, then asked, “Have you located Dirty Hairy yet?”

“Not yet,” he admitted, “but we got a small army out shagging the eastern foothills.”

“Have you identified him?”

“Oh, sure,” he said. “Name's actually McGowan—John McGowan—and he's got a minor record.”

“Oh?”

“Vagrancy, trespass, attempted burglary—no crimes against persons, though. He's lived up in those woods for years.”

“I see,” I said, first sitting up, then getting up and moving out onto the porch. “Have you spoken with Dorin?”

“Yesterday afternoon, and he's made a statement.”

“And?”

“Said he didn't kill her.”

“Really.”

“Well, he has a fair alibi,” he told me. “Date of your friend's death has been more or less fixed as September fifteenth. There was a newspaper found with her blood on it in the cabin. Later issues were still wrapped and out by the front door.”

“I saw them.”

“Newspaper boy quit delivering after a week, and according to the ME, the condition of the body is consistent with that date of death.”

“So what's Dorin's alibi?” I asked, not following him.

“Dorin was arrested for drunk driving by Eatonville sheriff's men on the fourteenth—a Friday. Drunk driving, resisting arrest—he was jailed and didn't make bail until Monday, the seventeenth.”

“That's not ironclad,” I pointed out. “She still might have been killed after that.”

“That's true.”

“And what did he say about those paintings?”

“Same as he told you,” Stender said. “His ex-wife gave him the paintings as payment for his share of the cabin that he co-owned with her.”

“So he knew where she was all along.”

“He did,” he agreed. “We're not ruling him out, Mr. Virginiak, he's got a record for assault against women, and the victim herself made several complaints in the past...”

“That figures.”

“...but right now we're focused on Dirty Hairy. He's good in these woods and it's a big area, but we've got dogs and we'll get him sooner or later.”

“Sounds like you've made up your mind, Sheriff.”

“We've got his prints—good sets—from inside the cabin, and he knew her body was in that hot tub—those wildflowers didn't grow on that lid—so what do you think?”

My eyes drifted up to the cloud-shrouded mountain, and I imagined the scene unfolding there.

“Listen,” Stender said thickly.

I listened.

“Reason I called was to let you know,” he spoke with reluctance, then stopped.

“Go on.”

He sighed. “Autopsy was done and the results were leaked, and I didn't want you to just get it from TV or something—”

I waited.

“It's not good,” he said.

It wouldn't be, I thought.

“Both legs and one arm were broken,” he told me. “Skull was fractured. Her nose and cheeks also had fractures.”

“He beat her hard,” I said.

“Thing is,” he went on with more hesitance, “she went into that hot tub alive.”

“What?”

“Couple of fingernails were broken off and there were deep scratches in the wood seat inside the tub, so ... well, it's pretty much certain, that ... you know.”

“She drowned?”

He sighed, then said, “Analysis of tissue, lungs, and the condition of her brain makes it almost certain she ... boiled.”

“Jesus.”

“There's a safety breaker, that should have kicked in when the water temp reached a hundred five. It had been forced open...”

“Christ almighty!”

“I know.”

“I didn't realize...”

"I know."

Jesus, I thought. Poor Carole.

"Anyway," he said, "the report was leaked. We got a call from the Times looking for confirmation, and I figured you should be told."

"I appreciate it."

"She had no family, apparently, except her ex-husband?" He'd made the statement a question.

"I don't know anything about any family she might have had," I told him, then I remembered. "Oh, Jess Collier, her agent, they were friends as well. She needs to be notified."

"Seattle P.D. talked with her today," he assured me. "She thinks it was Dorin, by the way."

Which, alibi or not, was what I still thought.

* * *

After hanging up, I sat on the screened porch of my cabin, drinking bad coffee and thinking hard thoughts about Carole's last minutes alive. Thoughts I didn't want to think but that came to mind anyway. Around two P.M., which is when I decided I'd need fresh clothes if I were to stay on in Ashford for the rest of the weekend, I decided to drive back up to Seattle that afternoon.

In the same way that thoughts of Carole's death came uninvited to mind, I turned my eyes toward my truck, parked only a few feet from the screen door, and there was, on the windshield, a shape that didn't belong. Something...

* * *

Rather damp, folded twice, and tucked under the driver's side wiper with a wildflower on the inside—a charcoal drawing of Dirty Hairy.

Unmistakably him, complete with Mets baseball cap, his eyes wide, staring out from the hair that crowded and obscured the rest of his face. The portrait was unsigned, but the style of it was definitely Carole's.

Handling it with care I took it back into the cabin, found a plastic trash bag in which to keep it, then grabbed my binoculars and went out again, where I scanned the woods around me, watching for any movement, for almost fifteen minutes.

If Dirty Hairy was near, he was too well hidden, so I gave that up and got out my cell phone to call Stender. He was out, and when I asked to speak with someone who was connected with the investigation, I got a frustrating fifteen-minute runaround. I hung up, deciding there was, after all, no hurry about reporting my find just then.

Thinking that the dampness of the paper suggested it had been left in the early morning rain and that Dirty Hairy—if he was the one who'd left it for me—would by then be long gone. And there was at least a small chance that the portrait I had was not done by Carole.

Besides, in my own mind, Dorin was a far better suspect than Dirty Hairy still, and this was evidence that might close off any other direction the investigation might take.

So for the moment I decided I would get it confirmed that the portrait had been done by Carole—and Jess Collier should be able to do that.

* * *

When I got to Seattle, and her office, and showed her the drawing, she did.

“Oh, this is Carole's, I'm sure,” Collier said.

“I thought so, too.”

We were in her wide-open-spaces office, standing at her desk, with the drawing of Dirty Hairy open on it.

“And he just left it for you?”

“He'd seen me the day I found Carole's body.”

She sat and sighed raggedly. “It must've been horrible.”

“It wasn't pleasant,” I agreed.

She looked at me, her eyes red-rimmed but hard, and shook her head. “That ... bastard!”

I knew whom she meant. “Apparently, Dorin has an alibi.”

She frowned, so I explained, and she saw the problem as I had.

“That newspaper business means nothing. He could've still killed her when he got out of jail. The fact that newspapers dated later than the sixteenth hadn't been looked at may only mean Carole hadn't been home, for God's sake!”

“They haven't ruled Dorin out as a suspect, but they are focusing on Dirty Hairy.”

“Well, he certainly looks like a crazed killer,” she said, looking down at the drawing. “Does he have a name?”

“John McGowan,” I replied. “He has a minor police record, but nothing violent.”

She studied the drawing a moment longer, then tears started falling. “Charcoal was becoming Carole's forte,” she

told me hoarsely. “The last work she brought to me was a charcoal sketch.”

“Oh?”

She nodded, dabbing her eyes with tissue, then stood and stepped over to a mirrored cabinet and pressed a corner of the door. When it opened, she slid out an unframed canvas sketch, which she stood on her desk.

“It might be the best she ever did,” she said thickly.

It was a sketch of the mountain, viewed from the creek bed outside Carole's cabin, drawn on a much better day than when I had stood there. Rainier was full up and clear in the sky beyond the trees, the wooden footbridge, and the dry creek bed, that lay like a rocky carpet thrown down to where Carole had to have been.

I pointed to the broad split stone at the base of footbridge. “The detail is wonderful.”

“She always knew,” Collier agreed, “just what belonged and what didn't.” She shook her head, adding thickly, “I'm taking this home—I'll never sell it.” She faced me then, and her teary, angry eyes glittered. “I want to kill him, Mr. Virginiak. I really, really do.”

* * *

She meant Dorin, of course, and I could understand her. Carole Dragnich had been her friend as well as her client, and wanting her killer's death was the least she could do.

I felt something along the same lines, I suppose, and after taking my sketch and leaving her, after picking up my clothes at my condo, and then on the road back to Ashford, in the

driving rain and growing dark, I did what I could to see Jess Collier's wish come true.

I focused my thoughts on seeing that Carole's killer was arrested and convicted. The death penalty was alive and well in Washington State, and the arrest and conviction of such a crime would almost certainly make the killer a candidate for the hangman.

And because Carole Dragnich had been my friend, it was the least I could do.

But by the time I hit Eatonville—probably the result of having seen my own anger at Phil Dorin reflected in the angry eyes of Jess Collier—I had given Dorin and what I knew of him a lot of thought and decided he was probably not the killer after all.

His alibi aside, despite his brutish, bullying behavior and the fact I didn't like him, he hadn't struck me as the kind of person who would go to the lengths that were taken to perform Carole's murder.

If she'd been merely beaten to death, that would be one thing, but she was intentionally boiled alive, the act of a careful sadist or a psychotic, neither characterization consistent with the impression I had of Dorin.

By the time I'd reached Ashford, that realization turned my thoughts toward Dirty Hairy and the evidence I had of a connection between him and Carole that the police didn't know existed. As I turned down the lane to my cabin, I decided to call Stender as soon as I got inside.

But just as I came to a stop in the open area in front of my cabin, I saw a dark figure sprinting away from the screened

porch and my headlights picked up the startled face of Dirty Hairy.

Getting out my cell phone and pressing 911, I used the searchlight on the side of the Bronco to follow him as he darted across the footbridge, then headed north on the paved road on the other side. I reversed my truck, spun out of the drive and with the phone to my ear—listening to a tape giving me options—I drove south very fast to the bridge half a mile away.

Pressing 2 on the phone to report a police emergency, I sped over the bridge, squealed a right-hand turn, and fishtailed the Bronco, heading north.

Getting the speed up to seventy, my eyes scanning left and right, looking for Dirty Hairy's dark shape among all the others in the woods on either side, I listened to another taped voice tell me that my call would be answered in the order received and to please hold...

Which is when I spotted him, high up along a ridge to my left—just as a logging truck pulled out in front of me from the right, causing me to curse, brake, skid, and swerve off the road, then backwards, down an embankment, where I heard a loud thump, before I came to a stop in a muddy ditch.

My heart pounding in my chest, cold sweat forming inside my clothes, I was looking at a dark prostrate form lying in the gully a few feet ahead of me—the thump I'd heard. I got out a flashlight, finally, and stepped out of the truck into the dark on weak legs, and walked back to see what I'd hit.

I was so afraid of what I would find, I actually cried a little when I saw it. A large raccoon—dead as dead gets.

* * *

The driver of the logging truck appeared shortly. Because my cell phone was smashed and because I wanted to follow Dirty Hairy, I told him to get the state police, explained who I was and what I was doing, then I left him.

I got into my raincoat and started up the side of the steep hill, my flashlight sweeping the woods ahead.

At the top of the ridge was a thicket of black hawthorn—the point where I'd last seen him. I went down along the other side, slip-sliding over a carpet of dead, wet leaves, stopping every hundred feet or so to scan the area as far as the beam of my flashlight could illuminate, then going on.

Up and down over another ridge, into thicker woods of pine skirted by dense alder—thinking I'd lost him and starting to think of heading back to the highway—when I saw him.

He was high in the woods to my left, staring down at me until my flash picked him up, then he scampered away. I went on, coming to where I'd seen him at the base of a cliff, a dead-end triangle of rock where there was no place to go but up.

So I did. I stepped up easily at first over a natural stairway of rock, until it became steeper and I started having second thoughts. Although I couldn't see in the dark, I had to be a hundred feet or so above the base, and I really had a problem with heights.

But I went on, using my hands now, to haul myself upward over the rock face of the cliff, until I came to a narrow ledge that was just wide enough to sit on.

I rested for a moment, scanning with my flash along the ledge, seeing nothing. Then, standing on nervous knees, I started sidling along the ledge, watching carefully now and thinking I'd accidentally cornered him, which might make him suddenly brave—until I came to the cave.

* * *

It was actually more of a deep indenture under a broad overhang of rock. Stooping down from the side, I let my flashlight explore first, picking up in the light a variety of trash, bedding, clothing, boxes, et cetera, but not Dirty Hairy, as far as I could see. But this was his home.

So I went in, carefully, bent over low, watching the shadows for movement, but seeing none, coming, finally, to the deepest point, where he'd built a semi-permanent campsite. There was a stone fireplace, a large, mostly rotten mattress, various cooking items, canned food, plastic bottles of water, trash bags filled with clothing, assorted books and magazines piled here and there.

And photographs.

Spilling mostly from old yellowed envelopes onto a large, flat stone that he used as a table, on which there was also a small kerosene lamp, which I lit, then looked the photographs over.

Most of them were of people I didn't know, but in one newer envelope were a dozen or so banded together, all of Carole while she still lived—some nude, some not.

One of the photos was taken as she sat on a rock by the full flowing creek by her cabin.

Which caused me, finally, to realize something that I'd known already, and gave me a chill that had nothing to do with the fact that I was cold and wet.

Which is when Dirty Hairy came home.

* * *

The kind of anger I felt then, and for the rest of that night, was a rage so cold that its memory now causes a kind of nausea—as if it were a virus my body, once infected, remembers and recoils from.

A rage that was quiet, but hard as ice. A rage I held onto for nearly twelve hours, till the next morning.

* * *

When I knocked on the door to Jess Collier's apartment—on floor forty of a newish Bellevue condo—she came to the door after only a second or so, as if she'd been just on the other side expecting me, but she seemed surprised to see me.

“Mr. Virginiak?”

“Ms. Collier,” I said. “I'm sorry for coming so early, but I needed to speak with you.”

“You look terrible,” she told me opening the door wider. “Please come in.”

I stepped inside saying, “I've been up all night.”

“It looks like it,” she told me. “Would you like some coffee?”

“No thank you.”

She turned and led me into a large, spare, expensively furnished living room, which opened onto a large wrap-

around balcony. “I was just about to get ready for work,” she said, waving me to a gray leather loveseat. “Please sit down.”

Which I did, looking the room over.

I'd expected artworks on her walls, but like her office there was only glass—huge sliding-glass doors, bracketed by floor-to-ceiling mirrors. With the doors open the effect was of being outside.

“Are you sure I can't get you coffee?”

I told her no.

Wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, lighting a long thin cigar, she still was a handsome woman, but she didn't look as good to me then as she had when I first met her.

I said, “I found Dirty Hairy last night.”

“You did?” She perched herself on the arm of the sofa and waved a hand toward the Times on the coffee table between us. “There's nothing in the paper about it.” She frowned at me. “Has he admitted to killing Carole?”

“No,” I told her. “He didn't kill anyone.”

“I see.”

“He doesn't exactly play life with a full deck, but he told me that he and Carole were friends—and I believe him.”

“Really?”

“He's not a bad guy, actually. He'd stolen some pictures from the cabin. Pictures of Carole, mostly nudes. He'd taken them because he'd been embarrassed for her and didn't want them to be seen by others.”

“Really.”

“He's a Gulf War vet and saw a little more than he could handle, and he's taking a vacation from the world, he told me.”

The wind was blowing the balcony's curtains in around her, so she got up and pulled them back a bit, then reperched herself.

“He wanted to come forward with what he knew, but he's had a bad history with police, so he'd been afraid,” I said. “When he saw me in uniform the other day, he figured I might listen to what he had to say, and he had a lot to tell me.” I looked at my watch. “He'll be turning himself in to the state police in a few minutes,” I added, “so we haven't got a lot of time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” I told her with reluctance, “something's bothering me.”

She frowned and shrugged.

I said, “Did you bring that charcoal drawing of Rainier home with you as you said?”

“Yes.”

“May I see it?”

“Sure,” she said, then got up, went to a desk, and from behind it, took out the drawing.

I stood and went over to look at it, saying, “And you did say that Carole delivered this drawing to you in early August, I believe?”

“Yes,” she agreed, laying the drawing down and walking back to the sofa and coffee table, where she opened a briefcase that was on it and removed a small piece of paper,

which she handed to me. “I brought this to the police officers who questioned me yesterday. They asked me when it was that I last saw her, and I found this copy of the receipt I gave her.”

RECEIVED FROM CAROLE DORIN,
8/5/98
A DRAWING IN CHARCOAL OF MOUNT RANIER.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

I stared at her.

“What is it?”

“The creek is dry in the drawing.”

“I beg your pardon.”

I looked at her.

“Yes?”

I said, “The creek in the drawing—Brown Creek—wasn't dammed until September first.”

She frowned sharply.

“That split stone at the base of the footbridge was well below the waterline, and under the footbridge itself, and could not have been seen before the creek was dammed.” I frowned back at her. “She couldn't have drawn this before September first.”

Her frown became thoughtful. “Carole...” she began, then smiled. “Carole had an artist's imagination, Mr. Virginiak. She could've done the drawing earlier. At any time, actually...”

“No,” I told her. “There's too much detail there. I've seen that creek bed, and the rock arrangement is precisely the same as in the drawing.”

Collier gave me a long look, gave her cigar a puff, then hugged herself. “So what's the problem?”

I folded the receipt I held and put it in my pocket, saying, “The creek was dry when she did the drawing, so she couldn't have given it to you in August.” I watched her eyes watching me. “Which makes you a liar, Jess.”

Which didn't prompt a denial.

* * *

Instead she frowned at me for a long moment, looking for some sign of stupidity in my face, which she wasn't going to find. Then finally she sighed and turned away, went back to the sofa, stubbed out her thin cigar, lit another, and smiled at me, saying, “You're very clever.”

Jesus, I thought.

“So?” she said, sitting back. “Why is it that we have so little time?”

“Because,” I explained, “the police will be coming for you, and I thought we needed to talk before your arrest.”

“My arrest?” She affected amusement at the idea. “That receipt means nothing. In fact, I now seem to recall it was September fifth that Carole delivered the drawing to me.” She shrugged easily. “I wrote an eight instead of a nine—so what?”

“But you did kill Carole,” I told her.

She considered me for a moment, then said, “Take off your shirt.”

I did as she asked, to show her that I was wearing no wire, then she said, “Would you care to know why?”

Collier blew smoke and began to inspect the back of her hand in a casual way. “Carole betrayed me,” she said with coldness. She glanced at me. “After all that I'd done for her, she betrayed me.”

She sat back easily and said, “I found her, you realize. Selling her artwork from a park bench, for next to nothing.”

What was killing, I thought, but the ultimate betrayal.

She said, “I saw her talent, but her technique was naive. I advised her. I taught her to be all that she could be. I arranged her first showings. I became her friend. And when she finally had enough of that idiot she'd married, I was with her, giving my support every moment.

“I loved her,” Collier told me, in a flat monotone.

“Did you?”

She nodded. “Carole was confused about her sexuality, but I knew, and eventually brought the true woman out of her, even though she resisted.” She frowned slightly. “Then last summer she ... went away. Said she needed space. Went to live in that cabin, didn't even call. I found her and ... we reconciled, I thought, but then...” She shrugged. “She chose in the end to reject her true self—and me.” She smiled ruefully. “Well, I couldn't have that, now, could I?”

I said nothing.

“It was very painful to me, Mr. Virginiak, and I don't do pain very well—I really don't.”

“So,” I said, finding my voice again. “You killed her.”

“Oh it wasn't that simple.” She puffed hard on her little cigar. “Carole needed to be punished before dying.” She blew smoke, and her mad eyes glittered at me.

Right, I thought.

“I admit that when I went there that day, I was a bit out of control. We argued and I hit her very hard with the poker, and at first I thought she was dead—until I saw she wasn't. And I'll tell you something else,” she said breathlessly. “Breaking her legs gave me great pleasure, and then, after I'd put her in the tub, watching her struggle so desperately, hearing her scream as she realized what was happening—” She smiled. “—I enjoyed it very much.”

“Of course, you did,” I said.

She smiled almost impishly at me. “Does that sound strange to you, Mr. Virginiak?”

“You're not going to get away with this, Jess.”

She smiled. “That receipt is hardly evidence, and I could just deny what I've told you. There's no evidence I was ever even at that cabin.”

“McGowan saw you there,” I told her.

Her smile flatlined.

“That's what he's telling the police now.”

She thought about that, then tried, “A half-witted wild man, Mr. Virginiak?”

I shook my head at her with certainty. “He described you perfectly, Jess, and if you told the police that you'd never been to the cabin, they will know you lied.”

She sighed with a sense of weary capitulation.

“And, there is the receipt,” I went on, “which catches you in another lie, and if the police know what to look for—and I'll be sure they will—enough evidence will be found. Fingerprints, fiber evidence.” I pointed to the newspaper and the headline: POLICE HUNT FOR HOT TUB KILLER. “You'll hang in the end, or opt for injection, or more likely, prison, forever, but you won't get away with this, Jess.”

She looked then as thoughtful as she should.

I said, “You haven't really thought this through, have you?”

She said carefully, “Do you think, Mr. Virginiak, that a sane person would have done what I did?”

I didn't, but said nothing.

“I mean, I must have been insane to have done this to poor Carol, mustn't I?” She considered her line of thought, then blew smoke, and smiled. “A hospital is more likely than prison, don't you think?”

I kept silent, watching her closely.

She only smiled that little inhuman smile at me.

And, I finally sat back, and felt all my own humanity slip away.

“That's exactly what I was thinking before I arrived here, actually,” I said, watching her closely, trying to fix the right advantage. “When you say hospital, you do realize that means the state facility at Tillicum?”

She shrugged.

“I've seen the place,” I told her. “They're very chemically oriented, there.”

“Are they?”

“Thorazine, Prozac, Serone, Zoloft—they'll mix you nice little cocktails, so you'll feel very little for the few years you'll be there.”

“Sounds lovely,” she told me, adding with a disbelieving frown. “Did you say years?”

“Oh, I'm sure we're talking years, Jess.”

She looked at her watch, as if tired of me.

“You really are quite psychotic, you know, and not smart enough to hide it.”

She looked doubtful.

“You boiled a woman alive,” I told her. “Beat her with a poker—broke her arms and legs, then boiled her alive—and there's no remorse in you.”

She looked less doubtful.

“No remorse, no regret—just a pathetic sense of having done yourself justice because another woman dumped you?” I laughed. “You are insane, Jess.”

“Really.”

“Yes,” I said, smiling a little more inhumanity at her. “It's not what you've done, though, as much as it is what you are—so you'll be at Tillicum a long time.”

She tried looking bored again, but couldn't quite pull it off.

“But the drugs will be a big help,” I went on. “And what you're able to feel, you won't really mind.”

She sighed and I watched again for the advantage.

“You'll barely notice waking in your bed, soaked in your own urine.” I shrugged. “Happens when you're doped past caring, as you surely will be.”

Her lips pressed together slightly, but that hadn't yet rocked her.

“You won't mind having no one to talk with except brain-fried drug addicts, schizophrenics, and a few psychopaths like yourself.”

She brushed an ash from her sweatshirt.

“You may even get used to the hands of the guards, as they move you from one room to the next.”

She only looked at me.

“Do you mind being handled, Jess?”

She stayed silent.

“Well, you'll be handled a lot, so you'll get used to it. You may even get to like it—just as you may come to enjoy the very close confinement.”

Her eyes moved—fractionally—toward the opened door to the balcony.

Yes, I thought.

“You'll have your own cell,” I told her. “A full eight-by-eight—very cozy.”

She started to gently bite the inside of her lip, and I could almost smell her sudden fear.

My advantage, I thought.

It made me feel good.

I got up, moved to the patio door, and drew the curtain open a bit more, and looked at her. “You like high places, don't you Jess?”

She rubbed her arm and looked away.

I smiled. “I don't mind telling you that I don't, but you like being high up—the cleanliness of being above everything?

Above the corruption?" I shook my head. "You'll miss that feeling of openness and height for a while, but then..." I drew the curtain closed. "...there's a certain sense of security and comfort in being caged."

A vein began to prominently throb along her throat.

"It won't be as if you're entombed, though it may feel that way at first."

She scratched her neck idly.

"It won't be as if you were buried alive."

She looked up at me with sharp irritation.

"It won't be as bad as you think..."

"If you're trying to frighten me, think again."

"You're frightening yourself," I told her. "I'm just telling you how it will be."

"You're exaggerating."

"Am I?"

She put her thin cigar out and lit another.

"If I'm boring you, I could call the police now."

She swallowed and whispered, "Do what you like."

I watched her think for a moment, then I put my hands in my pockets and moved around the room, coming to rest facing a large mirror.

"The thing about being in custody, Jess, is that your options become so limited."

She was quiet.

"Yes," I said, watching myself. "Once you're in custody, you'll stay in custody—there will be no bail for you."

In the mirror I saw her looking up at me with doubt in her face.

I laughed at her. “You're insane, Jess—and it shows, right there in your face. You're a danger, to others and to yourself, and they will not let you go.”

And she believed me. She swallowed fear, looked away.

I looked back at my own face, and wondered who I was.

I said, “Fellow I knew once in San Diego was arrested for dealing drugs.”

Something about my eyes was different, I thought.

“He knew he was facing a lot of jail time, and he knew he could never do that time, but he wasted the little time he had before he was arrested.”

Something vaguely dead about them.

I turned and waited for her own dead eyes to come up to mine.

“The problem,” I explained, “was that, once he had been arrested, his options were so limited.”

She frowned up at me.

“He had the advantage of being sane, but they watch people closely because suicide makes cops look bad, uncaring or something, so that all he could think of in the end was to bite through the arteries in his own wrist.

“You're out of your mind, and they'll be watching you every minute, so...” I shrugged, letting her fill in the blanks.

The wind ruffled the balcony curtain.

I waited a moment more, then retrieved my hat and said, “McGowan will have already told the state police what he knows and what I've told him to say. It will take a while to sort out, but my guess is the Seattle police will be here

shortly. If not, I'll give you an hour before I call them myself."

Her look was blank.

"I'll be across the street," I told her, nodding toward the open balcony.

She said nothing. Neither did I.

* * *

I rode the elevator down to the lobby, stopping only to ask the security guard the time—six fifteen A.M.

I jaywalked across the highway to a coffee shop where I took a seat along the front window, which had a full view of the parking lot of Jess Collier's building, and ordered coffee and a bagel to have while I waited.

I was watching the road outside fill with morning rush-hour traffic, hoping McGowan had managed all right with the state police, wondering if the Seattle P.D. would arrive.

And thinking hard, cold, unforgiving thoughts that seem to come easier the older I get. I had no second thoughts whatsoever.

And she took nearly the full hour.

* * *

Doing what, I never knew, but at 7:05, having paid for my coffee, and thinking I'd have to call the police about Collier after all, I saw someone running.

He tore across the street from the parking lot to the front of Collier's building, where he opened the door and shouted something inside. Then the security guard came out and both ran back to the parking lot, looking up.

Which is when I left the coffee shop, and although I couldn't see the parking lot well from that vantage point, I stayed standing where I was.

I didn't see her fall.

* * *

But despite the noise of the traffic around me, the sound of her body slamming down, forty stories, through the roof of a parked car, came through to me loud and clear.

And it sounded as final as it should.

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Houdini by Eve Fisher

My wife, Jackie, decided a couple of years ago to finish her doctorate. Well, you can't do that in South Dakota, or at least not in eighteenth century English literature, so she had to go out of state. I'm a farmer, so I stayed put in Laskin. That caused a lot of talk. Oh, you betcha. Wife gone most of the time, coming home on weekends, sometimes only once a month? Lot of talk. “Hey, Steve, everything okay at home?” “Fine.” “You sure?” “Yep.” But I wasn't.

Except that Jackie was happy, and what was I supposed to do? Lock her up? I didn't like it so much when she got all enthusiastic about a professor, or a student, but I trusted her. For one thing, she always came home. One weekend she came home even more excited than usual.

“Look what I found in the telephone book!” she cried. She pulled out a Xeroxed page and pointed to an ad. “‘Williams Books. Rare and Used Books,'” she read aloud. “Estate Sales—that's a good sign. You know, Great-aunt Lena dies, and they find all these books in her attic and they never bother to actually look at them, they just want to get rid of them. So just before they throw them away, they find an ad like this and ship them off.” Jackie was just beaming. Of course, she's never recovered from finding a first edition Harriet Beecher Stowe in the trash. Granted, it was The Mayflower, not Uncle Tom's Cabin, and it was damaged, but it was a first edition.

“So where is this place?”

“You'll never believe it. Brant, South Dakota.”

“Brant?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Honey, Brant has a population of thirty-seven people and fifty-nine dogs.”

“No, it doesn't.”

“That's what it says on the sign going into town.”

“When were you there?”

“I went over with Joe to help with some repairs on a generator, last May.”

“Oh. Well, let's check it out tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

So, bright and early Saturday morning, we hopped in the car and went off in search of Williams Books. It was a long search. Nobody in Brant had ever heard of the place, which was strange. Brant's too small for someone to be running a business there and nobody know it. And the directions Jackie got over the phone didn't make any sense. We were almost in Minnesota, driving down a gravel road, when we finally saw a small wooden sign tacked to a fence post: BOOKS.

The driveway was blocked by pointed stakes, so I pulled in sideways in front of them and switched off the engine. Two large German shepherds came bounding up the driveway on the other side of the blockade. Behind them was a tiny old woman pushing a wheelbarrow. I looked at Jackie, who smiled reassuringly. “Don't worry,” she said. “I'll beat them off with a stick.”

“That or you'll be lunch.”

“Thanks,” she said and got out of the car. “Hello, Mrs. Williams? I'm Jackie Thompson, and this is my husband, Steve. I called you yesterday about looking at the books.”

“Of course,” the old woman said. She shooed the dogs away and said, “Come on up.”

I got out of the car and we followed her up the long driveway.

“It was a little hard to follow your directions, Mrs. Williams,” I said.

“Oh, my, yes,” she replied. “I do that on purpose. And my name is Mrs. Torulfson. I only call it Williams Books.”

“Makes it a little hard to do business, doesn't it?” I asked.

“No. It's just my way of making sure that whoever comes out here is all right. Some people—well.” She stopped in front of the barn. The door was chained and padlocked. She set down the wheelbarrow (the dogs had completely disappeared), fished a huge key out of her pocket, and fumbled the padlock open. “You see, I've had such problems with vandalism, I have to be careful.” The door swung open and we went inside.

I swear I've never seen anything like it. Yes, it was an old horse barn, and the floor was dirt, but really it was a cathedral of books. Stalls with arched wooden lintels led off from the central hall, like monastery cells, under windows and skylights that should have been of stained glass. Each stall had built-in bookshelves, heavy laden, floor to ceiling. Mrs. Torulfson flipped a switch and electric lights went on. I looked over at Jackie. She looked like she was in church.

“Now over here,” Mrs. Torulfson said, “are all the art books, and in this stall is ... let me see ... yes, mathematics. Fiction, well, there's about seven, eight stalls for fiction, English of course, and then—are you fluent in any foreign languages, dear?”

Jackie was gaping like a fish, but she managed to gasp, “French.”

“Oh, well, I don't have too many of those. And I cannot part with many of the ones I have. Some are just too valuable, and others, well...” We had stopped in front of a stall crammed full of books. Jackie hitched herself up on her toes and started reading titles. She and Mrs. Torulfson took up most of the room in the stall, so I wandered across the aisle to a stall with a white floor and empty shelves. I looked closer. The floor was white because it was carpeted with hundreds of thousands of pieces of paper. I looked closer, and print looked back at me: pages and covers, ripped and torn and shredded, maybe six inches deep.

“Oh, my!” I heard Mrs. Torulfson cry out. “I forgot this was out here. I must take this back to the house where it will be safe.”

“What happened over here?” I asked, pointing at the floor.

Mrs. Torulfson came over to me, a book tucked under each arm, and sighed as she looked at the floor. “Vandalism. It never stops. If you'll excuse me a moment, I'll go put this in the wheelbarrow.”

She went scurrying off down the center aisle. I went across to Jackie, who was reading titles as fast as she could. “Vandalism?”

Jackie glanced at me. “Probably kids. Old woman living out here alone. Probably terrorize the poor soul.” She reached up and took down a book. “Oh, look at this! This is wonderful!”

“Did you find something, dear?” Mrs. Torulfson asked. She'd come back so quietly that I almost jumped.

“Yes,” Jackie said. “This one.”

“Oh, my,” Mrs. Torulfson said, taking it gently from Jackie's hand. “Oh, no, I can't let you have this one. This is ... this means too much to me. My husband gave it to me, before he left. I'll have to take this back to the house.” Jackie's face was something to see, and Mrs. Torulfson hurried to say, “But look at these. A complete set of Joseph Conrad.” There was a whole shelf of them, in brown dust covers, each with an X cut into the spine. “Won't you take them?”

“I don't know that I can afford a whole set,” Jackie said.

“Oh, nonsense,” Mrs. Torulfson replied. “You'd be doing me such a favor if you took them. I'll let you have them a dollar a book.” Jackie looked at me and took out a volume. “It's a very good deal,” Mrs. Torulfson urged. “You can't pass it up.”

“What happened to the dust covers?” I asked.

“Well...” Mrs. Torulfson looked around and then whispered, “Those X's mean that ... he's coming. Fifty cents a book?”

“Who's he?” I asked.

“Houdini,” Mrs. Torulfson whispered. Jackie and I exchanged looks, and Mrs. Torulfson said quickly, “Of course, that's not his name, that's just what I call him. He's a professor. He's been after me for years to let him have my books. He wants me to give them to him, but he's not ... he's

not worthy. I've always refused. But ever since my husband ... since the doleful stroke ... he knows I'm old and I get so tired at night, and he comes in and steals them! The books! Of course, I've got the best ones under lock and key, but he gets in. He gets in and takes them away. Or he has somebody do it. I don't know, it doesn't matter, they're gone." She was almost in tears. "And it's just a game to him. He has the gall to let me know which ones he's going to take. I'll come in and find books with that—" she pointed to the X on the spine "—on them, and then I know that he's coming back to steal them, or worse." She looked pleadingly at us. "Won't you take them? Don't let him get them. Please. I can't stop him, I'm too old, and nobody will help me. I'll let you have the whole set for five dollars."

Jackie looked at me and said, "I'd love to have them. I like Conrad."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Mrs. Torulfson said, relieved. "Now let's see if we can't find you something else to go with them."

We spent over an hour looking through the stalls. Mrs. Torulfson gathered about thirty books to take back to the house, and Jackie finally ended up with ten books, besides the Conrad set. I was amazed she got that many, since every time Jackie saw something she liked, Mrs. Torulfson instantly said she couldn't sell it. Unless it had an X on the spine. Those we could have. She even gave Jackie two books for free, simply to keep them away from "Houdini."

We finally piled up all the books in the wheelbarrow, and I insisted on wheeling it back to the house, in spite of the fact that Mrs. Torulfson, trotting back and forth with armloads of

hard-cover books, was obviously strong as an ox. Mrs. Torulfson carefully locked the huge padlock on the barn and we headed for her house, plowing through grass that hadn't been mowed in years.

“Now you must come in and have some refreshments,” Mrs. Torulfson said. “And you must look through my private collection. You don't know how good it is to have some company out here, especially people who really appreciate books.” She was unlocking another massive chain and padlock affair as she spoke.

“Where would you like these?” I asked, sweeping my hand over the wheelbarrow.

“Oh, just leave them out there,” she replied. “Come in, please.”

Inside, the house appeared to be made of books. Books made tall columns, floor to ceiling, thin as the Needles, four stacks deep, all along the walls. Books were in pyramids on the kitchen table, on the refrigerator, on the chairs, even on the stove. Mrs. Torulfson cleared off a couple of chairs and dug around in the refrigerator, emerging triumphantly with two small cans of pineapple juice. Jackie, who claims that her mother trained her to be courteous and always accept hospitality, drank hers, though I noticed she checked the expiration date first. I declined, and Mrs. Torulfson drank mine.

It was when I was pulling out my wallet that the kitchen door caught my eye. It was painted white, but on the paneling, at seated eye level, in thick, bright red letters (paint? nail polish? blood?) was written:

THIEVES THIEVES
RETURN THE DOOR KNOBS
THIEVES

I hasten to add that the doorknobs were there. I looked at Jackie, who shook her head very slightly, and I paid Mrs. Torulfson for the books.

“Well, thank you,” Mrs. Torulfson said. “Now you must take a little tour of my house.”

We got up and followed her down the narrow winding path between the columns of books in the hallways and past the rooms, columned and stacked with groaning books. It was like walking through ancient ruins. The columns were endless, and the paths were barely wide enough for us to go single file, and at least twice I came near to toppling a pillar with my toes. Books ran down the hallways and around the doors of each room and all along the sides of each room. And in the center of each room was a huge tidal wave of ripped pages, from books, magazines, newspapers, rising almost to the ceiling. Room after room after room.

“This house is my sanctuary,” Mrs. Torulfson said. “Or at least it used to be. Back when my husband was here, it was my sanctuary. But then came the great infliction. The doleful stroke. My husband gone ... well, I try. But it's so hard. You don't know what he's like. He stops—I have some very valuable books here, books that many libraries and museums would pay a fortune for, but he stands in the way.”

“Houdini?” Jackie asked.

Mrs. Torulfson nodded. “He's got so many tricks. So many connections. Someone will make an offer, and then it will be

withdrawn. It's happened time and again. It's Houdini, I know it. He won't let anyone else have my books. He wants them all himself. He's an evil man, a possessive, evil, jealous man. He's never forgiven me ... never mind that. He does terrible things. Before my husband ... left ... he wrote me horrible letters, terrible letters saying all kinds of terrible things. When my husband ... when the disaster came, that stopped." She was staring down at her twitching hands. "I suppose I must not say that he is all evil. But then he started calling me every night, harassing me, until I had the telephone taken out. I couldn't bear it any more. But I don't know that now it isn't worse. He doesn't just steal, he destroys. In the middle of the night. All those pages, ripped..."

We were at a staircase, and I was trying to look sympathetic rather than nervous. It was so dark and gloomy in that house, with all the windows covered by piles of books, that I couldn't tell exactly where we were. Mrs. Torulfson sighed and then said, cheerfully as a Norwegian housewife, "Now if you'll wait here just a minute while I straighten things up, we can finish our little tour."

She went upstairs and I turned to Jackie. "I don't know that I want to finish our little tour," I said. Jackie's face was a little odd. "What is it?"

Jackie stepped away from the wall, so that I could see the shotgun behind her. "Just making sure someone's between her and it," Jackie whispered.

"Smart move," I replied.

"So, what do you think's going on around here?" she asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “But it wouldn't surprise me if there's a body upstairs. Sitting in a corner. Stuffed with paper.”

“You want to get out of here?”

I thought about it before I answered. “No. If we go, we'll be dying of curiosity.”

“True.”

Mrs. Torulfson came down and said, “Please, come upstairs.”

We went up. It was the same as downstairs, columns upon columns of books and mountains of ripped pages. Only in her bedroom was there just one long wall of columns that completely encircled her bed, and there the windows were open.

Jackie looked around and said, “It's a lovely room.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Torulfson said. “I spend a lot of time here. Remembering.”

“You read a lot of mysteries, don't you?” Jackie asked.

“Yes. They help me go to sleep. There's a wonderful one around here someplace. And it's based on a true story. About an heiress, did I ever tell you I was once an heiress? It was all stolen away, you know. And I have a book somewhere, about an heiress, who was kidnapped by a very evil man and buried alive. Yes! Buried alive! How in the world would she ever escape? You couldn't help but wonder. Buried alive! But the evil man, he had to make sure that she stayed alive, so that nothing would happen to him, so he wouldn't be charged with murder or anything like that, and that gave her an idea.

Then one day, she managed to destroy her captor and dig her way out and escape. Isn't that amazing? She escaped!”

Mrs. Torulfson was obviously waiting for a response, so I said, “That's amazing.”

“Yes. But it was so sad. For when she finally escaped, no one believed it was her. The powerful people who had stolen all her inheritance told everyone that she was mad. An imposter. She could never convince them that it really was her. Amazing book, absolutely true. Tragic, really, don't you think?”

“Very,” I said, trying to see what might be behind the columns around the bed. Just an empty bed. But beyond, toward the corner, was another set of columns, like a screen. I drifted toward it as discreetly as I could, while Jackie made herself appear fascinated by Mrs. Torulfson's tale of a book.

“You must read the book some time. I've got it here somewhere. In fact, it may be the only copy left. It was published, against all odds, but then, you see, the people who stole all her money bought up every single copy of the book. Except for this one. Well, of course they would, to keep anyone from finding out the truth. And then they kept it from being published again. That poor woman, buried alive, everything taken from her, and no one will ever know, no one will ever believe her. I don't know what they'd do if they found out I have a copy.”

I thought they might arrest her. Behind the books was an old wing-back chair, large and over-stuffed, with someone sitting in it. Parts of the someone were sticking out from underneath an afghan, and they did not look pretty. Or alive.

I drifted back. “You know, Mrs. Torulfson,” I said, “this is all fascinating, but I'm afraid we really have to get going.”

“Oh, must you?”

“Yes,” I said, “I've got some work to do this afternoon, and we've been here almost four hours.”

“Four hours? Really?” Jackie nodded. “Well, the time has just flown!” Mrs. Torulfson started for the stairs, and I slid myself in front of her. “I can't tell you when I've had a more enjoyable afternoon. I have enjoyed it so much.”

“So have we,” Jackie said as we reached the first floor. She looked up and down the bookshelves that covered the hallway by the stairs. Some of the books were bound in what looked like marble, others in leather. I had a feeling they were extremely old. And on one after another, little X's were carved in their spines. “You know,” Jackie said, “maybe you should try to get someone to come live with you. Just to help. It might keep Houdini away.”

Mrs. Torulfson looked around and her eyes were brimming again. “There's nothing I can do about it,” she said. “He comes, and there's nothing I can do.”

Jackie nodded. “It was just a thought.”

“There's nothing I can do,” Mrs. Torulfson repeated. “Now that my husband's gone.”

“Well, we need to get going,” I said. “Thank you for a lovely afternoon.”

“Nothing,” Mrs. Torulfson said.

We hated to do it, but there was nothing else we could do. The sheriff came out, along with a couple of deputies, and found the late Mr. Torulfson sitting in the chair, where he'd

been for ten years, ever since Mrs. Torulfson had come up behind him with a small axe and killed him.

No one really knows why she did it. Nobody even knew he was dead, which was the part that amazed Jackie, who's not from around here. But I understood: Torfinn Torulfson was the sort of old Norwegian farmer who only went to town three or four times a year, and when he did, fought with everyone there. At one point he'd fought with everyone in Brant, so he took all his business to Earlin, Minnesota. Soon he'd fought with everyone there, too, and had just announced that he was going to take all his business elsewhere when he was killed. And that's how no one noticed that he was gone.

Mrs. Torulfson was taken down to the state mental hospital in Yankton, and I think she's going to stay there the rest of her life. There's a trial coming up in a few weeks, but I don't think it'll make any difference.

There was only one relative, a nephew, Joseph Torulfson, who's taken over the farm. He's a much friendlier man than his uncle, so everyone's learning a whole lot more about the Torulfsons than they'd ever known before. For example, the fact that Mrs. Torulfson had inherited about ten thousand dollars from a great-aunt, and Mr. Torulfson wouldn't let her spend it on anything. He wouldn't let her spend anything on anything. Anyway, the money's supposed to be hidden somewhere in the house, which has really increased the number of people who are willing to help young Torulfson clean the place out.

And as for the books ... well, about a week ago, Jackie came home and said, “I'm transferring to Lincoln.”

“What? Now?”

“You know that ad that first tipped me off to Mrs. Torulfson's?”

“Yeah.”

“Dr. Tower gave that to me. Said he knew I liked old books, thought this might interest me, being so close to Laskin and all.” I sipped some coffee and waited. “I just found out that some of her books are going to the university library.” I sipped some more coffee. “The rest ... Dr. Tower is purchasing them. Dirt cheap. The nephew doesn't know what he has, so Tower's practically buying them by the pound.” We sat there for a while, quiet.

“You sure you want to transfer?”

“Not really. But I know I sure as hell don't want to take any more classes under Houdini.”

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Two Nights' Work by Iain Rowan

As soon as the short man opened his bag, I knew what was going on. He'd blown in from the autumn night ten minutes or so earlier, oversized raincoat belted tight around him, collar turned up around his neck, a large carrier bag in his hand. He'd shivered, ordered a pint and a brandy, and then sat at the bar, his carrier bag propped up against the side of his stool. He blew on his hands, then worked his way through his drinks. There were four or five of us at the bar, all lost in our own little worlds of alcoholic contemplation. The big clock behind the bar ticked steadily on. Then the short man finished his pint, tossed the last of his brandy down, and ordered another pint.

The landlord moved at the glacial pace with which he'd done everything since I had walked in. It was one of those typical back street pubs that seemed to depend on the income from a small group of sad-eyed regulars, a pub where happy hours never happened and busy was when there were four people waiting for drinks at once. I'd been in more than a few like this in my career, and I always wondered how they stayed in business.

"Same again?" the landlord asked, in a voice that suggested that it would be easiest for all concerned if this was the case, and besides, there might not be anything else.

"Please. Just getting warmed up. Vicious out there it is, vicious. Packet of twenty Bensons as well, please. No, second thoughts, make it sixty will you? I'm off on the train tonight,

all the way up to Scotland, God knows how long it will take, the trains are terrible. And another brandy while you're at it, mate, make it a large one. Might as well stock up. Have you seen the prices that they charge on the trains? Criminal, it is. Couple of packets of crisps, n'all. Ta. And a drink for yourself, too."

"Much obliged." The landlord puttered about behind the bar, muttering to himself so that he did not forget anything that had been ordered. He pulled the pint, then the brandy, stooped painfully down to pull the crisps from a box underneath the bar. "Prawn cocktail do you? All we got, prawn cocktail."

"Yeah, fine, whatever. Just to line the stomach, bit of carbohydrates."

The landlord dropped the crisps onto the top of the bar, then wandered over to a glass shelf that was stocked with neat piles of boxes of cigarettes. "Bensons, did you say?"

"Bensons, yeah. Not prawn cocktail." The short man laughed, and the landlord even cracked a smile.

"There. Pint of best, large brandy, sixty Bensons, and two packets of crisps. That's fifteen pounds and, um, seventeen pence."

"Blimey, more than my mortgage cost a month back when I first bought a house." The short man pulled his wallet out, opened it and looked inside, grimaced. He dropped his wallet onto the bar, searched in each pocket of his coat one after the other, then his trousers. All of us at the bar watched the pantomime out of the corner of our eyes.

The landlord stood waiting. "Problem is there?"

“I'm sorry about this. I forgot, spent all my cash on the bloody train ticket. Rip off, the prices these days, they must think we're mugs. Don't bloody believe this. Worst thing is, I'm back tomorrow evening, going to be rolling in it, picking up money for a job I did up in Glasgow, you see, that's why I'm going off there. Getting paid in cash, know what I mean, taxman doesn't have to know anything about it, everyone's happy.”

“I don't know you'll be back here tomorrow,” the landlord said in a tired voice that suggested that he had had this conversation many times before.

“ ‘Course you don't,” the man said, “and you don't know me from Adam, can't expect you to trust me.” He looked at the drinks and the cigarettes, licked his lips.

“You not even got enough for one packet of the cigarettes?” I didn't know if the landlord was being friendly and concerned or just trying to make a sale, no matter how small.

“Not a penny, mate. Not a penny. Unless ... nah.”

“What?”

“Nah, forget it, like I said, you don't know me, can't expect...”

“Expect what?”

“Well,” the man said, and reached down for his carrier bag.

* * *

Half an hour later, the man was gone, his glasses empty on the bar amongst the wreckage of the plastic wrap from a packet of cigarettes and two empty packets of crisps. The landlord stood behind the bar, looking down at a small oil

painting of a yacht coming in to a deserted harbor in a high sea, and going on the defensive against a couple of the regulars at the bar.

“Doesn't matter if he's talking bull,” he said, “got to be worth at least fifteen, twenty quid down at one of the secondhand shops, obvious, just look at the frame, that's quality that is. So even if he don't come back, I'm still covered on what he bought. And if he isn't talking bull"—one of the regulars snorted into his pint—"and he doesn't come back, then I can sell this for a hundred, maybe hundred and fifty. And that's if he doesn't come back. If he does, he gets his picture back, and I get twenty-five quid, which is a tenner more than the stuff he spent. Can't lose, can I, would have been a mug to do anything else.”

The dissent subsided, partly because the regulars saw his point and thought that it did sound like a good deal, and partly because he was the landlord, and if they annoyed him too much he could bar them and then they would have to go through the hassle of finding somewhere else to drink away the long winter afternoons and evenings of their lives.

I didn't say anything, because I knew exactly what was going on. I had nothing else to do, just a long night in a strange town with plenty of time to kill, so it was a form of entertainment for me. I ordered another drink and a packet of crisps—prawn cocktail, of course—and settled in for the evening in the familiar surroundings of a strange bar.

The landlord passed the painting over to one of the regulars, a bent and twisted old man who held it up to the light as if this would reveal some great secret to him. He

tapped on the frame with his fingernails, turned it over and examined the reverse. Then he passed it on to the next along the bar, and they looked at it because there was nothing else to look at and the painting was probably the first new thing to appear there for months. And so it came down the line to me. I looked at the painting, and then I looked at it again. Then I passed it back to the landlord who propped it up behind the bar, and everyone settled in to drink the night away, and I settled in to watch what would happen next. I looked at the clock above the bar. It was half past eight. I thought that it would be by half nine, at the latest.

As it turned out, I was wrong. The second man came in at eight forty-five. He was remarkable for being nondescript. He was average height, average build, with hair and eyes and skin that were all—well, you get the drift. I played a game as he walked to the bar: I looked directly at him, impressing his features into my mind. Then I shut my eyes for a moment. I could not picture him.

An asset in your profession, I thought. A great asset. He settled himself onto a stool at the bar, nodded at the regulars, ordered a pint.

“Vicious out there,” he said. “Was going to say that you can tell that autumn's here, but it's more like winter, you ask me. Vicious.”

There was a general mumble of agreement.

“Always cold in this town,” the man said. “I have to come here on business, four or five times a year, and it's always cold. No offence.” He had an educated accent, which figured, given what I knew would come next.

The landlord walked away to pick up a cloth to polish some bit of the bar top that he had already polished a hundred times that night.

“You paint or collect?” the man said.

“What?” The landlord looked confused. It wasn't one of the questions that he was normally asked, like Can I have another, How about a lock in, or Where's your bogs, mate.

“You paint? The picture there. Or are you a collector? Not the normal pub decor, that one.”

“Oh that, no, no, not mine. Don't paint, failed art at school, I did, and everybody passed art.”

“Sorry, just being nosy. Professional curiosity.”

“You paint then?”

“No, well, not really, a little, but I work for an auction house, so I'm on the selling side rather than the creative side. That's why I'm in town actually, to look at a small collection that someone wants to sell through us. I think the father's died and the children just want to cash in on the collection.”

“Worth much are they? Paintings, like.”

Everyone at the bar was listening in. Any conversation about money, I thought, and it would have this effect on those who had little and drank most of that.

“Varies.” The man spread his hands wide. “Take that picture behind the bar, for example. It could be a cheap reproduction. Worth ten pounds or so, if you could find someone mug enough to buy it. Best used as firewood. Or it could be an Old Master. In which case it could be worth...” he tailed off, leaving the suggestion hanging.

“A lot more,” one of the regulars said. “Thousands. Tens of thousands.”

The man at the bar laughed. “Think bigger.”

There was a reverent hush around the pub as everyone thought bigger. Then another regular, a man with a sort of ruddy complexion that you get from a lifetime spent working outdoors or a lifetime spent sitting in a pub, broke the silence by noisily draining his glass and then setting it back down on the top of the bar.

“Another one, Mike, same old poison, you know the score. You should have him take a look, find out how much you've been conned.”

“Conned?” the educated man said. “I don't understand.”

The landlord opened his mouth to explain, but was beaten to it by the regulars, who spoke in turn like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, all trying to embroider the tale with what they thought was great wit at the landlord's expense, but which served only to complicate the story until it was doubtful whether anyone who had just walked into the pub could understand it. But that didn't matter, because I knew that the man who was standing at the bar now didn't need to understand the story. He already knew it.

“So you see, we reckon Mike's been conned, and that the bloke is never going to reappear.”

“I can hardly have been conned,” the landlord broke in, sounding annoyed at the assumption that he was the fool, “if even cheap rubbish is worth ten quid and I only let the bloke have fifteen. All I can be out is five quid, big deal.”

“One way to settle it,” ruddy face said.

The landlord sighed. “If it'll shut you lot up. And if you don't mind, sir.”

The man shrugged. “No problem, I do it a dozen times every day. Be glad to settle the argument. Mind, if it's a Van Gogh, I want ten percent.”

Everyone at the bar laughed, and the landlord rolled his eyes as if to say, With my luck, you think it likely, look at this place, do you think I'm a man blessed with much luck? But he reached to the shelf behind him and took the painting and laid it out on a beer towel on the bar. Everyone craned their necks to watch, waiting. The man picked the painting up, turned it around in his hands, looking at it from every angle. He held it up close and studied it, brushing some dust away with his finger. He tilted it to the light, peering at the texture of the canvas as if the mysteries of the world would be revealed inside.

Then he set it back down on the beer towel, lifted his glass and drained it. “Same again, please.” There was a long pause, everyone still waiting. “So where did this fellow get this from?”

“Got it off his grandmother, he said,” the landlord said, happy to prolong the time until the inevitable bad news. “Out her attic, been up there for years, gathering dust. Present for his daughter or something. Art student, he said she was.”

“So is it rubbish then?” one of the regulars said, but everyone ignored him, waiting for the man to speak.

He didn't say anything though, just picked up the painting, turned it over in his hands. Then he spoke.

“Well, it's not an Old Master.”

“Told you, told you,” the man with the ruddy face said.

“But it's not a knock-off piece of junk either. Not by a long way. Tell you, it's a shame that this isn't yours to sell, because if it was, I'd give you three thousand pounds for it, right now.”

Silence again. The man smiled.

“Shock, is it? It's not the most valuable piece in the world, not by a long way. On the open market I reckon you might be pushed to get more than about eight hundred for it. But it's a Vennell, a genuine Vennell, and although he's hardly the best-known artist around it's in very good condition, and I know—through my work—a certain collector in Switzerland who specializes in just this sort of mid-Victorian stuff. I'd say that when your fellow bought it, neither he nor the seller had any idea what it was worth. Take heart, you've not been conned. If he doesn't come back for it, then I'd certainly be interested in taking it. Three thousand would be fair. I don't mind admitting I'd sell it for something more than that, but then it's my specialized knowledge that would unlock that price. You'd be welcome to try and sell it yourself, but I would reckon you'd only realize a quarter of the value. But that's all moot, as it's somebody else's.”

“Lock the door quick,” the bent old man cackled, “don't let the other fellow back in.”

I could see from the landlord's eyes that he was considering it.

“Of course,” the educated man said, finishing his second drink, “if you could convince him to sell it to you...”

“Reckon I could,” said the landlord, turning the idea over in his head. “Reckon I could. He looked short of cash, like. Might offer him a couple of hundred, see if he bites for it.”

The man shrugged, started to button his coat. “Well, I'm only here until tomorrow evening, and then I'm away again, down to Cornwall. I'll call in, about nine. If you've managed to part it from its owner, then I'll be glad to do business with you. If you haven't ... well, you keep a nice bitter, and I'll just have another pint before I catch the late train. Good night—oh, and good luck.”

Everyone in the bar watched him walk away. The door opened, letting the cold air surge in, and then it banged behind him and he was gone.

“Bloody hell,” the landlord said. “Bloody hell.”

The rest of the evening was spent marveling that something so ordinary could be worth so much, cursing the fact that its owner would be back the next day to retrieve it, devising devious—and as the drinking went on, increasingly improbable—schemes for parting him from it.

I just sat there, drinking some more but not too much, and smiling at the jokes. At half past ten I left, wishing them all good night. Those at the bar said goodbye, and then went back to their plans, back to their dreams.

* * *

The next day I was back at the pub early, there by half past six. The landlord said good afternoon, a recognition that he remembered me from the day before. I bought some crisps and some nuts, wanting to pace my drinking, knowing that I needed my wits about me. The regulars were there

already, and most of them raised their eyebrows or nodded their heads as I sat down on a stool at the bar. I think that they saw in me one of their own, another inhabitant of the world measured out by the staggering ticks of the clock above the bar, and the bell beneath it that marked out last orders, the end of the day.

I drank my first drink, ordered my second, and then thought that it was time to begin, in case the short man came in early.

“Sorry to have to break the bad news, but it's a con, you know.”

That got everybody's attention.

“What is?” the ruddy-faced man asked, frowning.

“I thought I recognized it last night, but I wasn't sure. That's why I didn't say anything. But I checked with a friend today, someone I know used to work for the police, long time ago. It's an old, old con. The painting. Doesn't have to be a picture, can be a clock, a violin, anything.”

“What do you mean,” the landlord said, coming over. “What do you mean? The auction bloke in yesterday said that it was worth a packet.”

“He would,” I said. “It's a two-man con.”

There was silence for a moment, and then the landlord said, “You mean...”

“Yes. He's the second man.”

“I don't understand, you can't be right. How can it be a con when he's going to pay me money?” There was a general hubbub of agreement along the bar.

“He isn't.”

“But he said—”

“Oh, he said all right. But you won't see him again. First man will be back. He'll come to settle his bar bill, reclaim his picture. You'll make up some story, offer him a couple of hundred quid for it. He'll refuse, say that it's sentimental, present for his daughter, family heirloom, something like that. You'll go higher. Four hundred quid, five hundred quid, cash. He'll hesitate, mention how hard up he is, maybe that his old grandmother needs an operation and the money would be handy like, or maybe for his daughter's college fees because she's doing so well but money's so tight, and then he'll say no, no, can't give up something so precious to the family, he'd love to but no deal. You'll go to a thousand pounds, cash, you've probably got it back there somewhere"—the landlord flushed red—"he'll hem and haw some more but reckon it is as far as he can take you and he'll give in, with regret, maybe with a tear in his eye, but he'll say how it's for the best, dear old gran will get her hip replacement now, dear daughter will graduate from college, and he'll run his hands over the painting and say goodbye to it, and then take your thousand pounds and disappear into the night.

“You'll feel a bit of regret that you had to go so high, as it eats into your profits from the three thousand pounds that you are going to get, but still, a thousand pounds is worth investing to make two with no work, so you'll wait for the fellow from the auction house coming in. And you'll wait. And you'll wait.”

“And he'll never show,” the landlord said, the bitter taste of reality evident in his expression. “And I'll have lost a grand. And I'll take the painting to a dealers and be told that I'm best off using it for firewood.”

“Crafty buggers,” the bent old man said. “They're clever though, got to give them that.”

“I'll have the bastard when he comes in,” the landlord said. “I'll call the police out on him.”

“And for what?” I asked. “There's nothing they can do. He's come in, you've voluntarily let him leave his picture in lieu of payment, he's going to come back in tonight and offer to pay you the money that he owes you, and he's not even going to suggest that you buy the painting off him. It's all quite above board. It's the second man who's the fraudster, and where is he? How could they find him. It's an old con. A thousand quid off you—not bad for two nights’ work.”

The landlord shook his head. “Should have known better. Should have known that it was too good to be true.”

“Not everything you said was right, though,” I said. “There might be something in this for you after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you'd be out a thousand pounds. That's right. You said that you'd never see the second man again. That's right. And you said that the painting was junk. That's not right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I looked at it yesterday, when you passed it around. I know a bit about this sort of thing, been a dealer in this and that for some time now, not an art dealer like the second man

was pretending to be, but you know, spend a lot of time around the antique auctions, get to see a little of everything. It's not worth what he's scamming you it's worth, nowhere near it, but even a quick look tells me that these two know nothing about art, nothing at all. Because that picture there, I reckon I could sell for five hundred quid."

"You're kidding me," the glint of money was back in the landlord's eye.

"Nope. Needs a bit of a clean, but I think I could get that. I'd give you three hundred for it now. If it was yours to sell."

"Go on," the ruddy-faced drinker said. "Take three hundred off him Mike. Not as good as three grand but better than a kick up the arse." The others round the bar agreed, with nods of heads and slurred mutters.

"Would be good," I said. "Except of course, you can't because it's not yours."

Landlord and drinkers nodded again, muttered agreement, jumping from one side of the argument to the other with every swallow of their drinks.

We all sat in glum silence for a moment, and then the bent old man raised his head from his scrutiny of the bar and spoke.

"Who says you have to give it to him? To the first fella?"

"Well, it's his, isn't it," ruddy-faced man said.

"Yeah, but who's he, eh? Someone coming in to con you, that's who he is, to make a right fool out of you. You know he is, you know that what this fella says makes sense. So don't give him his bloody painting back. Keep it. Say to him he's had his fifteen quid's worth of drinks, and he should count

himself lucky for that or you might be calling the police on him. That'd soon shut him up and he'll just take the loss and leave if he has any sense."

"He might," the landlord said. He was wavering, attracted to the idea but still reluctant to take the leap, knowing that it might cause aggravation. He needed just a little push.

"Not my place to say so," I said, "but at least you'd be giving him one in the eye. Cheeky bugger, tried to con you. If you just let him walk out, yes, you know that you've not been taken for the money, but still, he's going to be cocky, think that he got one over on you."

"Took you for a fool, Mike," my bent little ally chimed in. "Made you look stupid."

"All right, all right," the landlord said. "You want this thing? It's yours. But you got to pay me cash now, before he comes back. Cash now or no deal. He comes in later I tell him I know his game, that he's lucky I'm not throwing him out through that window, reckon he'll leave pretty quiet, know that he's been rumbled. No one tries a stunt like that on me. Cheeky sod. Cash, and it's yours."

"Back in five minutes," I said, and left the pub.

I stood around the corner shivering, giving myself enough time to have walked to a cash machine and back. I already had the money, it had been the first thing that I had done that morning. I walked back in, sauntered over to the bar, and counted the money out there, note by note.

"Of course, only if you're sure," I said. "About not giving it back to the bloke."

“Oh, I'm sure,” the landlord said, and I knew that it had become a matter of pride for him, his small victory, saving face in front of his nightly audience. He picked the picture up from behind the bar, gave it one last look, saying goodbye to his brief dreams of riches and a little bar in Spain, and handed it over to me. I pulled a tatty supermarket carrier bag from my pocket and dropped it in.

“Pleasure,” I said.

“Suppose,” the landlord said, counting his money again, half his mind still on the Spanish sunshine.

“Right, I'd better be off before your friend comes back,” I said. “Makes it easier for you if the object in question is off the premises. I'll be back in when I've sold it, and the first round's on me.”

I hadn't seen any of the men at the bar look as lively since I had first stepped into the pub. I nodded goodbye and walked out. The harsh wind of the last few days had dropped, and it was really quite a pleasant night.

I didn't think that I would be back in that pub again. Just in case. I didn't lie to them, I am a bit of a dealer, and know my way round an art sale. Which is more than could be said for the two conmen—I didn't lie about that, either—who probably did pinch this picture off the wall of an aged relative or some car boot sale. If they had known anything, they'd have realized how much it was actually worth. Not the price of a bar in Spain. But it would buy me a couple of months’ holiday there, living it up in the sun. Not bad for two nights’ work.

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The Pines of Cuska by Scott Mackay

Detective Barry Gilbert studied the victim through the cracked windshield of the crashed Unipar delivery truck. The deceased was in early middle age. His head hung over his left shoulder. The truck's crumpled front end pinned him to his seat. While the top half of his body looked intact, the hidden bottom half had to be nothing but jam. The victim's name was Petar Mestrovic. According to Unipar, he was single and lived alone. Thank God there would be no next of kin to call—rarely did a victim have a body so mangled.

Police now blocked all twelve lanes of the 401. Traffic was backed up for miles. Overhead, the CFTO News Helicopter filmed the chaos for the six o'clock news. Thousands of drivers waited for Gilbert to let them pass, but he was damned if he was going let any of those drivers drive over his crime scene before he had a good chance to analyze and process it. He walked away from the Unipar delivery truck. His partner, Joe Lombardo, scoured the debris in the eastbound express lanes looking for evidence. Fire Lieutenant Peter Rand approached Gilbert with a metal-cutting tool. Rand gestured at the backed-up traffic.

“Look at this,” he said. “It was bad even before this thing happened. I think I'm going to transfer to Povungnituk.”

“If you're up in Povungnituk, see if they have an opening for a police officer,” said Gilbert.

All the gridlocked traffic made Gilbert uneasy. His city—his hometown—had gotten out of control in the last few years. It

was July. It was hot. There'd been nothing but smog advisories all week. Thousands of cars now crammed this stretch of highway pumping more crap into the air, making the smog thicker, the temperatures hotter. If that weren't bad enough, public sanitation workers had gone on strike. Garbage collection had been suspended indefinitely. Toronto stunk. He sensed short tempers everywhere. Right now, Povungnituk sounded good.

“Can we cut him out yet?” asked Rand. “The marshal tells me it's costing a million dollars a hour to keep this highway closed.”

Gilbert lifted his brow. “How does he figure?”

“In lost work hours and retail revenues,” said Rand.

Gilbert shook his head. “Everybody's just going to have to wait,” he said.

Rand gestured with some skepticism at the badly damaged delivery truck and its dead occupant.

“Are you sure about this?” he said. “I mean, a bomb?”

Gilbert nodded. “I've done a color-spot test with my field kit,” he said. “It came back positive for TNT.” Gilbert sighed and put his hands on his hips. It wasn't his job to convince Rand, but under the circumstances, a million dollars an hour and so forth, he felt he had to. “Even without the color-spot test, we can tell it's a bomb. Look at the front of that truck. That's not impact damage. The marshal was right to call us. See the debris? My partner's finding it six lanes away. That's blast debris. I've done car bombs before, and this is definitely a car bomb.”

Ten minutes later, Detective Luke Jerome from the Bomb Squad appeared. He strode across the debris-strewn pavement toward Gilbert.

“Can you believe this?” he said, motioning at the gridlock. “This is surreal.”

“You came along the side roads?” asked Gilbert.

“Yeah,” said Jerome.

Lombardo came from the eastbound express lanes with a couple of Ziploc plastic bags in his hand.

“Look at this,” he said. “A timer from Radio Shack, and some color-coded wiring.” He looked at Jerome, a facetious smile on his face. “Can we go home now?”

Jerome shook his head. “This might take a while. Bombs always do.”

Gilbert cast a nervous glance at the traffic. He felt like he was standing in front of the Hoover Dam, only now the dam had a big crack in it.

“How long?” he asked. He nodded at Peter Rand, who stood nearby with his metal cutter. “The fire guy says it costs a million dollars an hour to keep this highway closed.”

Detective Jerome surveyed the scene one more time. “Five hours,” he said.

“So five million dollars,” Gilbert said glumly.

Jerome nodded. “Give or take,” he said.

* * *

The next day, before lunch, Lombardo came in with the case's first lead.

“Luke successfully identified a manufacturer's taggant in the explosives residue,” he said. “He gave me a verbal on it.

He'll fax the official report later this afternoon for our case file."

Gilbert smiled, pleased by this news: a taggant, a color-coded marker embedded into the explosive by the manufacturer for owner and buyer identification purposes.

"So you've found the TNT's last legal owner?" he asked.

"I have," said Lombardo. "Huronia Northpath Paving and Construction Ltd."

"Who are they?" asked Gilbert.

"They tendered the lowest bid on Highway 65 last year. It's all Canadian Shield up there. They had to blast through solid granite. They needed a lot of explosives. They reported a crate stolen in October. The Ontario Provincial Police haven't recovered the crate yet. Huronia Northpath is going to fax a list of employees."

Which they did, an hour later.

By this time, Lombardo had gone out to get some lunch. This gave Gilbert a chance to compare the Huronia Northpath employee list to the Unipar employee list.

When Joe came back with sandwiches and coffee, Gilbert showed him the two lists.

"A man named Emin Selmanaj worked for Huronia Northpath last October," said Gilbert. "He now works for Unipar." He nodded placidly. "I think we have our first suspect, Joe."

"Great," said Lombardo.

"Unfortunately, Justice Lembeck's not willing to sign a warrant on the basis of these employee lists alone. He needs something more concrete. Something that legitimately

connects Selmanaj to the crime. That means we have our work cut out for us. Especially because I've already encountered some obstacles already. I phoned Huronia Northpath while you were out getting lunch, and they said Selmanaj had no particular expertise in explosives, was just a general laborer, and had no access to the explosives shed. Nor did anyone at Northpath ever see Selmanaj anywhere near the explosives shed. I think we're going to have to dig up some background, Joe, before we actually approach Selmanaj. No point in scaring him before we actually have to."

Given the foreign names of both suspect and victim, Gilbert thought a good place to start might be the Immigration Office. He phoned Immigration Canada and had them fax immigration records on both the victim, Petar Mestrovic, and their suspect, Emin Selmanaj. Copies of the immigration applications came with accompanying photographs. It turned out the victim and the suspect were both from the Balkans, from different towns in the former Yugoslavia, towns that were within driving distance of each other.

"This is promising, Joe," said Gilbert. "It establishes a preliminary link between the two men. They come from the same part of the former Yugoslavia. Petar Mestrovic comes from a town called Zahac. Emin Selmanaj comes from Cuska. I checked an atlas. Those two towns are five miles apart. And guess what? Both victim and suspect served in the military over there, but on opposite sides. Mestrovic fought with the Yugoslav Army. Selmanaj fought with the Kosovo Liberation

Army. Those forces were in opposition to each other during that whole mess. So technically, our victim and suspect are former military enemies. That's a tantalizing piece of circumstantial evidence."

Lombardo came over and had a look at the military service spots on the immigration application forms. "I really don't know anything about that whole mix-up over there," he said.

"Neither do I," Gilbert said. "But I know someone who does. Korina Soldo."

Gilbert visited the force's occupational health nurse, Korina Soldo, later that afternoon. She hailed from Bosnia and was a heavyset woman who, in spite of her perpetually tired eyes, had a great smile for Gilbert as he walked into the occupational health office.

"We hardly ever see you down here," she said.

"I try to stay healthy," he said.

He showed her everything he had.

"I need an education on the Balkan conflict," he said. "I'm wondering if you know anything about it. Our victim looks like he was a corporal in the Yugoslav Army and our suspect appears to have been a regular in the Kosovo Liberation Army. It looks like they were operating in roughly the same area of the former Yugoslavia at roughly the same time. It seems like everybody was fighting everybody over there. I'm wondering if you can set me straight on it." He pointed at a Xeroxed map of the area around Zahac and Cuska. "Can you tell me anything about this particular region?"

She glanced over the case file. Her eyes narrowed.

"Zahac and Cuska," she said, her voice now melancholy with grief. "They're both in the south. In Kosovo. Poor farmland, mostly. My uncle and his family live in Pec, not too far from here. I visit them every two years. I know the area well. There was a lot of bad fighting there during the war. A lot of people died. And that's because in Zahac you have mainly ethnic Serbs, while in Cuska you have nearly all ethnic Albanians. The Serbs and Albanians hate each other. This fellow Mestrovic is a Serb. Selmanaj is an Albanian. I can tell by their names. There was a big massacre in Cuska in 1999, where this fellow Selmanaj comes from. I remember this. I was in Pec visiting my uncle when it happened. Serb units operating out of Zahac killed forty-one ethnic Albanian men in Cuska. Zahac is where the other guy comes from. Your victim." She raised her eyebrows. "Maybe your murder has something to do with that. Maybe not. It's certainly something you should look at."

Gilbert looked at the poster of the four essential food groups on the wall, thinking.

"Where could I get more information about this Cuska massacre?" he asked.

She tilted her head to one side. "I go to a community center," she said. "The St. Alban's Bosnian Community Center in the Dufferin Galleria. We keep files on everything back home. We do what we can for the prosecutors in The Hague. We might have something on Cuska. I could look for you if you like."

* * *

Lombardo, meanwhile, had dug up another possible lead.

"I phoned the Yugoslav Consulate and spoke to their military attaché while you were downstairs," he said. "A Serb by the name of Zlatko Pavelic. He says the Yugoslav Army keeps intelligence files on many Kosovo Liberation Army recruits. They might have a file on Emin Selmanaj. He's going to look for me. Maybe it might yield something useful."

* * *

Korina came to Gilbert and Lombardo two days later with information on the Cuska massacre. She had several photographs printed from the Internet. These photographs, taken by eyewitnesses on the day of the Cuska massacre, chronicled the so-called racial cleansing of ethnic Albanians in Cuska. Korina shuffled through the sheets and found one photograph in particular.

"That's him," she said, tapping the sheet. "That's Petar Mestrovic." Gilbert indeed recognized the man as their victim. "I've reviewed our information," continued Korina. "He was with the Serbian unit that did the killing. He was in charge that day. He gave the orders. He was the one who sanctioned the massacre."

Gilbert and Lombardo had a closer look at the photograph. Greasepaint blackened the man's face. A green cowboy hat sat on his head. He carried a submachine gun and had two bandoliers of heavy-caliber ammunition crisscrossing his chest. His boot rested on the back bumper of a large Russian-made car.

"Our victim in his glory days," he said to Joe.

Lombardo shook his head. "What a tragedy," he said.

Gilbert flipped through more photographs, trying to build a better sense of the massacre. He found a picture taken through some pine trees on top of a hill overlooking the village. For some reason the image stuck. He had pine trees like these up at his cottage. Every summer he went to his cottage with his wife and two daughters. The pines around the cottage were a happy sight. But these pines above Cuska, with the village burning below, were anything but happy. Two worlds. The world of the cottage and the world of Cuska. With the pines meaning two different things.

He flipped again. He stopped, surprised, yet not surprised, when he found a photograph of Emin Selmanaj. He compared the photograph to the photograph from Selmanaj's immigration application form. Yes, definitely the same man. Selmanaj stood in front of a burning house in Cuska with a woman. Selmanaj and the woman seemed to be together. They looked at something to their right, their eyes wide and scared. Selmanaj was out of uniform, in civilian clothes, watching the horrors perpetrated by Mestrovic and his army thugs. The woman was pretty, wore jeans and a white shirt, had dark hair tied back, looked frightened, her face slack, her eyes wide and dark, her rose petal lips pulled back in a rictus of fear.

Korina dug through her purse and pulled out a business card.

“We had this on file at the community center,” she said. “Contact information for the Human Rights Watch officer who investigated the massacre at Cuska.” She handed the card to Gilbert. “His name is Gavin Bright. He works out of their

London office. He probably has more information than the center does."

When Korina had gone, Gilbert stared at the picture of Selmanaj and the woman again. They stood against a battered old armored personnel carrier. Some Serbian security forces carried cans of gasoline in the background. The street was strewn with rubble. A dead man lay on the sidewalk. He couldn't help looking at the woman. Where was she now? What had happened to her? And in what way was she connected to Emin Selmanaj? Behind, he saw the hill. And on top of the hill, he saw the pines, blurry in this image, as if they'd been sketched in by a charcoal crayon. A background. But somehow it resonated. Pines were commonplace. Yet here was murder taking place on a grand scale. And these common pines, otherwise a happy sight, made these war crimes seem all the more heinous.

* * *

"Zlatko Pavelic got back to me from the Serbian Consulate," said Joe. "They have a file on Emin Selmanaj after all. Guess what he did in the army? He blew up bridges. Explosives was his thing."

This bit of information was just the thing they needed to get a warrant from Justice Lembeck to search Selmanaj's place of residence.

In less than two hours Gilbert, Lombardo, and Detective Luke Jerome of the Bomb Squad found themselves in Emin Selmanaj's basement apartment on Hallam Avenue. Emin Selmanaj, a wiry, well-muscled young man in tight blue

jeans, a denim shirt, and cowboy boots, looked on, his hands shoved into his back pockets, his jaw jutting.

“I don't know why you are here,” he said, in a heavy Albanian accent. “Petar is my friend. I would never blow up his truck with a bomb.”

Despite this assertion, Luke Jerome continued his search for bomb-making tools and materials unabated. Gilbert and Lombardo, meanwhile, scoured the apartment for receipts, hoping to uncover one from Radio Shack.

Unfortunately, it didn't take Luke Jerome long to come to a disheartening conclusion.

“There's nothing here,” he said. “If he built a bomb, he didn't build it here.”

“You see?” said Selmanaj. “I didn't blow up his truck.”

Without any physical evidence, they couldn't arrest Selmanaj. They had nothing that linked him to the crime scene. So they had no choice but to start digging into background again.

This meant a call to Gavin Bright, the Human Rights Watch officer in London, England. As Gilbert talked to Bright, he discovered a telling detail. Emin's brother, Jashar Selmanaj, had been killed in the massacre at Cuska.

“We found him in the second house,” said Bright, “the one that burned to the ground. We identified him through dental records.”

“And you're sure he's Emin's brother?”

“Yes.”

“And you have documented proof of Petar Mestrovic's involvement?” asked Gilbert.

“We do,” said Bright. “He was the Serbian colonel in charge of the Cuska operation.”

Bright e-mailed his twenty-three-page report on the Cuska massacre to Gilbert. Gilbert read it over several times.

Certain sentences stuck out. Early on the morning of May 14, 1999, Serbian Security Forces entered the village of Cuska near the Albanian border. Serbian militia marched forty-one ethnic Albanian men to three different houses, took their valuables, destroyed their identification, then sprayed them with machine gun fire.

The report quoted one witness, a man who'd actually survived the machine-gunning.

We went into the living room and they opened fire with their machine guns. They killed everyone but me. Haxhi Dreshaj fell on top of me, and that's what saved my life. The third time they sprayed, I was hit twice, once in the shin and once in the knee. I didn't move. I heard the soldiers leave. After five minutes I opened my eyes. Arian Lushi was dead on my left, and Isuf Shala was dead on my right. I pushed Haxhi aside and crawled to the window. I saw soldiers outside. They stood around their cars and trucks smoking cigarettes. Some other soldiers walked toward the house with cans of gasoline. I knew they were going to burn down the house. I escaped out a back window and climbed to the wooded hill a mile away from the village. I watched the house burn. I finally fainted from blood loss under the pine trees.

There were those pines trees again. Gilbert flipped through Korina's Internet photos to the picture of the pine trees. The pines grew tall. They were a dark green, with the branches

starting twenty feet up, the trunks themselves as straight as poles, the bark reddish and flaking away. Down the hill Gilbert saw great plumes of black smoke. Looking closer, he saw a tank outside the village, its grim silhouette blurry and menacing against a barn. Two women and three children fled around the foot of a hill, where a small stream splashed through the valley. The pines seemed to brood. The fire and smoke was sullen and intense behind them. The pines seemed to judge. A soldier, in sniper position, crouched on a church roof just outside the village. Half the stone cross on top of the church was blown away by mortar fire.

Gilbert flipped through some of the other laser-printed photos Gavin Bright had sent to him, trying to find another perspective. What he found instead was a duplicate photo, the one of Emin Selmanaj and the woman again, both of them looking at something to their right, their eyes wide and scared, the house burning behind them. Same photograph as Korina's, only this one had their names in subscript underneath. Emin Selmanaj's name was there. So was the woman's. Danica Selmanaj, neé, Kelmendi. Another Selmanaj? Emin's wife? Or Jashar's wife? The lead was thin, tenuous, but it was the only lead he had.

* * *

Two days later Gilbert participated in a three-way conference call between himself, Korina Soldo, and State Security Investigator Milo Bosic of the Klincica Police Department, the Pec Secretariat, the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Serbia. Gilbert listened to Korina and Bosic speak to each other in Serbian. The language sounded percussive and

choppy to his ears. Bosic spoke with great force. When Bosic finished, Korina translated for Gilbert. He wrote it all down as Joe stood behind him.

"Thanks, Korina," said Gilbert. He hung up and turned to Joe. "Here it is," he said. "Danica Kelmendi married Jashar Selmanaj in Cuska on May 3rd, 1997. Emin is Danica's brother-in-law." Gilbert shook his head, feeling sad about the whole thing. "I checked with Immigration. She's been a naturalized Canadian citizen since last year. She lives over on Bathurst. Whether it's a coincidence or whether she and Emin followed Mestrovic to Canada on purpose to kill him, I don't know. But maybe the reason we couldn't find any bomb-building stuff in Emin's apartment is because it's all over in Danica's apartment. I phoned Justice Lembeck. He's signed an addendum to our original search warrant. We can now search Danica's premises, as well as its environs. If we find any bomb-making equipment in her apartment, I think the Crown can reasonably prove Selmanaj and Danica acted in concert, that with Emin's previous explosives experience, he did the actual killing while his sister-in-law acted as his accomplice."

They got Detective Luke Jerome, and the three detectives drove to Danica's apartment on Bathurst. They knocked on her apartment door. She answered a few moments later. She was in her mid thirties, slight, attractive, with recognizably Balkan features. She wore a white uniform and a hair net—she was obviously just home from work. The uniform and hair net suggested she worked in a bakery, cafeteria, or food-processing plant.

Gilbert produced his badge and ID. “I'm Detective-Sergeant Barry Gilbert from Metro Homicide,” he said.

Her shoulders sank when Gilbert produced the search warrant for her home.

“I just worked overtime,” she told them. “I'm tired. I want to go to bed. Please. Can you come tomorrow?”

This would of course defeat the point of the search warrant—by morning she'd have had the opportunity to destroy or hide any incriminating evidence.

“No,” said Gilbert. “We have to do it now.”

She relented. She opened the door and let them inside.

“Please do not try to be so long,” she said. “I need to sleep.”

Luke Jerome used his ultraviolet wand.

“Most explosives manufacturers use light-reactive materials in their formulas,” he explained. “It helps us find trace evidence a lot more quickly.”

Frustratingly enough, even with the use of the ultraviolet wand, nothing showed up in Danica's apartment.

“You see?” she said. “You are wasting my time. You are wasting Emin's time. We had nothing to do with Mestrovic's murder.”

“Why don't we search her car?” suggested Lombardo. “The warrant says environs. I think we could interpret that as meaning her car.”

At the mention of her car, Danica sank to the sofa, put her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands, leaned forward, and sighed. This bit of body language could mean only one thing: they'd hit paydirt.

“Danica,” said Gilbert, trying to be kind now. “We need your keys, okay?”

She pointed without looking up. “On the hook,” she said.

“Thanks,” he said. “Is it parked outside?”

“Yes.”

“In the back parking lot?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Which one is it?” asked Gilbert.

“The gold LeBaron.”

Gilbert, Lombardo, and Jerome went down to the parking lot and popped the trunk of the Chrysler LeBaron. Jerome took out his wand.

Light-reactive taggants no bigger than dust specs immediately made themselves visible, showing up hot white under the black light's glow. Over and above the light-reactive taggants, they found a toolbox. And in the toolbox, they found coils of color-coded wire, stuff that matched the wire recovered from the crime scene. They discovered three sticks of TNT wrapped in paper, the paper with the words Huronia Northpath Paving in big black letters along the side. A strong thread of evidence now connected the events in Cuska on that tragic day back in 1999 to the blown-up Unipar truck on the freeway a week ago. Case closed. Gilbert felt sorry for Danica. He didn't want to arrest her, knowing her husband Jashar had died in that massacre, but he knew he had no choice.

They went back upstairs. He explained things to Danica.

“If you don't cooperate with us, Danica,” he said, “the judge is going to go hard on you. Look at all this stuff we

found. Three sticks of TNT. Wire. A toolbox. And lots of trace evidence besides. You don't want to take the fall for this all by yourself. If you share blame with Emin—and that means you have to turn him in—things will be easier for you. We know about Cuska. We know about Jashar. And I'm sure the judge will sympathize with you. But you've got to go for a plea bargain. So save yourself some grief. Emin will understand. He won't want you to suffer more than you already have."

She sat motionless for several moments, her eyes clouding with tears, her chin resting on her fist—a thin woman, a tired one, a woman who had been burdened with an unfair share of tragedy. She rocked on the edge of the sofa.

Finally, in a soft voice, she said, "We waited for you." She swallowed, trying to get control of herself. "But you never came." She shook her head. "My heart was breaking every day. Emin's heart was breaking every day." She looked at Gilbert as if she were now holding him personally responsible for what had happened to her husband in Cuska. "You never came," she said. "You just looked the other way. So we had to do something ourselves."

* * *

A couple days later, at headquarters, Gilbert looked at the picture of the pines again. The arrests had been made, and plea bargains struck. Danica was going to jail for six years. Emin was going for eight. Those pines still mesmerized him for some reason. A May morning in 1999. Pines standing there on that hill like silent sentinels while the sound of small arms fire crackled in the valley. A different world over there, he decided. He took too much for granted. He heard the

whisper of flames rippling up the house roof, accelerated by gasoline. He looked at the two women and three children running along the stream. The sniper crouched on the church roof behind the broken cross. The tank by the barn turreted its cannon gently in search of prey. Crisp brown needles littered the forest floor. The morning sun looked baleful in the smoky sky. The pines cast shadows on the poor dry earth of Kosovo. Dark shadows. Long shadows. Tragic shadows. Shadows that in the end had stretched all the way to Canada. Yes, he took way too much for granted.

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A. J. Raffles: The Other Side by John Hall

I have remarked elsewhere, and in passing, that my friend A. J. Raffles had a considerable experience of the fair sex. I have deliberately avoided any more circumstantial discussion of this topic, for what I trust are obvious reasons. However, the trial and conviction of the man who now calls himself Sebastian Melmoth produced what I can only describe as a mood of suspicion or innuendo, a kind of schoolboy sniggering whenever two men were seen dining together. So perhaps it is not entirely inappropriate to include here a story which sheds a little light upon this aspect of Raffles's character; you will, I know, understand that it is still necessary for me to be imprecise, if not downright untruthful, as to some of the details.

It was autumn, in a year which I shall not name but which was not very far from the second Jubilee of Queen Victoria. I had seen nothing much of Raffles since the cricket season faded out; he seemed to have vanished from view. As for me, my own modest literary efforts were at last meeting with a certain amount of financial success. So much so, indeed, that editors were now contacting me, rather than the other way round! Not exactly in droves, you understand, and the money, when it came, was not in such quantity as I might have wished for; but it was what I might call optimistic rather than the reverse. It all meant that I was considerably cheered by the way things were going. And since I was now earning some cash legitimately, it meant, too, that I had no incentive

to seek out Raffles with the purpose of joining in some dangerous and criminal scheme to make money.

On the day of which I am writing I had received a check far more munificent than the usual meager specimens of its kind to which I had perforce become accustomed. The day was one of those bright and sunny exceptions to the dullness of the season that sometimes help to hasten October's passing, and I spent it wandering round the shops and replenishing my wardrobe, which had become somewhat run-down of late. It ought to have been a perfect day; but yet as I strolled from tailor's to shirtmaker's, I experienced a curious, almost an oppressive, sensation, rather as if I were being watched. I could not explain it, other than to think that my sudden good fortune had perhaps led to a touch of that hubris which so bothered the ancient Greeks, and that this was the reaction to that. I shook off the feeling with a stiff drink at the Criterion bar, and thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon.

I determined to round the day off with a respectable dinner, and at around half past eight I went along to my favorite restaurant—to find it closed for refurbishment! I had not known of the proposed redecoration, for insufficiency of funds had meant I had not patronized the place for some time. I ought, of course, to have gone there in the afternoon, and would then have had sufficient time to think about a reservation elsewhere; but one does not always think of these things. It was not exactly the end of the world, to be sure, but I muttered to myself that it rather took the gilt off the gingerbread.

Then thoughts of that humble foodstuff jogged my memory. Some days before, a friend of mine had recommended a small place, The Carlton Workmen's Eating Rooms, on the fringes of the East End, not so far east that one would appear to be slumming, but out of the usual run of high-class restaurants. Their pie and mash, jellied eels, and the like, said my friend, would put many a West End hotel to shame. He and a few friends had discovered the place in the early hours some time before, and they were keeping it very much to themselves, lest the bright young things should learn of it and spoil it.

I had eaten much more Spartan fare than pie and mash, thought I (did I but know it then, I would eat even less well a year or two later, when I served my eighteen months in Wormwood Scrubs!), so why should I not try the place, which was, after all, at no great distance away? I should be fed, and at less cost than I had originally planned for, thereby producing a feeling of virtue that would counter to some extent my spendthrift behavior of the afternoon. Moreover, the other customers would surely be worth the attention of a literary man and would doubtless provide material for a few paragraphs illustrative of life in the East End. The way my luck was running at the moment, there would be no difficulty about selling such character sketches to one of the weekly papers!

Almost imagining myself a new Dickens or Mayhew, I set off at a brisk walk—no cabs for me tonight! In a very short while I had left the fashionable West End proper, and found myself in a somewhat dreary and all but deserted street. This

was not yet the true East End, but that no man's land of not-quite-poor but yet shabby houses that are home alike to the artisan moving up in the world and the aristocrat going down.

I had gone halfway along the street when a hubbub of voices caught my attention. The sound was not in any sense that of a dispute or altercation, more the noise you get when a crowd leaves a theater after a show. I glanced ahead of me, and saw a throng of people emerging from a large brick building. The legend MISSION HALL, or some such, was over the door, and as I neared the place I could see a poster with the words “Spiritualist Meeting—Tonight!” plastered on the wall by the door.

Feeling that neither the building, nor the meeting, nor, to be blunt, the people, would hold any great appeal for me, I moved aside to avoid the crowd spilling onto the pavement. Then I spotted a familiar figure, none other than that of A. J. Raffles, and by his side a most attractive young woman. Ah-ha! thought I, so that is why his friends have seen little of old Raffles of late! Mind you, I could not blame him in the least, for the young woman was dark, well dressed, and quite lovely to look at.

“Hullo!” I said as I passed them—I did not use Raffles's name, for you were never absolutely sure with him that he was going about under his true identity.

He looked guilty—not the guilt of a man engaged upon some criminal enterprise, but the guilt of a man caught with an attractive young woman of whose existence his friends have hitherto been ignorant. “Hullo, Bunny! Ah—Mr. Manders, Miss Ellison.”

I mumbled the usual pleasantries, but then felt at something of a loss. I could hardly invite someone like Miss Ellison, who was clearly well bred, to share pie and mash with Raffles and myself! And besides, I did not know if she and Raffles might have plans for the rest of the evening. So I ended by saying, “I fear I must go—an engagement,” or something of that kind.

Raffles nodded. “We have not talked for some time, Bunny. Call on me in my rooms at noon tomorrow, if you like.”

I promised that I would do so, and started off again, only to halt a second time when I saw the angular form of Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard emerge from the doorway! He had the furtive air of a man who does not want to be seen, and it seemed very much to me as if he were following Raffles. I stood there for a long moment wondering just what the devil might be going on. By the time I had decided that the best course would be to march boldly up to Mackenzie and greet him openly, to force the issue, he was almost at the end of the street, while of Raffles and the young lady there was no sign. I gave it up for the moment and went on my way, determined to question Raffles thoroughly on the morrow.

I had my pie and mash. The friend who had recommended the place had been right, it was food fit for the gods, though I fear that I hardly did it justice; and I had no inclination to observe my fellow diners for those lively paragraphs of which I had dreamed earlier. My mind was in a whirl, but to no good effect, for neither in the eating rooms, nor on the walk back

to Mount Street, nor in the hours that preceded my dropping off to sleep, could I imagine what Raffles was up to, or Mackenzie either for that matter.

Was Raffles planning to rob Miss Ellison or some member of her family? I could not think so, for his attitude had been that of a squire rather than a knave. Then why was Mackenzie following Raffles and Miss Ellison? For I could think of no other reason why Mackenzie should be in that run-down neighborhood just at the precise time that Raffles and his lady friend happened to be there. And above all, why was Raffles, the most prosaic, if not the most cynical, of men, attending a Spiritualist meeting?

I invented several theories, each more bizarre than the last, and discarded them each in turn, before giving the matter up and going to sleep.

* * *

At noon the next day, I rang Raffles's bell in the Albany, and he let me in. “Hullo, Bunny!”

I regarded him with some suspicion. “Don't tell me you've become a Spiritualist, Raffles?”

“Good Lord—”

“And what was Mackenzie doing there?”

He gave a slight start, then his face cleared and he laughed. “Was Mr. Mac there? I didn't see him, Bunny. Mind you, I can't tell yet whether it's a good thing or a bad.”

I leaned forward. “Raffles, I haven't seen anything of you for absolutely ages. When I do run into you—quite by chance—you are escorting a very attractive young woman, you have been to a Spiritualist meeting, and you are being

shadowed by Detective Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard! I think you owe me a drink, Raffles, and a cigar, Raffles, and above all things an explanation, Raffles!”

He got to his feet. “Here's the drink, Bunny, and there are the cigars on the table.”

“And the explanation?”

Raffles sat down again, lit a Sullivan, and gave what in any other man I should call a sheepish laugh. Then he told me the following tale.

He had, it seems, met Miss Ellison quite by chance. He was vague as to the exact circumstances, and I rather suspected that he had been surveying some house with what you would call a professional eye; that Miss Ellison was one of the inhabitants of said house; and that, on meeting her, he had altered his plans slightly. This suspicion, unworthy though it might be, grew stronger when he added that Miss Ellison lived with, and acted as a sort of companion to, her aunt, who was also called Miss Ellison. (For the sake of clarity, I shall try to refer to the younger Miss Ellison as “Miss Dora,” that being her name—spoken by Raffles in a sort of faraway tone, a tone that sent a cold shiver down my spine—and the aunt I shall call “Miss Ellison.")

Now, the aunt, Miss Ellison, was a keen Spiritualist, and Miss Dora had been obliged to accompany the older lady to several séances and had developed what you might call a sort of academic interest in the subject, though according to Raffles she was by no means as convinced as her aunt as to the honesty of the various practitioners. When Raffles

appeared on the scene, he too was expected to escort the Misses Ellison to various sittings.

“Good Lord!” I said at this juncture. “But you don't tell me that you've taken any sort of interest in the subject yourself?”

He regarded me severely. “Only in a strictly businesslike sense, Bunny. You would be surprised just how many people take the subject seriously. Men who have reached the top of their various professions, serious-minded scientists. Oh, not all of them believe the claims of the mediums, of course; in fact, some of those skeptics who aim to discredit the subject show the keenest interest in it, for fairly obvious reasons. No, I have seen nothing that might make me a believer; but I have observed that the séances fall into two distinct classes. You have the sort of general meeting that you saw me visit last night that is open to all comers and the content of which is usually pretty vague, a sort of introduction to the benefits of belief, lantern slides showing apparitions or apports, or whatever the right word may be. Then you have more intense, more serious sittings, a few earnest individuals meeting in a private house, asking specific questions, or hoping for specific messages from the other side. It is mainly the latter that interest Miss Ellison's aunt, and which interest me.”

“But it was one of the ‘open to all’ things you were at last night,” I pointed out, “and I did not see the elder Miss Ellison with you then.”

He held up a hand. “Bear with me, Bunny. I have said that my interest was strictly professional, and you know what that

means. In a word, it struck me that if a man knew who would be at a séance on a certain evening, shall we say—"

"He would know that their houses would be empty, or at least emptier?"

"You read my mind, Bunny. And of course, although a lot of people are interested in the subject in a vague kind of way, in that they will go along to a free meeting like last night's, the number of those in central London who take it seriously enough to hold a séance in their own homes, pay a medium such as Madame Carati—"

"Who?"

"Madame Carati. Famous medium, though you won't have heard of her. She was at the meeting last night. But don't keep interrupting a fellow, Bunny! I was saying that there aren't that many people here in town who take it seriously; hence they are fairly easy to keep track of. And most of them are rich, or getting on that way. Well, I had pretty well made up my mind that I should have a shot at the thing, when someone or the other beat me to it!"

I frowned. "In what way?"

"Listen. I was at a séance, at Miss Ellison's house, as a matter of fact, and was listening pretty keenly to the conversation before the main event, to learn who would be at the next séance, with a view to selecting my victim. Madame Carati went through her performance—and pretty mediocre it was, too, Bunny—and I stayed to a little supper. Imagine how I felt the next day when I learned that old Colonel Browne, who had been seated next to me at the séance, had been

robbed! And just during the exact time we had been at Miss Ellison's."

"Great minds think alike, eh, Raffles?"

He nodded. "Evidently. And then the same thing happened on the evening of the next séance, too. I was not present at that séance, nor was I working. But I had studied the list of those who might be there, and selected two of them as being likely candidates. It was one of my two names who was robbed."

"So, someone who thinks on very similar lines as you, then?"

Another nod. "And then Inspector Mackenzie drifted onto the scene! The devil of it was, with my having been seen at some of the séances, he suspected me at once. Of course, as it was, I had nothing to hide—genuinely had nothing to hide, for once! So I wasn't too worried. Mackenzie was a bit thrown by the fact that I was actually present at a séance when the first robbery took place, but I'm sure he thought that I had somehow worked the trick there! He's been following me ever since—"

"Me, too!" I exclaimed, for I had just seen the explanation for the curious sensation of being followed that I had felt the day before. I gave Raffles a quick account of my own experiences.

Raffles nodded sagely. "I have no doubt you are right, Bunny," he said, frowning. "What with your being what Mackenzie would call 'a known associate' of mine, he would wish to be informed of your doings." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Yes. He most likely suspects that I was at the

séance that first time to provide myself with an alibi, whilst you were doing the robbery!"

"I say!"

"And then of course he himself must have followed me to the meeting last night, though I confess I did not spot him. He must be improving!"

"But this is intolerable, Raffles!" I burst out.

"I heartily agree, Bunny. It leaves a chap no chance at all to get on with his work!"

I emitted a snort of disgust. "I have been legitimately employed these last few weeks, Raffles, with no thought of anything untoward in my mind. Why should I be subjected to this persecution, merely because—" And just in time I realized what I was saying, and stopped.

"Merely because you happen to be a friend of mine, Bunny?"

"That isn't what I meant, Raffles, and well you know it! But suppose I had to meet some editor or publisher, and half of Scotland Yard came trailing after me, how would that look? And all because—merely because—of some unproven suspicion on Mackenzie's part!"

He gazed at me in silence for a long moment, then nodded thoughtfully. "I agree, something must be done about it, and soon." He rang the bell for the doorman, then took out a silver propelling pencil that had once graced the window of a jeweler's on Bond Street, found some paper, and scribbled a note. When the doorman arrived, Raffles handed him the note and a couple of shillings, and said, "Would you get a

messenger boy to take that round to Inspector Mackenzie at Scotland Yard?"

I fairly gasped at this, and the doorman had gone by the time I had recovered sufficiently to stammer out, "Raffles! What are you thinking of?"

"The only sensible course of action, Bunny, I assure you. As long as this other fellow is at liberty and at work, Mackenzie will stick so close to us that we shall be quite unable to—well, to do anything that we might wish."

"But, Raffles! To assist Mackenzie?"

He shrugged. "Some of our exploits have been a touch equivocal, Bunny. The penalty we pay for not being professionals, of course."

"Even so, Raffles!" I said, so taken aback by this going over to what in the circumstances seemed appropriate to think of as "the other side" that I did not think to query his use of we, or us, or our.

He waved me to silence with an impatient gesture, then lit a cigarette. After five minutes, I ventured to ask, "Why exactly were you at the public meeting last night? You never told me that."

"Ah." He looked embarrassed at this and would have changed the subject if he dared, but I was in no mood to let him off the hook. "Two reasons, Bunny. The first being that I had a suspicion that Madame Carati herself might be involved, or her accomplice, I should say."

"What, the old dear spies out the land, passes information on to the actual burglar?"

He nodded. “Something of that sort. But I hardly think that is likely. No,” he added almost to himself, “it's a one-man show if ever I saw one.”

“And the other reason for your going there? You said there were two.”

“Indeed.” He coughed delicately. “The fact is, Dora—Miss Ellison the younger, that is to say—rather wanted to go and see the fun.”

“Ah.” I had more questions, of course, but he gave that dismissive wave of the hand a second time, and sat there smoking his Sullivans in silence until there was a tap at the door, and the lean form of Inspector Mackenzie insinuated itself into the room.

Mackenzie nodded a greeting and regarded me suspiciously before asking, “I had word you wished to see me, Mr. Raffles?”

“I did indeed, Inspector Mackenzie. Won't you hang up your hat and coat and take a seat? Perhaps a whiskey? Or a cigar?”

“I won't drink on duty, thank you—and besides, it's a trifle early in the day for me,” said Mackenzie. “But I'll not refuse a cigar, thank you kindly. Now,” he went on when once his figurado was alight, “what was it you wanted, sir?”

Raffles leaned forward in his chair, and studied his old adversary intently. “It's about these robberies that have been taking place during Spiritualist séances,” he said quietly.

Mackenzie dropped his cigar, and scrambled to retrieve it from the carpet. “No harm done. Sorry, Mr. Raffles, you were saying?”

“I was saying that I have a theory about these robberies, which have taken place whilst honest—albeit rather gullible—folk are attending Spiritualist meetings. I take it that you are handling the case, for Scotland Yard would naturally want their best man on it?”

Mackenzie strove manfully to look modest. “Aye, well it's maybe not for me to say as much, Mr. Raffles. However, you're right in thinking that I have been put in charge of the matter. You have a theory, you say? Well, I'd be most interested to hear it, for I have some notions of my own, you know.”

“To be sure, Mr. Mac, and I wouldn't dream of setting up my ideas against yours, or anything of that kind. I could hardly hope to succeed where you have failed, after all! But then, it's in everyone's interests to catch this blighter, don't you think?”

“It's certainly in the interests of every law-abiding citizen,” said Mackenzie, carefully keeping his voice level. “Fire away, Mr. Raffles, I'm listening!”

“Well, at first I thought that Madame Carati might be involved—”

“Oh!”

“But I soon rejected that. No, it has all the marks of a one-man job, don't you agree?”

“One man, maybe. Or two,” said Mackenzie, turning his head slowly to look at me. I felt my face begin to burn, and I lit a cigarette, cupping it in my hands to hide my emotions.

“One,” said Raffles confidently. “Anyway, our man must be interested in Spiritualism, for otherwise he could never know

just who would be away from home at any given time. Agreed?"

Mackenzie nodded. "Agreed."

"Next, he must be someone who was not at the meetings or séances which took place on the nights of the various robberies, for otherwise he could never commit the crimes. Agreed?"

"Agreed a second time."

"Well?"

"Well, Mr. Raffles?"

"Oh, Mr. Mac! You have obviously been making inquiries, you must have a list of names, something of that sort?"

"And if I have?"

"Look here, Inspector," said Raffles earnestly, "Bunny and I are positively bending over backwards to help you catch this fellow. Won't you trust us just a little?"

"Well, maybe that's only fair." Mackenzie reached into his jacket pocket and took out his notebook. "I had a fairly lengthy list to begin with," he said, "but I was able to eliminate many of the names on it. Your name was on there, Mr. Raffles," he added casually.

"Mine?" Raffles looked astounded; he was, as I have often remarked, a superb actor.

"Oh, purely as a matter of form, you understand. I was able to cross you off at once—at once, sir—when I learned that you were at a séance at the time when one of the robberies took place."

"Ah." Raffles looked relieved. "That's all right, then. You had me worried for a moment, Mr. Mac! And the names you could not eliminate?"

"It boils down to three, Mr. Raffles. Mr. Raphael Mantini—"

"Who, despite his name, is an Englishman. Young chap, man about town," Raffles said for my benefit.

"I know him well," I replied.

"Aye," said Mackenzie. "He spends freely, but nobody seems to know just where he gets his money."

"Oh, we are all in the same boat there!" said Raffles.

"Maybe so. Mr. Mantini shows an interest in Spiritualism, attends the occasional séance, but he was not present at any that we know of when the robberies took place. Next, Mr. James Dawson; same as Mr. Mantini, give or take. And last, Dr. Aloysius Boyle."

"Dr. Boyle!" It was out before I could think about it. "Why, he's the greatest skeptic of the age, where Spiritualism is concerned! Won't have it at any price!"

"That's so," nodded Mackenzie. "But yet he knows everyone who is concerned in the business, he attends occasional séances, just like the other two, and, just like the other two, Dr. Boyle was not at a séance when the robberies took place. Well, Mr. Raffles, Mr. Manders? Who do you back?"

"Mantini!" I said confidently; I had quite forgotten my scruples, since neither Raffles nor I had anything to fear from Mackenzie, and I entered into the spirit of the thing. "Despite the fact that he's English of the English, he has an Italian

ancestry, and that's the nation that produced Machiavelli. He probably has links with the Camorra, or something," I added.

"Hmm," said Mackenzie, clearly unimpressed—his own dour Scots ancestry showing itself, no doubt. "Mr. Raffles?"

"Oh, I'm not betting, Mr. Mac. The three runners start even, as far as I'm concerned. Well, your course of action is pretty clear, I should think?"

"Aye." Mackenzie hesitated. "And in my place, what would you do, Mr. Raffles?"

"Two things," said Raffles. "First, follow those three, especially when there's a séance!"

Mackenzie nodded. "I shall," he said. "Second?"

"Second, I should try to work out just where the next robbery will take place."

Mackenzie raised an eyebrow. "Easier said than done, don't you think?"

"Not necessarily." Raffles produced a piece of paper—but he used a different pencil this time. He scribbled away happily, then handed the sheet to Mackenzie. "I have what you might call advance information this time, Mr. Mac. Those are the people whom I know will attend the next séance at Miss Ellison's—you know her, of course?—on Tuesday next. Now, who amongst those is worthy of the attentions of a crook?"

Mackenzie studied the list, then handed it to me. "What's your opinion, Mr. Manders?"

"No good asking me, Inspector!" I said as innocently as I could manage. "I don't know these things, you know!"

"Of course not, Mr. Manders. Whatever was I thinking?" Mackenzie studied the list closely. "Well, now, Colonel Washburton, he has a fine collection of Egyptian antiquities. Miss Young, porcelain. And—"

"And?" asked Raffles innocently.

"Oh, I fancied there was another name I'd heard—but that's neither here nor there. Yes, Mr. Raffles, that's a good idea of yours." Mackenzie stood up. "I'll say good day, then, and thank you for your help. By the way, Mr. Raffles," he added as he took his hat and coat from the peg, "will you be at the séance on Tuesday yourself?"

"Well, I had intended to be there. But if you'd rather I came along with you, I could. I'd rather like to see the fun," said Raffles.

"Not at all, not at all! These things are best left to us, Mr. Raffles! You go along to see your young lady. And the spirits," and Mackenzie grinned evilly and let himself out.

"Phew!" I reached for the brandy. "Raffles, I hope never to have such an interview as that again!"

"Oh, I don't know, Bunny. It wasn't so bad, was it? By the way, Mackenzie seemed to think there was a third name on my list that might interest a crook. I wonder who that might be? Someone who has some secret store of valuables, and has asked Mackenzie to keep an eye open, I suppose? I'll have to make my own discreet inquiries there, for future reference, as it were. So that was an added bonus, Bunny! But even without that snippet of information, Mackenzie has done us a good turn."

I frowned. "Has he?"

"Of course he has. Mackenzie is no fool; I trust his judgment almost as much as I trust my own. If Mackenzie has identified Mantini, Dawson, and Boyle as possibles, you may be sure that one of them is our crook. I confess I'd never have thought of Boyle myself, either, for he is such a skeptic about Spiritualism."

"But—"

"Meantime, I shall have to usher you out, for I have some letters to write. Can you attend the séance on Tuesday?" he added.

"Me?"

"It might be as well. It is due to start at eight, so if you call here for me at seven thirty?"

"If you wish, Raffles. Delighted, of course. Incidentally, do you think that Mackenzie was fooled? Do you think he sees us as decent citizens outraged by these dastardly crimes?"

Raffles threw back his head and laughed out loud. "Hardly, Bunny! No, I imagine that Mackenzie has spotted the truth, or something very close to it. He, I imagine, sees us as hardened villains who—just this once!—happen to be innocent, and who want to see the real crook caught in order to eliminate the competition. And that's not so far from the reality, is it?"

"Raffles!"

"Well, I am a tradesman, Bunny, and like any other I must outdo my rivals in business whenever I can. Still, I should be careful what I did and who I saw, if I were you."

"Raffles?"

“Oh, Mackenzie will have us both followed, you may be sure of that! He is not quite that trusting! Now, run along, and I'll expect you at seven thirty on Tuesday.”

* * *

Prompt at seven thirty on the Tuesday, I knocked on Raffles's door, and he let me in. “Hullo, Bunny!” He glanced down the corridor. “Been followed?”

“Raffles! Don't even joke about it.” I shivered. “Now you mention it, I did have a curious feeling that someone was watching me.”

“Oh? I haven't, or not thus far. I suspect that Mr. Mac is half convinced of my innocence. But only half—I expect we'll be followed from here, just to make sure that we actually attend as advertised.”

We set off on foot, for Miss Ellison's house was at no great distance in Mayfair. I had that curious sensation of being followed, and turned round abruptly before we had gone many yards.

“Stop that, you ass!” hissed Raffles.

“But—”

“Yes, of course we're being followed!” he said in the same low voice. “We expected that, did we not? But, since we are innocent, we have nothing to fear, and can stride out confidently like any other honest citizens.” He suited his actions to the word, making me half run to catch up; I spotted our shadow also trying to keep pace, and at the same time trying to look as if he were nothing to do with us. This cheered me considerably, and I determined to enjoy the evening.

We arrived at Miss Ellison's, and Raffles introduced me to our hostess. Somehow or other I had formed the impression that the elder Miss Ellison was short, stout, and motherly, similar in looks to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, but in reality she was as tall as Raffles, lean, with a cynical eye and an incisive turn of phrase. In fact, she looked a jolly sight too-knowing to be fooled by Spiritualism, which just goes to prove that you can't judge by appearances. “Your first séance, Mr. Manders?” she said to me. “Well, sir, I trust you will not be disappointed. You have met my daughter? And this—this is Madame Carati.”

There was almost reverence in Miss Ellison's voice, and I studied the famous medium with some interest. And some disappointment, I might add, for she was positively dowdy; she reminded me of nothing so much as one of the aged flower sellers you see outside the theater. Like Mr. Raphael Mantini, she had an English accent, but unlike him she had the unmistakable suggestion of the East End in her tones. I mention Mr. Mantini because he was there, too, somewhat to my surprise.

Miss Ellison was saying, “So unusual! I invite Mr. Mantini and Mr. Dawson to all these little affairs, and as a rule they refuse politely. Yet here they both are!” and she introduced me to Mr. James Dawson, a pleasant enough young chap, whom I had never met until that evening. “And,” added Miss Ellison, with the intonation of the true lion hunter, “we have a very rare treat indeed this evening! Dr. Boyle seldom consents to attend any sort of Spiritualist gathering, yet here

he is at my little party!" and she waved a hand to indicate the famous scientist and skeptic.

I had never met Dr. Boyle, but I would easily have recognized the great mane of hair and bushy beard, familiar from the illustrations in the popular press, even without Miss Ellison's introduction.

His voice was a great bass rumble. "I seldom attend because I know I am unwelcome," he said to the room at large. "The truth is unpalatable to the charlatans who infest this murky world—no offense, madam," he added as Madame Carati looked set to contradict this. "I am sure you yourself are quite genuine, but some are not."

Madame Carati simpered. "I'm sure I'm very flattered that you think so highly of my poor abilities, sir."

Boyle frowned. "Hmm. The truth is, I should not have been here had I not received a most curious letter."

Mantini started visibly. "You did? I had a letter, too. Said I should move heaven and earth to attend, as I should find out something that would interest me."

"That is the same as mine!" said Dr. Boyle. "Exactly that wording!"

"Me, too!" added Mr. James Dawson, producing an envelope from his pocket and waving it in the air.

Miss Ellison was staring from one to the other of them. "Three mysterious letters summoning you to my little gathering? You, who so seldom attend such things? You know, if I did not know better, I should wonder whether those letters were not written by—by a Spirit hand!"

"I am quite convinced," said Raffles calmly. And when I turned a skeptical gaze upon him, he kicked my ankle savagely. "And you, Bunny?"

"Oh, rather! You can practically smell the Spirits coming from those letters from here!"

Miss Ellison, still looking very ethereal, introduced me to the rest of her guests. There were half a dozen there, some of whom I knew, though most were strangers to me. I recognized the names of Colonel Washburton and Miss Young, the potential victims whom Mackenzie had identified. But if the colonel or Miss Young were to be robbed, how on earth could Mantini, or Dawson, or Boyle, assuming that one of these were the burglar, possibly rob them? And come to that, why were Messrs. Mantini, Dawson, and Boyle here at all? They were not on the original list of potential guests at the séance, the list which Raffles had produced for Inspector Mackenzie. And judging by the way the three of them had spoken, none of them would have attended the séance had they not each received a mysterious letter! Well, even I was not quite that stupid; it was fairly clear that Raffles must have written those letters! But why, when he meant to identify one of the three as the burglar? Unless he hoped that one of the three would somehow give himself away at the séance? But how?

I gave it up, partly because it was beyond me, and partly because Miss Dora Ellison now appeared to tell us that all was ready for the séance. I followed Raffles into a sitting room lit only by a single candle, and sat down as instructed, between Raffles and Miss Dora.

Do not ask me to give any detailed account of the proceedings; I know that the candle was blown out once we were all seated, and I know that Madame Carati made some odd noises before passing on one or two messages supposedly from what she insisted on calling “the dear departed.” Pretty trivial and rubbishy stuff they were too, those messages, but there were little gasps of surprise or satisfaction as Aunt Gladys said that so-and-so was not to worry, as all would be well on the other side, and that kind of thing.

The one surprise came toward the end of the session. Madame Carati had been silent for a couple of minutes, but then she suddenly let out a loud gasp, and called out, in the purest Cockney, “Oh Gaw blimey! What are you up to, then? Help, police!” and then there was another gasp, and she added, in her normal voice, “Someone at this table has been robbed, this very evening!” Then there was a crash, and everyone started talking at once.

Miss Dora and Miss Ellison scrambled round, lighting candles, and then the gas lamps, and we all looked at Madame Carati, who was rubbing her head—I rather think she had swooned and banged her forehead on the table, that being the crash I'd heard, but she was too overcome to bother about that. “Never,” she told us, “never, in all my professional career, have I had a message from the other side with such clarity! One of you here has certainly been robbed this evening! And perhaps more than one of you! I'll stake my professional reputation upon it!”

The Spiritualists were all convinced, and even the skeptical Dr. Boyle could not be too skeptical; Madame Carati spoke with such absolute certainty. Even I was impressed, and wondered just what was going on. Only Raffles, imperturbable as ever, asked, “Wonder who it might be?”

I saw Colonel Washburton give a little start, and Miss Young burst into tears.

“Perhaps,” Raffles added, “it might be as well to conclude the séance now, and let each one of us check our possessions?” There was a move to second this, led, as you might have guessed, by the colonel and Miss Young.

Raffles had to say good evening to Miss Dora, of course, so he and I were about the last to go. As we reached the pavement, Mackenzie materialized from out of the shadows, like the best of apparitions.

“Why, Mr. Mac!” said Raffles. “Any luck?”

“None whatever, Mr. Raffles,” Mackenzie said through his clenched teeth. “The colonel's antiquities are safe, as is Miss Young's porcelain. I've had their premises watched carefully all evening, and there's been nothing untoward.”

“Well, that's a blessing!”

“Aye, maybe. But d'you know what I find curious, Mr. Raffles?”

“What's that, Inspector?”

“All of the five men—I beg your pardon, the three men, three, of course—whom I thought might have had something to do with these robberies, were here this evening! Now, how do you explain that, Mr. Raffles?”

"I'm sure I can't," said Raffles vaguely. "They're all interested in Spiritualism, you know. And my little theory was just that, a theory. I couldn't hope to succeed where Scotland Yard had failed, could I?"

Mackenzie snorted. "A wild-goose chase, Mr. Raffles!"

"But—"

"And I have to say, sir—and I say it with some regret, for I can find it in me to admire you—that I hold you personally responsible for the waste of my time, and that of my officers!"

"Come, now, Mr. Mac! I acted in good faith, after all. Why, in pursuit of the truth, Bunny and I have been sitting through two hours of Spiritualist nonsense—"

"Spiritualist nonsense!" I shrank back at the roar from behind us; even Raffles's imperturbability was shaken. We turned to see Miss Ellison and Miss Dora standing in the lighted doorway. "Spiritualist nonsense?" said Miss Ellison again in stentorian tones. She seemed set to say more, but words evidently failed her. She turned on her heel with a good deal of contempt, putting an arm round her niece. "Come away, Dora." As she started to close the door, Miss Ellison added, "Mr. Raffles, I trust that it is quite unnecessary for me to say—"

Raffles bowed. "Consider it said, madam." He gazed ruefully at me, then at Inspector Mackenzie, as the door slammed loudly. "Well, I seem to have come very badly out of this!" But I fancied that I could detect relief in his voice.

“Well,” said Mackenzie awkwardly, “I see you've lost your young lady over the matter, so we'll maybe say no more about it. Good evening to you, gentlemen.”

We set off for the Albany. “I'm sorry about Miss Dora,” I began.

“Oh, these things happen,” said Raffles, untroubled. “Truth to tell, that Spiritualist rubbish was beginning to get a trifle wearing, you know. A pity in some ways, for she was—is—a most attractive girl!”

“Madame Carati seems to have slipped up, too,” I added. “And we still don't know who the burglar is.”

“You know, that Carati business was odd,” said Raffles. “Makes you think there might be something in it, after all. I wonder how she knew?”

“Knew what? Nobody was robbed, were they?”

“Weren't they?”

“Were they? But Mantini and the others were there! Can't have been any one of them, can it, even if someone was robbed this evening?”

“Oh, it was Boyle,” said Raffles, in an offhand fashion.

“Boyle? But—”

“I've told you often enough, Bunny, that a man in this profession of ours must have a public life, the more prominent the better. Boyle was the obvious choice, when you think about it. With his outspoken attitude to Spiritualists, and charlatans, and what have you, he's always appearing in the papers, and that provides a perfect cover for his other work.”

“But Boyle was sitting opposite us, Raffles! It cannot possibly have been him this evening, if anyone was robbed, which I doubt!”

“Oh, not this evening, Bunny. Not this evening. That was me. And that's how I know it was Boyle who committed the other robberies. I recovered the loot, which he hadn't yet sold.” And he took a handful of jewels from a pocket. “Old Mrs. Waterman's necklace, Bunny. And here we have Colonel Browne's Roman coins. I suspect that the ‘Spiritualist robberies’ will cease immediately; Boyle won't want to run the risk of doing any more, now he knows that someone else knows that he's the crook. That means Mackenzie will leave us alone, my Bunny.”

I was frankly puzzled. “But you can't—well, you must have, because you did! But you can't have robbed him during the séance, because you were there, too!”

“Of course I was there. And of course I robbed him before the séance. Whilst he was dressing for dinner, as a matter of fact.”

“You mean that he was in the house whilst you—”

Raffles nodded. “I had to be deuced careful, of course. He being a crook himself, he would be extra vigilant. Of course I knew that Mackenzie's men were watching him! And for all I knew they were very likely watching—or trying to watch—me, too! I tell you, Bunny, I have had some anxious moments this evening! Still, no harm done. That reminds me, I'd better leave you here, and dispose of my swag.”

“No hurry, surely, Raffles? Boyle is hardly likely to call the police in, after all! He cannot tell them that his ill-gotten gains have been stolen by another crook!”

“Oh, Boyle won't call the police. But Mantini and Dawson will. You see, Bunny, I didn't know for certain at the outset that it was Boyle. It could equally well have been one of the other two. So I paid them all three a visit this evening, and, once inside, it seemed a pity to leave empty handed!”

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The One Best Bet by Samuel Hopkins Adams

A Mystery Classic

“Morrison has jammed the Personal Liberty bill through,” said Waldemar, scrawling a head on his completed editorial, with one eye on the clock, which pointed to midnight.

“That was to be expected, wasn't it?” asked Average Jones.

“Oh, yes,” replied the editor-owner of the Universal in his heavy bass. “And now the governor announces he will veto it.”

“Thereby bringing the whole power of the gambling ring down on him like an avalanche.”

“Naturally. Morrison has declared open war against ‘Pharisee Phil,’ as he calls Governor Arthur. Says he'll pass the bill over his veto. In his heart he knows he can't do it. Still, he's a hard fighter.”

Average Jones tipped his chair back against the wall of the editorial sanctum. “What do you suppose,” he inquired with an air of philosophic speculation, “that the devil will do with Carroll Morrison's soul when he gets it? Deodorize it?”

“Harsh words, young sir! Harsh words and treasonable against one of our leading citizens; multimillionaire philanthropist, social leader, director of banks, insurance companies and railroads, and emperor of the race-track, the sport of kings.”

“The sport of kings—maintained on the spoils of clerks,” retorted Average Jones. “‘To improve the breed of horses,’ if

you please! To make thieves of men and harlots of women, because Carroll Morrison must have his gambling-game dividends! And now he has our ‘representative’ legislature working for him to that honorable end!”

“Man to see you, Mr. Waldemar,” said an office boy, appearing at the door.

“Too late,” grunted the editor.

“He says it's very particular, sir, and to tell you it's something Mr. Morrison is interested in.”

“Morrison, eh? All right. Just step into the inner office, will you, Jones? Leave the door open. There might be something interesting.”

Hardly had Average Jones found a chair in the darkened office when the late caller appeared. He was middle-aged, pursy, and dressed with slap-dash ostentation. His face was bloated and seared with excesses. But it was not intoxication that sweated on his forehead and quivered in his jaw. It was terror. He slumped into the waiting chair and mouthed mutely at the editor.

“Well?” The bullet-like snap of the interrogation stung the man into babbling speech.

“ ‘S like this, Misser Wald'mar. ‘S like this. Y-y-yuh see, ‘s like this. Fer Gawsake, kill out an ad for me!”

“What? In tomorrow's paper? Nonsense! You're too late, even if I wished to do it.”

The visitor stood up and dug both hands into his side pockets. He produced first a binocular, which, with a snarl, he flung upon the floor. Before it had stopped bumping, there fluttered down upon the seat of his chair a handful of

greenbacks. Another followed, and another, and another. The bills toppled and spread, and some of them slid to the floor. Still the man delved.

“There!” he panted at last. “Money talks. There's the stuff. Count it. Eighteen hundred if there's a dollar. More likely two thou. If that ain't enough, make your own price. I don't care what it is. Make it, Misser. Put a price on it.”

There was something loathsome and obscene in the creature's gibbering flux of words. The editor leaned forward.

“Bribery, eh?” he inquired softly.

The man flinched from the tone. “It ain't bribery, is it, to ast you to rout out jus’ one line from an ad an’ pay you for the trouble. My own ad, too. If it runs, it's my finish. I was nutty when I wrote it. Fer Gawsake, Misser—”

“Stop it! You say Morrison sent you here?”

“No, sir. Not exac'ly. ‘S like this, Misser Wald'mar. I hadda get to you some way. It's important to Mister Morrison, too. But he don't know I come. He don't know nothing about it. Oh, Gaw! If he finds out—”

“Put that money back in your pockets.”

With an ashen face of despair, the man obeyed. As he finished, he began to sag at the joints. Slowly he slackened down until he was on his knees, an abject spectacle of disgust.

“Stand up,” ordered Waldemar.

“Liss'n; liss'n t’ me,” moaned the man. “I'll make it three thousand. Fi’ thou—”

“Stand up!”

The editor's hearty grip on his coat collar heaved the creature to his feet. For a moment he struggled, panting, then spun, helpless and headlong from the room, striking heavily against the passagewall outside. There was a half-choked groan; then his footsteps slumped away into silence.

“Ugh!” grunted Waldemar. “Come back, Jones.”

Average Jones reentered. “Have you no curiosity in your composition?” he asked.

“Not much—having been reared in the newspaper business.”

Stooping, Average Jones picked up the glasses which the man had thrown on the floor and examined them carefully. “Rather a fine instrument,” he observed. “Marked N. K. I think I'll follow up the owner.”

“You'll never find him now. He has too much start.”

“Not at all. When a man is in his state of abject funk, it's ten to one he lands at the nearest bar. Wait for me.”

In fifteen minutes Average Jones was back. There was a curious expression on his face as he nodded an assent to his friend's inquiring eyebrows.

“Where?” asked Waldemar.

“On the floor of a Park Row saloon.”

“Dead drunk, eh?”

“No-er; not-er-drunk. Dead.”

Waldemar stiffened in his chair. “Dead!” he repeated.

“Poison, probably. The ad was his finish, as he said. The next thing is to find it.”

“The first edition will be down any minute now. But it'll take some finding. Why, counting ‘classified,’ we're carrying

fifteen hundred ads in every issue. With no clue to the character of this one—”

“Plenty of clue,” said Average Jones suavely. “You'll find it on the sporting page, I think.”

“Judging from the man's appearance? Rather far-fetched, isn't it?”

“Judging from a pair of very fine binoculars, a mention of Carroll Morrison's name, and, principally, some two thousand dollars in a huge heap.”

“I don't quite see where that leads.”

“No? The bills must have been mostly ones and twos. Those are a book-maker's takings. The binocular is a racing-man's glass. Our late friend used the language of the track. I think we'll find him on page nine.”

“Try,” said Waldemar, handing him a paper still spicy with the keen odor of printer's ink.

Swiftly the Ad-Visor's practised eye ran over the column. It checked at the “offer” of a notorious firm of tipsters who advertised to sell “inside information” on the races to their patrons. As a special lure, they were, on this day, letting the public in on a few particularly “good things” free.

“There you are,” said Average Jones, pointing out the advertisement.

To his astonishment, Waldemar noted that his friend's indicatory finger shook a little. Normally, Average Jones was the coolest and most controlled of men.

“Noble and Gale's form ad,” he observed. “I see nothing unusual in that.”

“Yet-er-I fancy it's quite important-er-in its way.”

The editor stared. “When you talk like a bored Britisher, Average,” he remarked, “there's sure to be something in the air. What is it?”

“Look at the last line.”

Again Waldemar turned to the paper. “‘One Best Bet,'” he read. “‘That the Pharisee will never finish.’ Well?”

“ ‘That the Pharisee will never finish,'” repeated Average Jones. “If the Pharisee is a horse, the line becomes absurd at once. How could anyone know that a horse would fail to finish in a race? But if it-er-referred-er-to a man, an official known-er-as Pharisee Phil—”

“Wait!” Waldemar had jumped to his feet. A thrill, increasing and pulsating through the floor beneath them, shook the building. The editor jumped for the telephone.

“Composing room; quick! Give me the foreman. Hello! That you, Corrigan? Stop the presses ... I don't care if we miss every train in the country ... Don't answer back. This is Mr. Waldemar. Stop the presses!”

The thrill waned and ceased. At the telephone, Waldemar continued: “Look up the Noble and Gale tip ad, page nine, column six. Kill the last line—the One Best Bet ... Don't ask me how. Chisel it out. Burn it out. Dynamite it out. But kill it. After that's done, print ... Hello, Dan? Send the sporting editor in here in a hurry.”

“Good work,” said Average Jones. “They'll never know how near their idea of removing Governor Arthur came to being boasted of in plain print.”

Waldemar took his huge head in his hands and rocked it gently. “It's on,” he said. “And right-side-before. Yet, it tries

to tell me that a man, plotting to murder the governor, advertises the fact in my paper! I'll get a new head."

"Keep that one for a while," advised Average Jones. "It may be better than you think. Anyway, here's the ad. And down yonder is the dead man whom it killed when he failed to kill it. So much is real."

"And here's Bendig," said the other, as the sporting editor entered. "Any such horse as 'The Pharisee,' Bendig?"

"No, sir. I suppose you mean that Noble and Gale ad. I saw it in proof. Some of Nick Karboe's funny work, I expect."

"Nick Karboe; N. K.," murmured Average Jones, laying a hand on the abandoned field glass. "Who is this man Karboe, Mr. Bendig?"

"Junior partner of Noble and Gale. He puts out their advertising."

"Any connection whatever with Mr. Carroll Morrison?"

"Why, yes. Before he went to pieces he used to be Mr. Morrison's confidential man, and lately he's been doing some lobbying for the association. I understood he'd quit it again."

"Quit what?" asked Waldemar. "Drink?"

"Worse. The white stuff. Coke."

Average Jones whistled softly. "That explains it all," he said. "A cocaine fiend on a debauch becomes a mental and moral imbecile. It would be perfectly in character that he should boast of a projected crime."

"Very well," said Waldemar, after the sporting editor had left, "but you don't really connect Morrison with this?"

"Don't I! At least I propose to try. See here, Waldemar; two months ago at a private dinner, Morrison made a speech

in which he said that men who interfered with the rights of property, like Governor Arthur, were no better than anarchists and ought to be handled accordingly. Therefore, I don't think that a plan—a safe one, of course—to put 'Pharisee Phil' away would greatly disturb our friend's distorted conscience. You see, the governor has laid impious hands on Morrison's holy of holies, the dividend. By the way, where is Governor Arthur?"

"On the train for this city. He's to review the parade at the Harrisonia Centennial, and unveil the statue tomorrow night; that is, tonight, to be accurate."

"A good opportunity," murmured Average Jones.

"What! In the sight of a hundred thousand people?"

"That might be the very core of the opportunity. And at night."

"If you feel certain, it's a case for the police, isn't it?"

"Hardly! The gambling gang control the police, wholly. They would destroy the trail at once."

"Then why not warn the governor?"

"I don't know him."

"Suppose I make an appointment to take you to see him in the morning?"

This was agreed upon. At ten o'clock Governor Arthur received them at his hotel, greeting Average Jones with flattering warmth.

"You're the amateur detective who scared the Honorable William Linder out of the mayoralty nomination," said he, shaking hands. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Give you some racing news to read, Governor."

The governor took the advertisement proof and read it carefully. Characteristically, he then re-read it throughout.

“You think this is meant for me?” he asked, handing it back.

“I do. You're not exactly what one would call popular with the racing crowd, you know, Governor.”

“Mr. Morrison, in the politest manner in the world, has allowed me to surmise as much,” said the other, smiling broadly. “A very polished person, Mr. Morrison. He can make threats of extinction—political, of course—more delicately than any other subtle blackmailer I have ever met. And I have met several in my time.”

“If this were merely political extinction, which I fancy you can take care of yourself, I shouldn't be taking up your time, sir.”

“My dear Jones"—a friendly hand fell on the visitor's shoulder—"I gravely fear that you lack the judicial mind. It's a great thing to lack at times.” Governor Arthur's eyes twinkled again, and his visitor wondered whence had come his reputation as a dry, unhumorous man. “As to assassination,” he pursued, “I'm a sort of Christian Scientist. The best protection is a profound conviction that you're safe. That reacts on the mind of any would-be assassin. To my mind, my best chance of safety lies in never thinking of danger.”

“Then,” said Waldemar, “any attempt to persuade you against appearing at Harrisonia tonight would be time wasted.”

“Absolutely, my dear Waldemar. But don't think that I'm not appreciative of your thoughtfulness and that of Mr. Jones.”

“What is the program of the day, Governor?” asked Average Jones.

“Rather a theatrical one. I'm to ride along Harrison Avenue to the reviewing stand in the old coach-of-state of the Harrison family, a lofty old ark, high as a circus wagon, which has been patched up for the occasion. Just before I reach the reviewing stand, a silk cord is to be handed to me and I am to pull the veil from the great civic statue with that, as I move on.”

“Then I think that Mr. Waldemar and I will look the ground over. Could we get you by telephone, sir, if necessary?”

“Any time up to seven o'clock.”

“What do you think of the chance of their passing the bill over your veto?” asked Waldemar.

“They are spending money as it has never been spent before,” replied Governor Arthur. “I'll admit to you, Waldemar, that if I could find any legitimate method of calling Morrison off, I would not scruple to use it. It is, of course, Morrison's money that we are fighting.”

“Possibly-er-that, too-er-might be done,” drawled Average Jones.

The governor looked at him sharply. “After the Linder affair, Mr. Jones,” said he, “I would follow you far. Call my secretary at any time, if you want me.”

“Now to look over the line of parade,” said Average Jones as he and Waldemar emerged from the hotel.

Half an hour's ride brought them to the lively suburban city of Harrisonia, gay with flags and bunting. From the railroad station, where the guest of honor was to be met by the old coach, to the spot where the civic statue awaited its unveiling at his hands, was about half a mile along Harrison Avenue, the principal street. The walk along this street developed nothing of interest to Average Jones until they reached the statue. Here he paused to look curiously at a number of square platforms built out from windows in the business blocks.

“For flash-light outfits,” explained Waldemar. “One of them is our paper's.”

“Flash-lights, eh?” said Average Jones. “And there'll be fireworks and the air will be full of light and noise, under cover of which almost anything might be done. I don't like it! Hello! What's here?”

He turned to the glass of a prosperous-looking cigar store on the south side of the avenue and pointed to a shattered hole in the window. Behind it a bullet swung on a thread from the ceiling, and this agent of disaster the proprietor had ingeniously turned to account in advertising, by the following placard:

Aim Lower
If you expect to shoot
holes in *our* prices.
We Challenge Competition.

“Not bad,” approved Average Jones. “I feel a great yearning to smoke.”

They entered the store and were served by the proprietor. As he was making change, Average Jones asked:

“When was the bombardment?”

“Night before last, some time,” replied the man.

“Done by a deflected bullet, wasn't it?”

“Haven't any idea how it was done or why. I got here in the morning and there she was. What makes you think it was a deflected bullet?”

“Because it was whirling end-over. Normally, a bullet bores a pretty clean hole in plate glass.”

“That's so, too,” agreed the man with some interest.

Average Jones handed a cigar to Waldemar and lighted one himself. Puffing at it as he walked to the door, he gazed casually around and finally centered his attention on a telegraph pole standing on the edge of the sidewalk. He even walked out and around the pole. Returning, he remarked to the tobacconist:

“Very good cigars, these. Ever advertise ‘em?”

“Sure.” The man displayed a tin square vaunting the virtues of his “Camarados.”

“Outside the shop, I meant. Why wouldn't one of those signs look good on that telegraph pole?”

“It would look good to me,” said the vendor, “but it wouldn't look good to the telegraph people. They'd have it down.”

“Oh, I don't know. Give me one, lend me a ladder, and I'll make the experiment.”

The tobacconist stared. “All right,” he said. “Go as far as you like.” And he got the required articles for his customer.

With silent curiosity Waldemar watched Average Jones place the ladder against the outside of the pole, mount, nail up the sign, drop a plumb-line, improvised from a key and a length of string, to the ground, set a careful knot in the string and return to earth.

“What did you find?” asked the editor.

“Four holes that you could cover with a silver dollar. Some gunnery, that!”

“Then how did the other shot happen to go so far wrong?”

“Do you see that steel work over there?”

Average Jones pointed across to the north side of the street, just opposite, where a number of buildings had been torn down to permit of the erection of a new one. The frame had risen three stories, and through the open spaces in the gaunt skeleton the rear of the houses facing on the street next northward could be seen. Waldemar indicated that he did see the edifice pointed out by Average Jones.

“The bullet came from back of that—perhaps from the next street. They sighted by the telegraph pole. Suppose, now, a man riding in a high coach passes along this avenue between the pole and the gun operator, over yonder to the northward. Every one of the bullets which hit the pole would have gone right through his body. Probably a fixed gun. As for the wide shot, we'll see.”

As he spoke, the Ad-Visor was leading the way across the street. With upturned face he carefully studied the steel joists from end to end. Presently he pointed. Following the line of his finger, Waldemar saw a raw scar on the underside of one of the joists.

“There it is,” said Average Jones. “The sights were a trifle off at the first shot, and the bullet ticked the steel and deflected.”

“So far, so good,” approved Waldemar.

“I can approximate the height of the steel beam from the ground, close enough for a trial formula,” continued Average Jones. “Now, Waldemar, I call your attention to that restaurant on the opposite corner.”

Waldemar conned the designated building with attention. “Well,” he said finally, “what of it? I don't see anything wrong with it.”

“Precisely my point,” returned the Ad-Visor with a grin. “Neither do I. Therefore, suppose you go there and order luncheon for two, while I walk down to the next block and back again. I'll be with you in four minutes.”

He was somewhat better than his word. Dropping into the chair opposite his friend, he figured swiftly and briefly on the back of an envelope, which he returned to his pocket.

“I suppose you've done a vast amount of investigating since you left me,” remarked the editor sardonically. “Meanwhile, the plot to murder the governor goes merrily on.”

“I've done a fair amount of pacing over distance,” retorted Average Jones imperturbably. “As for the governor, they can't kill him till he comes, can they? Besides, there's plenty of time for them to change their minds. As a result of my little constitutional just now, a simple exercise in mathematics, you and I will call at a house on Spencer Street, the next street north, after luncheon.”

“What house?”

“Ah! That I don't know, as yet. We'll see when we get there.”

Comfortably fed, the two strolled up to Spencer Street and turned into it, Average Jones eying the upper windows of the houses. He stopped in front of an old-fashioned frame structure, which was built on a different plan of floor level from its smaller neighbors of brick. Up the low steps went Jones, followed by the editor. An aged lady, of the species commonly conjectured as “maiden,” opened the door.

“Madam,” said Average Jones, “could we rent your third floor rear for this evening?”

“No, sir,” said she. “It's rented.”

“Perhaps I could buy the renters off,” suggested Jones. “Could I see them?”

“Both out,” she answered shortly. “And I don't believe you could get the room from them, for they're all fixed up to take photographs of the parade.”

“Indee-ee-eed,” drawled Average Jones, in accents so prolonged, even for him, that Waldemar's interest flamed within him. “I-er-ra-a-a-ather hoped-er-when do you expect them back?”

“About four o'clock.”

“Thank you. Please tell them that-er-Mr. Nick Karboe called.”

“For heaven's sake, Average,” rumbled Waldemar, as they regained the pavement, “why did you use the dead man's name? It gave me a shiver.”

“It'll give them a worse one,” replied the Ad-Visor grimly. “I want to prepare their nerves for a subsequent shock. If you'll meet me here this evening at seven, I think I can promise you a queer spectacle.”

“And meantime?”

“On that point I want your advice. Shall we make a sure catch of two hired assassins who don't amount to much, or take a chance at the bigger game?”

“Meaning Morrison?”

“Meaning Morrison. Incidentally, if we get him we'll be able to kill the Personal Liberty bill so dead it will never raise its head again.”

“Then I'm for that course,” decided the editor, after a little consideration, “though I can't yet make myself believe that Carroll Morrison is party to a deliberate murder plot.”

“How the normal mind does shrink from connecting crime with good clothes and a social position!” remarked the Ad-Visor. “Just give me a moment's time.”

The moment he spent jotting down words on a bit of paper, which, after some emendation, he put away.

“That'll do for a heading,” he remarked. “Now, Waldemar, I want you to get the governor on the phone and tell him, if he'll follow directions, we'll put the Personal Liberty bill where the wicked cease from troubling. Morrison is to be in the reviewing stand, isn't he?”

“Yes; there's a special place reserved for him, next to the press seats.”

“Good! By the way, you'd better send for two press seats for you and myself. Now, what I want the governor to do is

this: get a copy of the Harrisonia Evening Bell, fold it to an advertisement headed ‘Offer to Photographers,’ and as he passes Carroll Morrison on the stand, hold it up and say to him just this: ‘Better luck next time.’ For anything further, I'll see you in the reviewing stand. Do you think he'll do it?”

“It sounds as foolish as a college initiation stunt. Still, you heard what Governor Arthur said about his confidence in you. But what is this advertisement?”

“As yet, it isn't. But it will be, as soon as I can get to the office of the Bell. You'll meet me on this corner at seven o'clock, then?”

“Yes. Meantime, to be safe, I'll look after the reviewing stand tickets myself.”

At the hour named, the editor arrived. Average Jones was already there, accompanied by a messenger boy. The boy wore the cheerful grin of one who has met with an unexpected favor of fortune.

“They've returned, both of ‘em,” said Average Jones as Waldemar approached. “What about the governor?”

“It took a mighty lot of persuasion, but he'll do it,” replied the editor.

“Skip, son,” said the Ad-Visor, handing the messenger boy a folded newspaper. “The two gentlemen on the third floor rear. And be sure you say that it's a personal, marked copy.”

The boy crossed the street and entered the house. In two minutes he emerged, nodded to Average Jones and walked away. Five minutes passed. Then the front door opened cautiously and a tall, evil-looking man slunk into the vestibule. A second man followed him. They glanced eagerly

from left to right. Average Jones stepped out to the curbstone.

“Here's the message from Karboe,” he called.

“My God!” gasped the tall man.

For an instant he made as if to turn back. Then, clearing the steps at one jump, he stumbled, sprawled, was up again instantly and speeding up the street, away from Average Jones, turned the corner neck and neck with his companion who, running powerfully, had overtaken him.

The door of the house stood ajar. Before Waldemar had recovered from his surprise, Average Jones was inside the house. Hesitation beset the editor. Should he follow or wait? He paused, one foot on the step. A loud crash within resolved his doubts. Up he started, when the voice of Average Jones in colloquy with the woman who had received them before, checked him. The colloquy seemed excited but peaceful. Presently Average Jones came down the steps.

“They left the ad,” said he. “Have you seen it?”

“No; I hadn't time to get a paper,” replied Waldemar, taking the copy extended to him and reading, in large display:

Offer To Photographers
$1,000 Reward for Special Flash-Light Photo of Governor Arthur
in Tonight's Pageant.
Must be Taken According to
Plans and Specifications Designated
by the Late Nick Karboe.

Apply to A. Jones, Ad-Visor
Astor Court Temple, New York City

“No wonder they ran,” said Waldemar with a grin, as he digested this document.

“And so must we if we're going to get through the crowd and reach the reviewing stand,” warned Average Jones, glancing at his watch.

Their seats, which they attained with some difficulty, were within a few feet of the governor's box. Within reach of them sat Carroll Morrison, his long, pale, black-bearded face set in that immobility to which he had schooled it. But the cold eyes roved restlessly and the little muscles at the corners of the lips twitched.

“Tell me that he isn't in on the game!” whispered Average Jones, and Waldemar nodded.

The sound of music from down the street turned all faces in that direction. A roar of cheering swept toward them and was taken up in the stands. The governor, in his high coach, came in sight. And, at that moment, terror struck into the soul of Waldemar.

“Suppose they came back!” he whispered to Average Jones. “We've left the house unguarded.”

“I've fixed that,” replied the Ad-Visor in the same tone. “Watch Morrison!”

Governor Arthur approached the civic statue. An official, running out to the coach, handed him a silken cord, which he secured with a turn around the wrist. The coach rolled on. The cord tautened; the swathings sundered and fell from the gleaming splendor of marble, and a blinding flash, followed by

another, and a third, blotted out the scene in unbearable radiance.

Involuntarily Morrison, like thousands of others, had screened his sight with his hands after the second flash. Now, as the kindlier light returned, he half rose, rubbing his eyes furiously. A half-groan escaped him. He sank back, staring in amaze. For Governor Arthur was riding on, calm and smiling amid the shouts.

Morrison shrank. Could it be that the governor's eyes were fixed on his? He strove to shake off the delusion. He felt, rather than saw, the guest of honor descend from the coach; felt rather than saw him making straight toward himself; and he winced and quivered at the sound of his own name.

“Mr. Morrison,” the governor was saying, at his elbow, “Mr. Morrison, here is a paper that may interest you. Better luck next time.”

Morrison strove to reply. His voice clucked in his throat, and the hand with which he took the folded newspaper was as the hand of a paralytic.

“He's broken,” whispered Average Jones.

He went straight to Governor Arthur, speaking in his ear. The governor nodded. Average Jones returned to his seat to watch Carroll Morrison who sat, with hell-fires of fear scorching him, until the last band had blared its way into silence.

Again the governor was speaking to him.

“Mr. Morrison, I want you to visit a house near here. Mr. Jones and Mr. Waldemar will come along; you know them,

perhaps. Please don't protest. I positively will not take a refusal. We have a motor-car waiting."

Furious, but not daring to refuse, Morrison found himself whirled swiftly away, and after a few turns to shake off the crowd, into Spencer Street. With his captors, he mounted to the third floor of an old frame house. The rear room door had been broken in. Inside stood a strange instrument, resembling a large camera, which had once stood upright on a steel tripod riveted to the floor. The legs of the tripod were twisted and bent. A half-demolished chair nearby suggested the agency of destruction.

"Just to render it harmless," explained Average Jones. "It formerly pointed through that window, so that a bullet from the barrel would strike that pole 'way yonder in Harrison Street, after first passing through any intervening body. Yours, for instance, Governor."

"Do I understand that this is a gun, Mr. Jones?" asked the official.

"Of a sort," replied the Ad-Visor, opening up the camera-box and showing a large barrel superimposed on a smaller one. "This is a sighting-glass," he explained, tapping the larger barrel. "And this," tapping the smaller, "carries a small but efficient bullet. This curious sheath"—he pointed to a cylindrical jacket around part of the rifle barrel—"is a Coulomb silencer, which reduces a small-arm report almost to a whisper. Here is an electric button which was connected with yonder battery before I operated on it with the chair, and distributed its spark, part to the gun, part to the flash-light powder on this little shelf. Do you see the plan now? The

instant that the governor, riding through the street yonder, is sighted through this glass, the operator presses the button, and flash-light and bullet go off instantaneously."

"But why the flash-light?" asked the governor.

"Merely a blind to fool the landlady and avert any possible suspicion. They had told her that they had a new invention to take flash-lights at a distance. Amidst the other flashes, this one wouldn't be noticed particularly. They had covered their trail well."

"Well, indeed," said the governor. "May I congratulate you, Mr. Morrison, on this interesting achievement in ballistics?"

"As there is no way of properly resenting an insult from a man in your position," said Morrison venomously, "I will reserve my answer to that outrageous suggestion."

"Meantime," put in Average Jones, "let me direct your attention to a simple mathematical formula." He drew from his pocket an envelope on which were drawn some angles, subjoined by a formula. Morrison waved it aside.

"Not interested in mathematics?" asked Average Jones solicitously. "Very well, I'll elucidate informally. Given a bullet hole in a telegraph pole at a certain distance, a bullet scar on an iron girder at a certain lesser distance, and the length of a block from here to Harrison Avenue—which I paced off while you were skilfully ordering luncheon, Waldemar—and an easy triangulation brings us direct to this room and to two fugitive gentlemen with whom—I mention the hypothesis with all deference, Mr. Morrison—you are probably acquainted."

"And who may they have been?" retorted Morrison contemptuously.

“I don't know,” said Average Jones.

“Then, sir,” retorted the racing king, “your hypothesis is as impudent as your company is intolerable. Have you anything further to say to me?”

“Yes. It would greatly please Mr. Waldemar to publish in tomorrow's paper an authorized statement from you to the effect that the Personal Liberty bill will be withdrawn permanently.”

“Mr. Waldemar may go to the devil. I have endured all the hectoring I propose to. Men in my position are targets for muckrakers and blackmailers—”

“Wait a moment,” Waldemar's heavy voice broke in. “You speak of men in your position. Do you understand just what position you are in at present?”

Morrison rose. “Governor Arthur,” he said with with stony dignity, “I bid you good evening.”

Waldemar set his bulky back against the door. The lips drew back from Morrison's strong teeth with the snarl of an animal in the fury and terror of approaching peril.

“Do you know Nick Karboe?”

Morrison whirled about to face Average Jones. But he did not answer the question. He only stared.

“Carroll Morrison,” continued Average Jones in his quiet drawl, “the half-hour before he-er-committed suicide-er-Nick Karboe spent in the office of the-er-Universal with Mr. Waldemar and-er-myself. Catch him, Waldemar!”

For Morrison had wilted. They propped him against the wall and he, the man who had insolently defied the laws of a great commonwealth, who had bribed legislatures and bossed

judges and browbeaten the public, slobbered, denied, and begged. For two disgustful minutes they extracted from him his solemn promise that henceforth he would keep his hands off the laws. Then they turned him out.

“Suppose you enlighten me with the story, gentlemen,” suggested the governor.

Average Jones told it, simply and modestly. At the conclusion, Governor Arthur looked from the wrecked camera-gun to the mathematical formula which had fallen to the floor.

“Mr. Jones,” he said, “you've done me the service of saving my life; you've done the public the service of killing a vicious bill. I wish I could thank you more publicly than this.”

“Thank you, Governor,” said Average Jones modestly. “But I owed the public something, you know, on account of my uncle, the late Mayor Van Reypen.”

Governor Arthur nodded. “The debt is paid,” he said. “That knowledge must be your reward; that and the consciousness of having worked out a remarkable and original problem.”

“Original?” said Average Jones, eyeing the diagram on the envelope's back, with his quaint smile. “Why, Governor, you're giving me too much credit. It was worked out by one of the greatest detectives of all time, some two thousand years ago. His name was Euclid.”

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Busman's Holiday: The Mystery Company

Mystery bookstores may traffic in death on a daily basis, but in March 2003 one store came back to life when **The Mystery Company** opened in Carmel, Indiana (part of greater Indianapolis). Owned and operated by Jim Huang and Jennie Jacobson, this new store is also the latest incarnation of Deadly Passions, the mystery bookstore that the couple ran in Kalamazoo, Michigan for eight years, and which subsequently morphed into an on-line mystery bookseller.

The couple is happy to be back in the realm of bricks and mortar, though they continue to maintain a strong Web-based business. “The Internet has sharpened our database skills,” notes Huang, and a good database allows him to manage and sell the titles of small and specialty publishers who are not well-served by the chains and wholesalers.

“We place our emphasis on selling books that the chain stores and the discount stores don't,” says Huang. “We do offer the bestsellers, and we will sell them happily, but we put our efforts (newsletter, discussion group, in-store display) into promoting books and authors who are not yet bestsellers.” Huang is personally familiar with the challenges that small presses face, as he is also the publisher both of the magazine The Drood Review and of the Crum Creek Press, which has reissued out-of-print titles by such authors as Kate Flora, Barbara D'Amato, and Terence Faherty.

The move to a larger metropolitan area has also proven a challenge, says Huang; the store must market itself more

aggressively in this larger market. But at the same time, Huang says he was surprised at the dearth of independent bookstores in the Indianapolis area. “Our opening increased the independent bookselling ranks by twenty-five percent,” he notes. And the store has already begun to build a community among local mystery fans and writers through author events and by hosting a mystery discussion group as well as a local chapter of Sisters in Crime.

Since he was new to the area himself not so long ago, Huang suggests a number of writers who can provide a good introduction to the local scene, including Michael Lewin, Jeanne Dams, Troy Soos, D. R. Schanker, and Terence Faherty. “One thing we were able to do in Kalamazoo was to expand the mystery reading community there. We got people who didn't read mysteries to try them, and they'd come back for more. We hope that over time, we can do that here as well.”

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Booked & Printed

Reviews by Robert C. Hahn

For most mystery authors (and their publishers), creating a popular series is the holy grail; some successful (and prolific) writers may even develop a secondary series, as a change of pace. And then there are those productive souls for whom even multiple series cannot provide adequate outlets for their ideas. Three such authors, Donald Westlake, Marcia Muller, and Margaret Maron, have recently published novels that stand outside their usual turf.

Donald Westlake has created several successful series, ranging from the wickedly funny Dortmunder novels to the violent capers of the thief Parker (at first published under the name Richard Stark, the later Parker books, including *Breakout*, have appeared under Westlake's own name). Marcia Muller, meanwhile, has created multiple trend-setting series. Her Sharon McCone led the parade of strong female protagonists that became popular in the mid-1980's, while her Elena Oliverez mysteries featured one of the first Hispanic-American protagonists. Margaret Maron likewise has created more than one successful series, one with urban police detective Sigrid Harald, and one featuring rural North Carolina judge Deborah Knott.

No one is better than Westlake at taking a totally outrageous premise and parlaying it into a vastly entertaining, somehow credible story. In his latest stand-alone novel, *Money for Nothing* (Warner, $24.95), Westlake

scores big with a story that starts off like a farce, takes a sharp turn and careens into drama, then catapults to a suspenseful climax. It is vintage Westlake done with great verve and assurance.

Josh Redmont got used to the $1000 monthly checks that mysteriously began arriving at a time when he needed the money and continued long after it was a pretty inconsequential sum. After some initial attempts to decipher what the United States Agency was and why they were sending him the checks, he just accepted the “money for nothing.”

As the saying goes however, nothing's for nothing, and Westlake riffs from this simple, even ludicrous opening into an adventure that first amuses then alarms as Josh discovers that those checks have bought more than he wanted to sell. After his somewhat rebellious college years, Josh had two years of army service, then a burgeoning career, a wife, a child, and even a summer rental home. And seven years of monthly, $1000 checks for nothing.

Spies, double agents, a femme fatale, terrorists all invade the peaceful routine world Josh has constructed as an account rep at the Sewell-McConnell advertising agency. And as Josh struggles to find a way out of his predicament—a predicament that promises not only loss of freedom but possibly life itself—he learns that he wasn't the only one receiving money for nothing.

Like most of Westlake's novels, *Money for Nothing* is filled with vivid, unique characters such as Mitchell Robbie, an actor willing to play any role, and Mr. Nimrin, a disfavored spy with

an unusual retirement scheme. Money for Nothing is sheer Westlake, sheer pleasure. This writer who's been at the top of his game for a long time shows no sign of slowing down, whether he's plunging Dortmunder into another scheme or sending Parker off for another heist or giving us another wonderful one-off like this one.

Marcia Muller created fictional Soledad County, California for her first stand-alone mystery, *Point Deception* (2001); now she returns there for a second one, *Cyanide Wells* (Mysterious Press, $24.95). It's easy to see why Muller's concept wouldn't work as well as a Sharon McCone novel since it is the dynamic that develops among a trio of characters that drives this clever puzzler.

Matthew Lindstrom's quiet, married, Minnesota life as a photographer and teacher was destroyed when his wife, Gwen, announced she wanted a divorce, then disappeared from sight in a way that branded Matt as the prime suspect in her presumed murder. Fourteen years later, Matt has constructed a new life for himself in British Columbia, where his past is unknown.

Then an anonymous caller shatters Matt's second life when he tells him that Gwen is alive and well and living in Soledad County under the name Ardis Coleman. Unable to ignore the call, Matt goes to check it out and a weird dance begins among Matt, Gwen/Ardis, and Gwen's new mate, as layers of deception are peeled away. Despite its intriguing, sometimes-surprising plot and Muller's fine writing, the shadowy character of Gwen/Ardis never appears clearly enough to be the driving force for the novel.

Margaret Maron's *Last Lessons of Summer* (Mysterious Press, $23.95) is her first stand-alone novel in more than fifteen years and combines location elements from her two series as it swings from Manhattan to North Carolina. An unabashedly romantic mystery, Summer finds insecure Amy Steadman, granddaughter of the author/illustrator team that created a beloved children's books series, returning to her grandmother's home to sort through both possessions and memories. The children's books her grandparents created have grown into an empire under the guiding hands of her father and, in part, her husband. It is a true family enterprise with the participation of Amy's stepbrothers and the recent addition of her young stepsister, Beth.

The southern trappings that Maron does as well as anyone are on full display as Amy travels alone to her murdered grandmother's unnaturally empty house and begins to meet with relatives poorly remembered and almost unknown to her. And relationships are the key to everything as Amy re-evaluates her relationship with her husband, delves into the secrets about her own mother's suicide, and starts to realize that many of her relations, including those newly met, had much to gain from her grandmother's untimely demise.

Although Amy is a grown, married woman, this is really her coming of age story. The diffident, deferential woman becomes more assertive as she overcomes the doubts and fears that have plagued her since childhood. Her will is tested as she begins to uncover secrets that a killer dare not let her expose. Maron tackles this atmospheric story with the same lyrical lushness she brings to her award-winning Deborah

Knott series and fans are sure to embrace this outstanding effort.

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A Bonus from Jonas

In Bill Eidson's *The Repo* (Justin, Charles, $24.95), two emotionally damaged people track down a missing boat—and in the process find each other. Jack Merchant is an ex-DEA agent with the accidental death of a fellow agent on his conscience, and Sarah Ballard has nightmares about the killing of her abusive boyfriend by her own hand. When Ballard, a marina operator and boat-repossession professional, is contracted by MassBank to find Paul Baylor, a rising young executive who has disappeared along with his wife and his forty-foot sloop, leaving over a million dollars in debt, she goes straight to Merchant, whom she knows from the investigation into her brother's death five years ago. Together they follow the trail of the Baylors up the East Coast from Boston to Maine. Things go horribly wrong when a whole new set of players with a lot more at stake enters the game. Connections between Julie Baylor's employer, an Internet tycoon with a taste for brutality, a porn star dead from suicide, and the banker who originally contacted Sarah Ballard reveal pieces of a much larger, more dangerous picture. In the midst of the betrayal and the violence that begin to surround them, Jack and Sarah turn to each other for comfort. Their relationship tentatively grows from the gruff affection of comrades-in-arms to a love that, given their pasts, doesn't seem to fit quite right. Eidson plans to write more Merchant and Ballard novels, and his compassionate treatment of their tormented courtship and ability to neatly

weave seemingly divergent narrative threads bodes well for the series.

—Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

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The Mysterious Photograph

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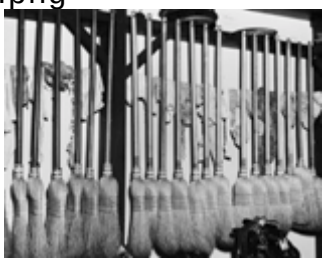

Witches’ Parking Lot

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

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The Story That Won

The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Dan Pawlowski of Oceanside, CA. Honorable mentions go to James Hagerty of Melbourne, FL; Lucille Zirbel of Seattle, WA; Paul C. Low of Riverdale, MD; Charles R. McCrary, Jr. of Clarksville, TN; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, MI; Nick Andreychuk of Port Moody, BC; Pat Scannell of Framingham, MA; Michael Penncavage of Upper Montclair, NJ; and Paul T. Ryan of Lansdale, PA.

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Through the Rye by Dan Pawlowski

I'm a bum, a confirmed drunkard and I admit it, but even a guy like me can be of value. Let me tell you about the day that Ilocated a missing person.

The police grabbed me one morning, just as I was rousing to the sound of waves breaking on the beach. My head throbbed and felt as swollen as an inflated balloon, but the police officer who shook me soon had my attention.

“Hey buddy, we're looking for a guy who disappeared yesterday. A big blond fellow, who was wearing red baggy shorts and had a jagged scar on his right shoulder. Did you see him?”

It took me a minute to focus but finally Isaid, “Yeah, Idid see that guy. He was over by the sand artist.”

“The sand artist? Now where is that?” growled the officer. “Come on, take us there.”

Now my legs weren't working too well, but Imanaged to stagger along. Finally we came upon the sand-sculpted figures and Isort of slurred, “It was right here, Officer, he was talking with the sand man.”

“Are you real sure, buddy?” he hollered in my face.

In my unstable state, the force of his query caused me to stumble and fall onto one of the sand figures. That's when my

weary bones were to meet a body, while coming through the rye. Not a nice way to make an acquaintance, but the police sure thought it was great.

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Solution to the October **Unsolved**

Carl and Kathy Mason from Buffalo were guilty of planning the murder of the presidential candidate.

Couple, City, Arrival Time

Arthur & Julia North, El Paso, 7:00

Brad & Laura Queen, Abilene, 9:00

Carl & Kathy Mason, Buffalo, 12:00

Donald & Greta Roller, Fargo, 8:00

Elbert & Helen O'Dell, Denver, 11:00

Frank & Ida Parker, Chicago, 10:00

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